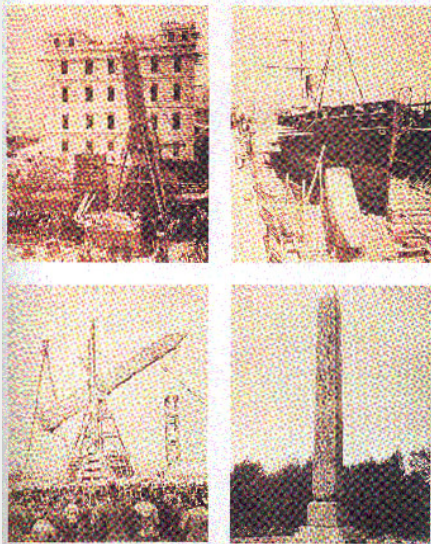




## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

### Obelisks and fountains - Greek culture in Hellenistic Egypt

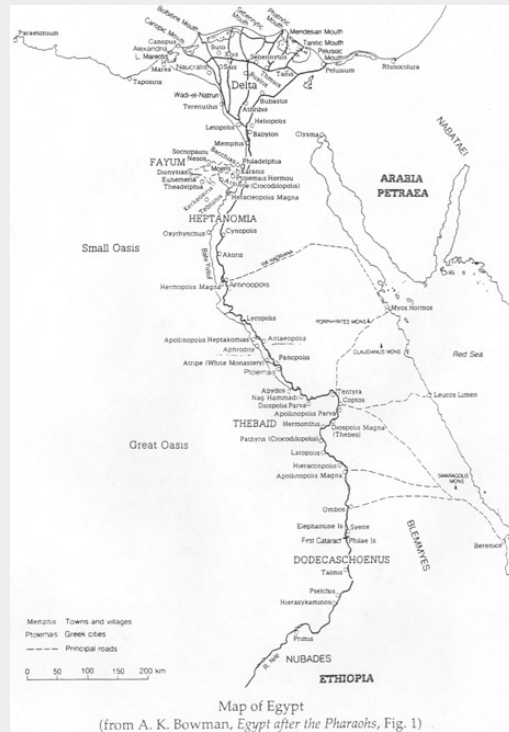
This is a lecture about Greek culture but I thought I'd start here in the United States. I have two exhibits which I want to draw to your attention - one from the East Coast and one from the West. First, from New York I start with the great **obelisk**, which was brought from Alexandria through the generosity of William Vanderbilt and reerected in Central Park in 1881. That great obelisk was one of a pair - the other stands on the Thames embankment in London. Originally these obelisks came from Heliopolis, the cult centre of the Egyptian sun-god Ra (Greek Helios) where in front of the main temple their gilded tops would catch the first rays of the sun. (Heliopolis may be known to some of you as the site of Cairo's airport but it has lost its former glory). The obelisks were brought to Alexandria by the first Roman emperor Augustus to stand in front of the Caesareum, the centre of the new imperial cult. These obelisks have an interesting history. Cut out as single pieces of red granite from Aswan in southern Egypt, 42 cubits in length, they were first erected by Tuthmosis III, in the first half of the fifteenth century BC. Some two hundred years later, in his usual aggressive and domineering way, pharaoh Ramses II had them reinscribed in his own name. Now, a Roman was taking them to adorn a key monument in the capital city of the country he had captured.



J.-Y. Empereur, *Alexandria rediscovered* (New York : G. Braziller, 1998), 123.

Alexandria, lies on the northern coast of **Egypt**, looking northwards back to old Greece across the Aegean. It was founded by Alexander of Macedon in 332 BC in the course of his conquest of the Persian empire, and in choosing this site for a new Egyptian capital, Alexander was well aware of the potential of its position. The foundation of Alexandria took a traditional form and, as in Greek colonial foundations of an earlier date, the agora or market-place was designed as the centre of the city. Here temples were planned - for the Greek gods and for Isis, the Egyptian goddess. This last, I think, is important. Alexandria in most respects was a typical Greek city foundation, but the inclusion from the start of a temple for the goddess **Isis** was a symbolic act. In his new foundation Alexander was setting the scene for continued Greek rule of Egypt; he was also, from the start, practising an inclusive policy in relation to that country's gods.

# Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt



Alan K. Bowman, *Egypt after the Pharaohs, 332 BC-AD 642: From Alexander to the Arab Conquest* (London: British Museum, 1986), Fig. 1.



Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley, and the Regents of the University of California; photographed by Joan Knudsen.  
 Inv. 6-20448



## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

Of Alexander's city we know little. Following his death in Babylon in 323 BC the conqueror's generals fought each other to claim his inheritance. It was Ptolemy son of Lagos who made for Egypt which, with its good natural borders, he succeeded in holding against his rivals. The later hi-jack of Alexander's embalmed corpse served to strengthen his position and, under Ptolemy I and, particularly, his son Ptolemy II, Alexandria grew and flourished. It was now that obelisk-hunting began in earnest. The natural historian Pliny describes how the engineers of Ptolemy II Philadelphus brought downriver for re-erection a massive obelisk, almost twice the height of the New York example. This too was an earlier pharaonic monument, which may have come from Heliopolis. The extent to which that sacred centre was despoiled is now made even clearer by the underwater finds from Alexandria at the foot of Fort Qait Bey. Out beyond the site of the ancient Lighthouse, the famous Pharos, there lie parts of three separate obelisks of Seti I, which must once have stood in the new Ptolemaic city. Besides the obelisks, papyrus columns have been found and twenty five sphinxes. From the inscriptions that survive on them, we learn that Heliopolis was the earlier home of most of these. Heliopolis, it is clear, formed a quarry of earlier monuments which were brought to the city and gave to the Ptolemies' capital a touch of older Egypt.

My second exhibit is from the west coast, from far closer to home, since it comes from the collection of the Tebtunis Centre here in Berkeley. This time we have another philanthropist to thank - Mrs Phoebe Apperson Hearst, who financed the excavations at Tebtunis and so was responsible for the fine collection of papyrus texts that now reside here in Berkeley together with a related collection of objects in the Hearst Museum. Papyrus, of course, was the paper of the ancient world, made out of the criss-crossed stems of the papyrus plant beaten flat which formed a surface for writing. The story of the discovery of the Tebtunis papyri is well known - but I'm still going to tell it again. It was 16 January 1900. One of the local workmen excavating for the Egypt Exploration Fund together with the University of California was digging at the cemetery of Umm-el-Breigat, the ancient Tebtunis in the south Fayum, when to his dismay he found a row of mummified crocodiles where he had hoped to find rich sarcophagi. In disgust, he lifted his spade and broke one of them into pieces. In doing so he revealed a wrapping of papyrus round and within the crocodile mummies. It is from these crocodile wrappings that a large number of the Tebtunis papyri now in Berkeley derive. (Others come from the casing of human mummies). Many - but certainly not all - of these texts were speedily published by the great Oxford papyrologists Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt with the help of J. Gilbert Smyly of Trinity College Dublin, who was highly skilled in reading Greek figures. That was certainly needed since many of the crocodile texts were from a related group of papers from the nearby village of Kerkeosiris. That particular group included local land surveys and tax accounts of the village scribe called Menches from the end of the second century BC. But it's not the Kerkeosiris surveys that I want to talk about today; instead, it's one of four literary extracts found together with them that forms my second exhibit.

One of the most important features of the Tebtunis Papyri is the preservation of the numbers of the crocodile mummies in which they were found; through these we can rearrange the texts back into the batches of waste-paper that they formed before they were recycled as mummy wrappings. Crocodile mummy number 28 contained a miscellaneous selection of texts, almost all of which appear to derive from the cache of Menches' papers. And together with a couple of petitions, some letters, survey reports and accounts, comes this literary papyrus, now published as *P.Tebt.* 1. Grenfell and Hunt described this text as an anthology and it certainly consists of shortish extracts from various poems. The anthology is presumably an individual's personal collection of extracts; I should like to think it was that of Menches, but that is not necessary for my argument today. So what does exhibit two consist of? First comes a brief lyric poem, in which Helen complains that Menelaus is deserting her after their return from Troy. It's a novel twist to an old theme and, as we shall shortly find, the tales of Homer remained strong in the Hellenistic world. Next, marked at the start of the extract (lines 5-11), comes an elaborate description of dawn in the countryside:

'Birds nimble and musical were flitting through the lonely woodland; perched on the topmost pine-branches they chirped and twittered in loud sweet sound (*eminuriz' ettittubizen keladon pantomigê*), some beginning, some pausing, some silent, other sang aloud and spoke with voices on the hill-sides; and Echo talkative, that loves lonely places, made



## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

answer in the glades. The willing busy bees, snub-nosed, nimble-winged, summer's toilers in a swarm, stingless, deep-toned, clay-workers, unhappy in love, unsheltered, draw up the sweet nectar honey-laden.'

