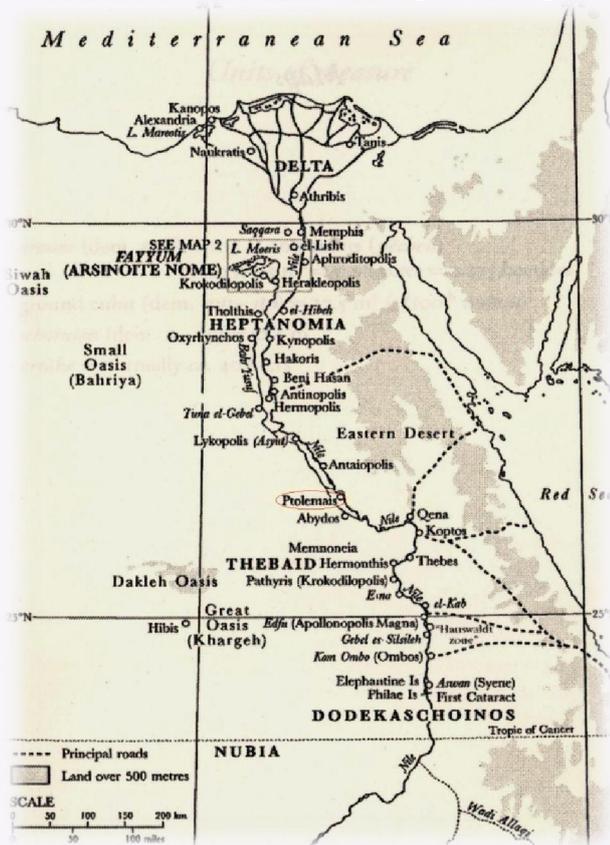


# PTOLEMAIS\*

## THE LOST GREEK CITY IN EGYPT



**Radwa Zaki**

Research Specialist  
Calligraphy Center  
Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Radwa.Zaki@bibalex.org

### Citation:

Radwa Zaki, Ptolemais: The lost city in Egypt.-  
*Historical Kan Periodical*.- Issue (8) June 2010.  
P.133 - 138 (www.historicalkan.co.nr)

### Introduction

Undoubtedly, the founding of Greek city-states in ancient Egypt was irreplaceable; the *Polis* was the most characteristic expression of the Hellenic way of life.<sup>1</sup>

It is a commonplace that the Ptolemaic government of Hellenistic Egypt was unusual, perhaps unique, among the successors in not founding Greek cities kingdoms, with a single exception. As a result, Egypt had only three Greek cities until the foundation of *Antinoopolis*<sup>2</sup> by Emperor Hadrian (AD 117-138) *Naukratis*<sup>3</sup>, the archaic foundation; *Alexandria*<sup>4</sup>, the greatest of the cities founded by Alexander the Great; and *Ptolemais*<sup>5</sup> in Upper Egypt or *Ptolemais Hermiou* that was founded by Ptolemy I Soter(323 -283 BC).<sup>6</sup>If Alexandria perpetuated the name and cult of the great Alexander (332-323BC), Ptolemais perpetuated the name and cult of the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty; Ptolemy I Soter.<sup>7</sup>

### Nomination

In ancient Egyptian PA si n ptwlmis (i.e. Posi Ptolemais). In Greek ptolemais (i.e. Ptolemais). Modern name El- Minshah<sup>8</sup>

### Location

Ptolemais occupied the site of an Egyptian village Psoi (modern Minshah) 400 miles up the Nile, in the nome called after the ancient Egyptian city of Thisis (modern Girgeh).

### Plan

Information concerning the planning of Ptolemais is shadowy, but it could have been assumed that the city assimilated the plan of Alexandria based on chess-board plan.

### Foundation

Literary sources<sup>9</sup> indicate that the ancient city should date to at least the third century B.C., it did not give any information about the foundation of the city except a decree from Ptolemais Hermiou gives interesting insight:

Resolved by the boule and demos... *Theos Soter* [founded] a Greek city in [the Thebaid]... making its name *Ptolemais* [from himself, and becoming its patron.] to it the king sent [... settlers from...] and from Argos [and from ...and Lacedaimo]n and from The[saly?] and from ... the [council and people] decreed [to...].

