

When the Greeks Ruled Egypt; From Alexander the Great to Cleopatra

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Review by Charlotte Booth

This is essentially a catalogue from the exhibition '*When the Greeks Ruled Egypt*' held at New York University's Institute for the Study of the Ancient World (ISAW). Items were loaned from numerous museums including the Art Institute of Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum.

The book comprises five essays about different elements of Ptolemaic art which tie in with the different object groups of the exhibition; portraiture, religion, funerary beliefs and language. Artefacts from the exhibition are used to illustrate the essays, and the photography cannot be faulted. Each essay is followed by a bibliography with a more comprehensive bibliography at the end of the book.

Following the essays is an illustrated checklist of all 150 artefacts in the exhibition. Sadly each object is not depicted but there are enough to make this element of the catalogue interesting and useful as for each artefact (illustrated or unillustrated) there is a description which includes date, provenance, museum accession number and a basic description.

The volume begins with three letters, one from Douglas Druick (Art Institute of Chicago), Arnold Lehman, (Brooklyn Museum) and Roger Bagnall, (ISAW). Each letter discusses the institutions involvement in the exhibition and their expression of thanks. The value of including these three letters is not clear, as they are only three of the twelve collections which contributed to the exhibition. The *Foreward* by Jennifer Y. Chi was more valuable and provided a brief outline of the exhibition which starts with royal portraiture, which was Egyptian, Greek or Greco-Egyptian in style. The next section regards Ptolemaic religion and their adaptation of the Osiris, Isis and Horus myth. The third section of the exhibition focuses on the funerary practices at the time, and the juxtaposition between Greek and Egyptian styles. The final part of the exhibition is that of papyri demonstrating the number of languages spoken during the Ptolemaic period. Each of these themes was expanded on in the five articles which followed.

In Mary Greuel's '*When the Greeks Ruled Egypt; From Alexander the Great to Cleopatra: The Genesis of the Exhibition at the Art Institute of Chicago*' she provides a brief run through of the history between Alexander the Great conquering Egypt and the Romans taking control following the death of Cleopatra, using the artefacts displayed in the Art Institute of Chicago's exhibition '*When the Greeks Ruled Egypt*'.

Greuel's main theme is the juxtaposition between the Egyptian and Greek cultures and then the Roman and Egyptian cultures. By displaying objects side by side they were able to demonstrate the Egyptian, Greek and combined styles common during the Ptolemaic period. The same method was employed for the different sub-headings of the exhibition; portraiture, religion and funerary beliefs.

The Ptolemaic religious and funerary beliefs focus heavily on the Osiris/Isis/Horus mythology and the Greeks adopted the idea of the deceased becoming an Osiris after death. The Ptolemaic rulers adopted the ideologies of kingship as defined by the king being an incarnation of Horus as a means of demonstrating a continuous line between the Ptolemies and the Egyptian kings. In the Roman period the adaptation of Egyptian and Roman funerary beliefs was represented in the mummy portraits which combine the Egyptian practice of providing a funerary mask and the Roman ideal of realistic portraiture. Whereas Greuel heavily relies on the artefacts from the exhibition to guide her writing Roger Bagnall in his *'Written and Spoken Languages in Ptolemaic Egypt'* focusses on a history of the language and how it changed from the third intermediate period onwards, with a rudimentary nod to the exhibition.

Bagnall explains the paradox that although papyrus is one of the best preserved organic materials in Egypt, and Egypt has more preserved papyrus than the rest of the ancient world, the remains are still fragmentary enough to paint an incomplete picture. However the written record provides enough evidence to explain how the language was influenced by the extended periods of foreign rule in Egypt.

During the Saite period the Demotic script was introduced which was not strictly a direct written version of the spoken language but was common for legal agreements and official administration. Less than a century after its introduction it was slowly interrupted by Aramaic which was probably more widely used at the time and was adopted by the Persian Empire who brought it to Egypt.

Part of the Aramaic archive of Elephantine is displayed in the exhibition including a marriage contract between a Jewish soldier and an Egyptian slave. Bagnall describes the text and there are numerous images of the papyrus concerned. These are large images but unless the reader is familiar with Aramaic they are perhaps not as interesting as some of the other images throughout the book.

In addition to Aramaic it is more than likely that the rest of the literate population were still writing in Demotic although the texts have not necessarily survived. The Ptolemaic royal family were Greek speakers and the administration of the country was carried out in Greek. With the introduction of coins into the economy financial records were also on the increase. Some examples of these in the exhibition come from the archive of Zenon and include the accounts of a small camel caravan.

Whilst the most interesting thing about the papyri is obviously the information written on it, Bagnall does not include any translations in the paper, preferring to paraphrase. This led to this chapter being a little dry, which unfortunately was not aided by the images of papyri written in specialised scripts.

Dee Clayman's article on *'Portraits of the Queens as Ptolemaic Self-Fashioning'* was a lot lighter, and discussed how the Ptolemies produced a number of portraits of themselves as a means of emphasising their Greco-Egyptian culture. They were following in the footsteps of Alexander the Great who employed a number of sculptors to capture his image in marble, bronze and semi-precious jewels presenting him as a warrior and then later as Zeus.