*(D. Page, Select Papyri III (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1950), 410-413.*

This, I suggest, is the poetry of Greece. The twittering birds, the glades, the trees and the snub-nosed bees seem to belong to the Greek countryside, rather than that of Egypt, where the text was found.

Finally, in this anthology, come two short two-liners on the nature of love. My interest in this second exhibit, is not in its metre or even, particularly, its content. What interests me especially, is what this represents - an up-country example of Greek literature, preserved in a crocodile mummy from Tebtunis, where it was reused as waste paper for wrapping a sacred animal.

Each area of Egypt had its own particular sacred animal, and in the Fayum, the Lakeland with its capital of Krokodilopolis that animal was the crocodile, known as Sobek or Souchos, and by many other names too. The crocodile was feared and it was tended. Indeed, a hatchery of crocodile eggs has recently been excavated. On death, the **crocodile was mummified**. And for a Souchos mummification and burial the local scrap papyrus might be used. So, as we have just seen, in among the land surveys and the correspondence of a local village scribe there survives a handful of Greek literary texts.



*Courtesy of the Phoebe Apperson. Hearst Museum of Anthropology, Berkeley and Regents of the University of California,  
photographed by Joan Knudsen.*

*Inv. 6-21633*

Why then these two exhibits? The two different yet, in a way, complementary features that I've presented are (1) an Egyptian side to Alexandria, the new Greek capital city of Egypt and Greek poetry which comes from an Egyptian scribal context, from an up-country village office, where land-surveys, petitions and official correspondence were the stuff of daily life. What are we to make of these and how do they relate to my subject - the Greek culture of Egypt? That is what I want now to explore with you a little further.



## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

Let us return to Alexandria, where the last few years have seen the extraordinary sight of two rival French teams diving in and around the murky waters of the Great Harbour in an attempt to uncover and identify the remains of that great Hellenistic city. The Alexandria that has been uncovered as a result is the one I've already described. A great forest of columns, obelisks, and sphinxes now lies underwater in both the areas that have been explored. The addition of this new underwater haul of monuments to the handful of pharaonic examples already known suggests that the founding fathers of the great city of Alexandria were concerned to decorate their capital with the art of the country they ruled. The transport north of obelisks and columns, of sphinxes and earlier monuments will have given to Alexandria quite an Egyptian aspect - an impression intensified by the use of colossal art for Hellenistic kings and queens.

The meaning of all this is puzzling. Did the new rulers really wish to Egyptianise their city, to incorporate it fully into the country that lay to its south? I somehow doubt this, though intentions of course are always hard to evaluate. Nevertheless, in the decoration of their Greek capital with the art of Egypt, the new Ptolemaic rulers were surely demonstrating their power and control over the land of Egypt. At the same time, it seems, they were presenting their new city as a sort of heritage centre for pharaonic Egypt, a capital city where Greek and Macedonian art was joined by another, far older, tradition. Under the early Ptolemies, as is well known, Greek literary culture was encouraged and developed in Alexandria, with its shrine to the Muses, the Museum, and the Library it contained. At the same time, the Ptolemies were turning their capital city into something of a museum itself.