The inscription itself is a Hadrianic copy of an early Ptolemaic decree.<sup>10</sup>

### Description

The city was framed in by the barren hills of the Nile Valley and the Egyptian sky, here a Greek city arose, with its public buildings and temples and theatre, no doubt exhibiting the regular architectural forms associated with Greek culture, with a citizen-body Greek in blood, and the institutions of a Greek city-state.<sup>11</sup>

Ptolemais is described by Strabo as a large city with a constitution on the Greek model:

Επειτα πτολεμαιοη πολις, μεγαιστη των εν θηβαδι και ουκ ελαττων Μεμθως, εχουσα και συστημα πολιτικον ηη τω ελληνικω τροπω.

*Then follows Ptolemais, the largest city in the Thebais, not inferior to Memphis, with a form of government after the Grecian mode.*<sup>12</sup>

With much exaggeration, it can assume that the city was only the size of Thebes, it was a very large city indeed.<sup>13</sup>



The ruins of the ancient city

### The Purposes of founding Ptolemais

1. One of the most important factors to establish a Greek city in Upper Egypt was the unprecedented threat to Ptolemaic throne in the Thebaid must have given an ominous warning to the ruling Ptolemaic authorities to be on full alert and take the utmost precautions against Thebes; the stronghold of the Egyptian nationalism. This activated and enhanced the role of Ptolemais, as the counter-stronghold entrusted mainly with the defense of the Hellenistic and Ptolemaic interests in the south of Egypt. Ptolemais played, in the regard, the role of repository which provided the garrisons all over Thebaid with their necessary troops of trained officers and soldiers.<sup>14</sup>

2. Thebaid stretches of the Nile valley from Aswan to roughly Abydos. The entire region was administrated through the new regional capital of Ptolemais.<sup>15</sup> It is clear that, whatever the evolution of institutional control was in the early Ptolemaic Period, the Ptolemaic plan for the control of the Thebaid involved the control of the ancient institutions by newly established officials based in Ptolemais.<sup>16</sup>



A Ptolemaic inscription from Bir 'Iayyan

An excellent example of the regional treatment of the Thebaid comes from a recently published inscription from Bir Iayyan<sup>17</sup>; a water station supplying the water to passerby situated along the eastern desert road built by Ptolemy II Phailadelphus (283- 246 BC), which connected the gold mines at Barramiya in the eastern desert, about ninety-seven km east of Edfu, to the Nile. The roughly-cut inscription, which served as a milestone marker, reads:

Απο ποταου εως τουτου σταδιοι  
τετρακοσιοι εξηκοντα εις.  
Βασιλευοντος πολεμαιου του  
πολεμαιου εωτηρος ετους κη, μηνος  
επειφ εστησεν ροδων Λησιμαχου  
πολεμαιευσ τοπαρχων τους τρεις

*From the river to this point, four hundred sixty-one stadii<sup>18</sup>. In the reign of Ptolemy son of Ptolemy Soter, year 28, month of Epeiph, Rhodon son of Lysimachos, form Ptolemais, toparch of three set up (this stone).<sup>19</sup>*

The title of Rhodon, “toparch of the three” refers to an area in his charge, and may refer to the southern nomes of the Thebaid. The former may be more likely, in which case this inscription, then, may provide additional evidence that the Thebaid was administrated regionally from Ptolemais.<sup>20</sup>

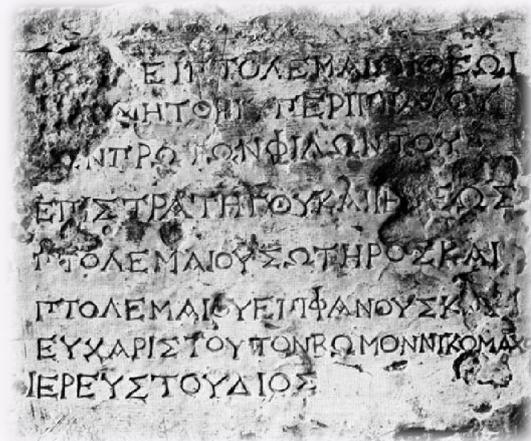
3. Also, Ptolemais, not far upstream from Akhmim, may have been sited to take advantage of developing cultivation in an agriculturally rich area that historically supported many settlements. All of the important Ptolemaic officials who were in charge of the finances and monitoring of local institutions were based there, as were the eponymous priests of Ptolemy I Soter (323-283 BC) after their introduction by Ptolemy IV Philopator (221-205 BC).<sup>21</sup>