Many of the Ptolemaic queens also presented themselves as divine and it is often impossible to tell a mortal queen from a goddess as the statues are highly stylised rather than realistic portraiture. Berenice I frequently associated herself with the goddess Aphrodite and some queens were also

deified after death. Aphrodite herself was presented with a ship upon her head, connecting her with the Ptolemaic family and their famous use of sea-faring vessels.

Berenice II associated herself with Athena the goddess of wisdom in reference to the Ptolemaic love of intellect following the founding of the Library of Alexandria. Berenice II also depicted herself as the Greek goddess Demeter and the Egyptian goddess Isis, both deities of fertility and potency. The temple at Philae which depicts Isis giving birth to Harpocrates was representative of Berenice II (and also of Arsinoe I and II) as a worshipper of Isis in addition to her incarnation on earth. A perfect representation of the melding of the two cultures is displayed in one of the statues in the exhibition, which is dated to the reign of Cleopatra II, which shows Isis with Greek style hair and headdress topped with the Egyptian ureaus.

The article was particularly engaging and would have been improved by more images of items discussed in the text. The same can also be said for the article by Kaper below. However the images chosen were relevant and beautifully presented.

An interesting and perhaps unusual chapter was *'The way they looked: Dynastic portraiture on Ptolemaic Coins'* by Roberta Casagrande-Kim as it is a topic that is largely ignored in popular books on Egyptian history. Coins were introduced in the thirtieth dynasty and were minted in Greece at this time. Alexander however opened a mint in Alexandria where most of the Ptolemaic coins were minted. The coins throughout the Ptolemaic period maintained their Greek identity as they were used primarily to improve international trade and too many Egyptian characteristics would provincialize the Ptolemaic kings in the eyes of the rest of the Greek world.

The artwork on coins sent a clear message about the ruler; for example Alexander was shown wearing an elephant scalp, Aegeus, and the horn of Amun showing him as conqueror and as a divinity. Once Ptolemy I became king he used his own image on the coins but with the attributes of Alexander in order to connect himself with him. Later Ptolemies connected themselves less with Alexander and more with their earlier relatives showing their right to rule through the divine right of accession.

Arsinoe II was depicted on coins wearing a Greek headdress, the horn of Amun, the lotus finial of Isis, and the double cornucopia connected with Athena clearly stating her divine nature. It was also common for the king to represent his sister/wife on coins in order to emphasise this connection rather than that of the divine mother which was more common in Egyptian representation. Ptolemy IV was depicted with an ear of corn, a symbol of Harpocrates, the Greek form of Horus showing that whilst they were depicted as fundamentally Greek in representation there were elements of the Egyptian religion depicted to show kingship ideology and divinity.

The divinity of the Ptolemies was explained further in the final chapter, Olaf Kaper's *'The Triad of Osiris, Isis, and Harpocrates in Ptolemaic Egypt'*. The secret of Alexander's and the Ptolemies' success where the Persians had failed was their adoption of the Egyptian religion. Alexander associated himself with Amun and Zeus and approached the oracle of Amun at Siwa before he was crowned at the traditional site of Memphis. When founding Alexandria he built a temple to Isis, and the Ptolemies, following in his footsteps continued to build and maintain temples dedicated to Isis and Horus throughout Egypt, thus endearing them to the Egyptian people. The entire cult of Osiris,

Isis and Horus was adopted by the Ptolemaic family although Osiris was replaced by Serapis, who evolved from the deceased Apis Bull, and Horus was represented as Harpocrates.

The Ptolemaic queens were associated with Isis, starting with Arsinoe II who married her brother Ptolemy II. This practice of sibling marriages is thought to be in emulation of the brother-sister marriage of Isis and Osiris. Sibling marriages were not an Egyptian, Macedonian or Greek practice and was unique to the Ptolemaic period.

Isis, following her popularity during the Ptolemaic period, became one of the most important Roman deities as her cult spread through the Roman Empire, although that of Osiris and Harpocrates remained in Egypt. The imagery of Isis was very closely tied in with that of Hathor where they are both shown in similar headdresses and Isis is even shown exposing her private parts in reference to the myth where Hathor exposes herself to her father, the sun god Re, in order to cheer him up.

Whilst the chapter was interesting and there were some beautiful illustrations the author describes numerous artefacts that are not in the exhibition and therefore are not depicted which was a little frustrating. Like Bagnall in his article of papyri, Kaper also focused more on the history than on the exhibition itself.

As a whole the catalogue for *'When the Greeks Ruled Egypt'* was an interesting read, which is illustrated with some lovely photographs. Whilst the articles sometimes strayed from the exhibition itself in order to tell the history of the period the illustrations were appropriate and the text was relevant. Much of the information is more detailed than in many mainstream Ptolemaic books and for this reason I believe this book is a valuable addition to the book shelf of anyone interested in the period.