So much for the Egyptian window-dressing to the city. I want now to get to the fountains and the Greek side of things, which is, after all, the aspect more usually connected with the city of Alexandria, where under the first two Ptolemies the famous Museum and its Library grabbed the imagination of contemporary literati, and where royal patronage enabled artists, poets, scientists and many others both to earn a living and to practice their trade in surroundings conducive to work. Alexandria, in this period, became the centre of learning and teaching in the Greek-speaking world. It was here that the best poets and scholars congregated, as part of what I'd like to call the 'Ptolemaic enterprise'. Alexandria took over from Athens as the cultural centre of the Mediterranean. It was in the great theatre of Alexandria, we are told, that Hegesias played the works of Hesiod, and Hermophantos those of Homer; it was here, not in Athens, in the third century BC that Machon of Sicyon put on his comedies. The encouragement to learning and literate culture that the Alexandrian Museum and its Library entailed should not be underestimated. Poets like Theokritos, Kallimachos or Poseidippos flocked to Alexandria in the hopes of patronage. Here, as scholars and poets they wrote poetry for the Ptolemies. Literary debate was the order of the day. What sort of poetry should one write - new elegy or old epic? The scholars drew up the battle lines. The battle of the books was underway. Ptolemy II's tutor was Philetas of Kos, a poet who ranged himself with Kallimachos on the side of the short elegy, in opposition to Apollonios of Rhodes who championed the cause of epic poetry. Kallimachos' battle cry was one for which we all, I suspect, feel some sympathy: mega biblion, mega kakon ('a big book is a big evil'). The debate in Alexandria was sharp and in a way this characterises the intellectual atmosphere of the time. 'In many-tribed Egypt' claimed one critic, 'there are many cloistered bookworms twittering in the bird-cage of the muses, who make a living from it'. But without scholars, scientists and artists, teaching loses its freshness. It was these poets and the scholarship they engaged in which formed the background to what went on in the countryside, to the sense of Greekness that the immigrants and their descendants came to acquire.

Large sums were spent on scholarship - the envy of any university today - and poets, geographers, astronomers, natural and medical scientists and engineers were all encouraged and supported. They might dine together in the Museum, taking part in the vibrant life of the capital. The scientific work of the day was probably even more important than that of the literary scholars. The circumference of the world was measured by Eratosthenes, Euclid wrote his Elements, Heron developed geometry, Archimedes - we are now told - got close to calculus and Ktesibios invented the pump, the principle of the steam engine and a water-clock, as well as making important improvements in artillery equipment.





## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

A bevy of scholars from both neighbouring and distant states came to the capital of Egypt, where they taught and did their research at a high level. This remarkable development was the result of a massive effort by the early Ptolemies, and we need to consider what led them to make it. How far was the royal patronage of Greek literary culture, that is found in the Library and the Museum, simply a part of the trappings of kingship, a matter of prestige, of holding one's own in the increasingly competitive world of Hellenistic kings? Or did it have a more practical and wider aim, the foundation of a broader educational project concerned with the spread of the Greek language and culture to the country as a whole. How far was this enterprise aimed at the hellenisation of native Egyptians and those now needed to run the country in a new language. Was it simply Greek education which was aimed at, or was the scope a wider one?

We can put these questions in an Alexandrian context, by considering the acquisition policy of the Library in Alexandria. The main Librarian within a library always holds a responsible and an influential position, and it was no different in Alexandria. There, the post of Librarian was held by a host of distinguished names - Zenodotos, Apollonios of Rhodes, Eratosthenes from Cyrene, and so on. The Librarian was a royal appointee, also charged with the job of tutor to the children of the royal house. The royal connection is important. This was a personal Ptolemaic project and the whole royal family was involved in this cultural enterprise. But what about the policy of acquisition? What books - and by books I mean rolls of papyrus - what books and what texts were in the Library?

One striking aspect of the whole enterprise is that this was not just a Greek project. More than just Greek literature was involved. In the words of Irenaeus, writing long after, 'Ptolemy son of Lagos' - that's Ptolemy I - 'had the ambition to equip the library he established in Alexandria with the writings of all men, in as far as they were worthy of serious attention'. Here, I think, we meet with one result of Alexander's conquests - an awareness of a far wider world than just that inhabited by Greeks. Alexander had showed himself interested in many things in distant parts - the breadth of his curiosity and interest in Eastern parts, and especially in India, comes through the fragments of his historians. An interest in, and desire to collect or even control, world literature is very much in the tradition of Alexander. But were these books in the original or were they held in translation? This is the nub of the problem and if just we could answer this question we should be some nearer to assessing the nature of the enterprise.

My hunch is that the books that were acquired for the new Library were primarily Greek texts and other works in Greek translation. Again it is clear from papyri that works of Egyptian literature circulated and were read in translation. Even nationalistic anti-Greek texts survive in their Greek translations. It's in Greek we have the Dream of Nectanebo and the Egyptian historian Manetho wrote his work in Greek. This after all was the language of the new pharaohs, who showed themselves prepared to sponsor the activity of translation. The best known example, of course, is the translation into Greek of the Hebrew Bible as the Septuagint, so-called from the number of translators reputed to have been involved.