### Political view of the city

Of the autonomy of the city there is no manner of doubt. If there is some doubt whether Alexandria possessed a council (boulē) and assembly, there is none in regard to Ptolemais. It was more possible

for the kings to allow a measure of self-government to a people removed at that distance from the ordinary residence of the court. We have still, inscribed on stone, “Decrees psephismata” passed in the assembly of the people of Ptolemais, couched in the regular forms of Greek political tradition:

*“It seemed good to the boulē and to the dēmos: Hermas son of Doreon, of the deme Megisteus<sup>22</sup>, was the proposer: Whereas the prytaneis who were colleagues with Dionysius the son of Musaeus in the 8th year, etc.”<sup>23</sup>*



Ptolemais also had building specifically associated with its city status, with popular assemblies (both demos and ekklesia). As it had a town council (boule) it probably had a council chamber (bouleuterion) and a town hall (prytaneion) for the presiding officers (prytaneis) of the boule. It also had courts of justice (dikasteria).<sup>24</sup>

The evidence for internal autonomy is thus complete. The king communicates with the city through the medium of the ambassadors, thus preserving the fiction of external autonomy.<sup>25</sup>

Formally Ptolemais was a free Greek city-state in alliance with King Ptolemy, to which the king sent ambassadors, whom the city received with public honors. It dealt directly with the court and was not subject to the strategos of the Thinite nome or the epistrategos of the Thebaid, though he might often reside in Ptolemais. No doubt, in reality Ptolemais was completely under the king's control.<sup>26</sup> There is no evidence that Ptolemais minted its own coinage.<sup>27</sup>

### Demographic view of the city

The names of citizens of Ptolemais are Greek names. No doubt they too, like the Alexandrines and the people of Naucratis, avoided intermarriage with Egyptians. Psoi will, no doubt, have formed a native quarter at Ptolemais, just as Rakotis did at Alexandria, with a native population excluded from the citizen-body.<sup>28</sup>

The citizen-body at Ptolemais, too, was divided into tribes and demes<sup>29</sup>, it seem probable that the deme-names at Alexandria and Ptolemais were so arranged -presumably by the court- that the same deme-name should never occur in both cities. This, however, did not apply to the tribe-names. There was a tribe "Ptolemais" at *Ptolemais*, as well as at Alexandria. But the deme-names of Ptolemais, although different from those of Alexandria, were of the same kind. One of the demes belonging to the tribe Ptolemais gave the deme-name Berenikeus. To the same tribe, presumably, belonged the other demes called after members of the royal family Cleopatoreios, Philotereios. "Megisteus" is possibly taken from an epithet attached to Ptolemy I in the cult offered him, as Megistos Theos Soter "Greatest God Savior".<sup>30</sup>

It is worth notice that one interest of Greek culture, the dramatic, was a living one in this far-away Greek community. As early as the reign of Ptolemy II we find Ptolemais the place where a guild of actors ("artists attached to Dionysos") has its headquarters, under the patronage of the Brother-and Sister Gods.<sup>31</sup>

### The Cults

Ptolemais had its own cult<sup>32</sup>, or system of cults, addressed to the persons of the royal house. The earliest document in regard to this matter belongs to the reign of Ptolemy IV<sup>33</sup>, Philopator (221-205 BC), and shows an annual "Priest of Ptolemy Soter and of the Father-loving Gods" (*i.e.* the reigning king and queen). Documents in the Thebaid are dated both by the priesthood of Alexander and the Ptolemaic kings and queens at Alexandria, and by this priesthood at Ptolemais.<sup>34</sup> Plaumann supposed that this eponymous priesthood at Ptolemais was a new institution of Ptolemy Philopator's, but that there was, quite distinct from it, a city-cult of Ptolemy I, as "Theos

Soter" or as "Megistos Theos Soter", and that this city-cult went back as far as the lifetime of Ptolemy I (323-283 BC). The evidence upon which he built for this distinct city-cult is exceedingly slight, but it seems certain that Ptolemais must have had from the beginning some cult of its founder. If Rhodes, in the lifetime of Ptolemy I, instituted a cult of him as a Saviour God, his own city of Ptolemais can hardly have been behind.<sup>35</sup>