For the Greeks of Alexandria, the mission of the library of Alexandria was, if we accept this argument, to provide great books in translation. A complete collection of all literature to date seems to have been the aim but we find no emphasis on foreign language editions. With translations, then, and with copies made at home and abroad the Ptolemies built up their collection. The scale was enormous, though the number of over 500,000 books preserved in Alexandria's libraries is of a late tradition. But it is in line with other accounts - according to the Letter of Aristaeus when Demetrios of Phaleron, in charge of the king's library, was asked how many thousand books were already collected, he replied: 'more than two hundred thousand, your majesty; and in a short while I shall exert every effort for the remainder, to round the number up to half a million'. Numbers of course are always uncertain but all accounts agree that there were a lot of books in the Library.

Long-term one of the most significant activities of Alexandrian scholars was that they decided which classical texts would survive. It was they, who were responsible for the canonisation of Greek literature; they decided who the top ten would be. These were the chosen texts - the classics, I suppose. Other texts were collected and catalogued, but not designated for special study. In this act of selection - in deciding who was worth reading - these scholars shaped



## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

more than two millennia's worth of scholarship, since there is no doubt that the poets and prose writers selected in Alexandria set the stage for their disciplines, through Rome and the Renaissance to the present day. That is quite an achievement, and in these days when 'great books' are sometimes regarded with suspicion, it is interesting to consider the circumstances in which the classic Classical texts were originally designated - the emphasis on these texts formed part of the definition of Greek culture in this new cultural environment.

In Greece, of course, poetry had a long tradition of performing important social functions. Pindar praised the athletic prowess of his patrons; Tyrtaeus incited Spartan hoplites to war. In Athens, the dramatists had engaged with issues of fundamental importance to the city. But it is often in marginal areas that cultural icons carry even greater weight and Macedon, as a relative outsider in Greece, had a striking record for the encouragement of Greek culture. Euripides had been invited to the Macedonian court. Alexander's father, Philip of Macedon, had actually been murdered in the theatre at Pella at the start of a dramatic performance of the type he and his predecessors had done so much to support. Now in Alexandria, at the edge of Egypt, in a new country where they remained a minority people, Macedonian kings were using their wealth to encourage Greek literary culture. Poets were patronised, literary and scientific activity supported and there was a strong emphasis on Greek culture in all its aspects. The engine of scholarly activity centred on the museum in Alexandria was a key part of the Ptolemaic project.

This was Alexandria. But what of up-country, of the Delta, the Nile Valley, and the Fayum from where my Tebtunis text - exhibit 2 - was found? How far was the rest of Egypt affected by royal cultural policies, and how indeed can we trace this? I want now to travel south, to see what was happening in the rest of the country, in areas where the Greeks formed only a small minority. It was the Nile valley as a whole that provided the wealth and strength of Egypt, and without the support of both Upper and Lower Egypt the rule of the new Alexandrian dynasty would be in danger. To unify Egypt under their control was one of the most pressing of the problems faced by the early Ptolemies; language-learning and education more generally were central to their response to it. So how did they do it? What policies did they adopt to encourage the learning of Greek, to persuade their subjects that education was worth the effort, could bring them rewards and jobs in the new administration, which over time became increasingly literate in Greek, to the eventual detriment of Egyptian?

Well, as any government knows, one of the most effective and direct ways of affecting its people is through the tax-structure, and this, we now know, was one of the approaches that the Ptolemies used. At the very end of a compilation of legal texts dating from the third century BC, a royal ruling on the salt-tax is recorded. The salt-tax in Egypt was very much like a poll tax and was levied on all adults, both male and female, at a fairly low rate. By this ruling various categories of persons were exempted from the salt-tax. The list of exemptions is surely significant. Teachers of letters come first, followed by athletic coaches, then actors, and those victorious in Alexandrian games. The remission was to apply to them and their families.

The range of concessions is interesting. Both mind and body formed part of education, and the inclusion of actors suggests a wider concern for literate culture than that simply found in schools. It's a very Greek line-up here, teachers of both letters and sport, actors and those professional athletes who had been victorious in the new dynastic games that were held in the capital city. But it is not dinners in the prytaneion, as in Athens, that these Ptolemaic victors were granted but rather a concession in taxes - a nice reflection perhaps of the changes that came about in the new Hellenistic kingdoms.

Again papyrus records show us the effect of this ruling, as teachers figure highlighted as a special category in tax-registers and tax-collectors' records. For in Egypt, everything was done in writing and the survival of these records allows us to begin to study the occupational make-up of the population. It's amazing how fascinating tax-records can become once one gets interested in such questions. Police, for instance, formed between three and five percent of the adult population, priests formed between five and ten percent; but what of the teachers? For some Fayum villages we have detailed figures and, the larger the village, the higher the concentration of teachers. Overall in the area,



## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

teachers formed 0.5 per cent of the population, and primary school teachers were to be found throughout the villages and towns of Egypt. Education, I would argue, played an important part in establishing the rule of the Ptolemies.

What did Ptolemaic teachers teach? A teachers' handbook from the same period can start to answer that question. Compressed in one longish papyrus text, we find the basic elements for the teaching of reading and writing. We start with practice with the vowels - a, e, ê, i, o, u, ô - first to be practised with an initial consonant running through the alphabet - ba, be, bê, bi, bo, bu, bô, and so on - then with a consonant at the end, then sandwiched between two and later more consonants. Later came practice with numbers, single-syllable words and a list of Greek gods. A list of rivers followed and then two-syllable names. Three-, four- and five-syllable names follow, many of them known from literature, but others as well.

Then we reach literature. We start with Euripides, some lines from *Phoenician Women*, some from the *Ino*, again a well-known passage. Then Homer, an *Odyssey* passage with Calypso speaking. When originally published, this was a unique extract but now twelve extracts from Book 5 have been identified, with three including some of these same lines. This is literature in extracts, an anthology, with highlights. Two Alexandrian epigrams follow and it is here that we reach our fountains since one of these poems describes a fountain; the other is in praise of Ptolemy IV, who built a temple to Homer. The fountain poem is an elaborate piece, which in perhaps excessive detail describes the architectural features of a fountain in Alexandria which had at its centre a statue of Arsinoe, the sister-wife of Ptolemy II. The handbook continues with two cook speeches from comedy, of a type we know to have been popular in the period, and an extract from the comic-writer Straton. Some multiplication tables come at the end.

This particular school-text has been frequently studied and today there are just a few points to which I want to draw attention. First, once the pupil progresses beyond basic numerate and literate skills, it is literature, more particularly poetic literature that he's taught. The anthologising of classical literature that we found in my second Tebtunis exhibit is a marked and enduring feature of the literary texts that survive from Egypt. This seems likely to reflect educational practice, with literature taught in extracts, at least at the lower levels. The authors chosen are the regular ones - Homer, Euripides and the comic writers with the addition of some contemporary literature.

The inclusion of recent Alexandrian poetry is a striking feature of this handbook. There are two examples here - the poem in praise of Ptolemy IV and the poem on the fountain. The fountain epigram represents a very specific form of literature - it's a poem celebrating a feature of the new Greek capital of Alexandria, which is closely tied to the royal house, in this case Queen Arsinoe. It doesn't matter for my argument which Queen Arsinoe this was, nor who the author may have been. What matters is that it's a poem on a monument that stood in Alexandria. The monumentalisation of this capital city in its early years was celebrated in literature. It was not, however, the obelisks and sphinxes which were noted in verse but rather the Greek monuments of the city. For Alexandria was filled with Greek temples and other public monuments which added grandeur to the city, and would catch the eye of visitors from both home and abroad. Alongside Alexandria's Lighthouse, the Pharos, or the temples of Berenike and Arsinoe, our fountain was certainly small-scale. Nevertheless, like these temples and like the Pharos, it was celebrated in verse by a poet keen to please his royal patron. Such poems, I want to argue, joined the classics - Homer and the literary works from Athens - in playing a part in the Greek education of Ptolemaic schools. In an age before photography or digitisation, the pictorial came in words. The monuments of their capital were displayed to the town dwellers and countryfolk of Egypt in the poems that they learnt at school.

Admittedly, this argument is based on only a few examples but my guess is that others will occur. Besides the two poems and the handbook, I'm thinking also of an anthology of literary texts copied out by the brothers Ptolemaios and Apollonios, who were detained in the Memphite Serapeum in the mid second century BC. In form that text is very similar to my exhibit 2 (P.Tebt. I). It contains a collection of unconnected extracts from different texts, the personal selection of the two brothers. The only copies to date of Poseidippos' poem on the Pharos, set up by Sostratos of Knidos, and that on the temple to Aphrodite Zephyritis, dedicated by Kallikrates of Samos, are preserved in the hand of Ptolemaios among the items of this poetic anthology. And how did Ptolemaios know these





## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

poems, if not from his days at school? I suppose it could just be that they were recited to him by visitors to the Serapeum but, whatever their immediate source, the knowledge of such texts, celebrating as they do Greek monuments of the city, notable members of the central administration and the royal family itself, are, I suggest, the stuff of patriotic set texts.

And here we reach the final stage of my talk today. I have been arguing that, as part of the Ptolemaic enterprise, Greek culture in the countryside was spread by teaching in schools, and that Ptolemaic education was not just a question of literacy but also of literate culture. We may go further and ask how far lessons learned at school were effective. How far were Ptolemaic pupils changed by what they learned? In part, the aim of the Ptolemaic emphasis on education may be seen as the provision of a scribal and administrative class literate in Greek. This was certainly achieved. Over time, Greek did become the main language of the administration, and not just at the higher levels as in the early years of the regime. Further, the odd quotations and extracts from Greek literature that survive in administrative contexts bear witness to the literary aspect of this education, as in that Tebtunis text. But how deeply did school learning have any effect?

As we saw, Homer was well known and widely read as a school text. Some 25 years ago Philippe Derchain drew attention to a new element in the Horus story recounted in the hieroglyphs on the Ptolemaic temple at Edfu. The story is the traditional tale of Horus and Seth as they fight for supremacy following the death of Osiris. I quote: 'Horus son of Isis decapitated his adversary and his accomplices, in the presence of his father Ra and the whole of the great Ennead. Then he dragged him feet-first across his territory and fixed a spear in his head and his back.' That Horus should drag Seth by the feet is otherwise unparalleled, and Derchain argues for an Homeric echo - the scene in Iliad 22 when Achilles defiles the body of Hector as he drags it behind his chariot. In Edfu, of course, we have no chariot, though the connection of the outrage with the victim's own territory is also found in Homer. To judge from surviving papyri, the Iliad was even more popular than was the Odyssey in Hellenistic Egypt, and book 22 was a particularly popular book. The episode was certainly known and read in schools. That the unusual scene from Edfu, on a Ptolemaic monument built in traditional Egyptian style, derived from a school study of Homer is by no means sure but the idea is an interesting one.

More recently, the same French scholar has drawn attention to another Edfu temple scene, in which a personification of the spoken word, accompanied by the god of writing Thoth, receives the instruments of a scribe - a desk and inkpot, a palette and a tablet with pens; and there is a paean of praise for script. In some ways this is reminiscent of the age-old praises for the profession of the scribe, but here it is more specifically the uses of writing that are described. First of all, writing allows the making of records, it guarantees exactitude in legal matters - a reference no doubt to contracts - it is an excellent instrument for administration enabling the making of rules, the passing on of instructions, the land-survey and taxation, the role of allowances, and the definition of royal rights. So far, so very Egyptian, but then ... Finally, writing allows written correspondence - two friends separated by the sea can keep in touch; the recipient of a letter can hear the distant friend. The extraordinary novelty of this text is very striking. Here in hieroglyphs that accompany traditional scenes within an Egyptian temple we find, especially at the end, a praise of writing that comes straight from the world of Greece. And if this influence is to be found incorporated into such a traditional structure as a temple, then we may assume that it was widespread and formed part of general culture.

In any society the school curriculum is likely to be important in the transmission of that society's values and in reflecting what is considered important. This was no less the case in Ptolemaic Egypt than it is today. We have no evidence at all for central control of the syllabus but there was a degree of uniformity in what was taught in schools in Ptolemaic and Roman Egypt, and even beyond. When, among the examples of literature to survive from this context, we find poems which celebrate Greek monuments in the capital city, we may perhaps assume that this was one of the ways in which the idea of the capital city, the image of Alexandria, was purveyed up-country in Egypt. And so I return to my title and the nature of Greek culture in Egypt. This was a culture embodied in both its monuments and its literature. Under Ptolemaic encouragement (but not coercion), the system of education brought the culture of Greek Alexandria to the wider population of Egypt. The early Ptolemies encouraged literacy for clear



## Obelisks and Fountains: Greek Culture in Hellenistic Egypt

utilitarian reasons but their educational enterprise went far beyond this, forming part of their broader ambition to establish their kingdom as the centre of Greek culture in the Hellenistic world.

*Dorothy Thompson*

*Berkeley, April 2002*