### Remnant of ancient Ptolemais

The site has never been extensively excavated or surveyed. Nowadays, the remains of Ptolemais are covered completely by a modern village, but even on the modern rubbish dump remains of the ancient city can be found, like pillar fragments. The site of El-Manshah, is owned by Supreme Council of Antiquities "SCA", it contains also the Temple of Neos Dionysu.<sup>36</sup>

Regarding finds from Ptolemais; black granite stele has been found in the site of El-Manshah<sup>37</sup>. It dates back to the reign of Trajan (AD 98 – 117). It bears the dedication of the temple which was raised by the city of Ptolemais to the god Aesculapius<sup>38</sup> and the goddess Hygieia<sup>39</sup>, and it has preserved the paean which was composed for the occasion by a local poet.<sup>40</sup>



## Conclusion

It could be stated that;

- Ptolemais was considered a second political center in Egypt -founded by Ptolemy I Soter- after Alexandria, according to Strabo; it was the largest city in Upper Egypt, and an outpost of Hellenism during the Ptolemaic Period.
- Information concerning Ptolemais is quite limited and brief especially regarding the date of foundation the city, and its plan. On other hand, information relating to the political status of the city and its religion is evidenced by inscriptions.
- The site has never been exposed to a complete archaeological excavation before. The ruins of the city are buried under the modern village.

## Footnotes:

\* Ancient name given to several cities to honor members of the dynasty of the Ptolemies, the one referred here is *Ptolemais Hermiou* in Upper Egypt, the others are: *Ptolemais Theron* located at African coast of the Red Sea, established by Ptolemy II Philadelphus, *Ptolemais* in Cyrenaica (modern Libya), probably named after Ptolemy III Euergetes, *Ptolemais* or *Ptolemaida* in Greece, named after Ptolemy I Soter, *Ptolemais* in Acre (modern Israel), probably by named after Ptolemy Soter, *Ptolemais Euergetis* or *Arsinoe* in Fayoum taking place Crocodilopolis nome, renamed by Ptolemy III Euergetes, and *Ptolemais Hormou* (modern El-Lahun, Fayoum). See Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo*, book no. 14, 16, and 17.

- 1 H.I. Bell, 'A Hadrianic Foundation in Egypt', *Journal of Roman Studies, JRS*, 30, Part 2 (1940), 133
- 2 It was a city founded at an older Egyptian village by the Roman emperor Hadrian to commemorate his deified young beloved, Antinous. It was founded about AD 130; it is located on the east bank of the Nile, 38 km south of modern al-Minyā. See Bell, (1940), 133-134.
- 3 This is the only Greek colony in Egypt, founded under the 26th Dynasty, it was located at the

Nile River delta, on the western branch of the river, present Kom Gi'eif, About 80km south-east of Alexandria. See C.C. Edgar, *Naukratis*, *The Journal of Hellenic Studies, JHS*, 25, (1905), 106.

- 4 It is well known that Alexander the Great was the founder of Alexandria in about 331 BC.
- 5 On Ptolemais, see G. Plaumann, *Ptolemais in Oberägypten* (Leipzig, 1910), still the only study of the town. The site has never been extensively excavated or surveyed.
- 6 R.S. Bagnall, "Cults and Names of Ptolemais in Upper Egypt" in: W. Clarysee, A. Schoors, H. Willems (eds.) *Egyptian Religion the Last Thousand Years, II: Studies Dedicated to the Memory of Jan Quaegebeur*, (Leuven, 1998), 1093.
- 7 E.R. Bevan, *The House of Ptolemy*, (London, 1927), 105
- 8 K. Mueller, *Settlements of the Ptolemies: city foundations and new settlement in the Hellenistic world*, (Peeters- Leuven, 2006), 22.
- 9 Either inscriptions or historians' testimonies like Strabo.
- 10 Mueller (2006), 166, G.M. Cohen, *The Hellenistic Settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin, and North Africa*, (California, 2006), 350.
- 11 Bevan (1927), 105; M. Rostovtzeff, *Social and Economic History of the Hellenistic World*, I, (Oxford, 1998), 156-157.
- 12 Strabo, *The Geography of Strabo with an English translation by Horace Leonard Jones*, 3, (Cambridge, 1982-1995), 46.
- 13 Manning (2003), 37.
- 14 M. Abd-el-Ghani, "The Role of Ptolemais Outside its Frontiers", *Atti del XXII Congresso Internazionale di Papyrologia*, I, (Frienze, 2001), 130; J.P. Mahaffy, *A History of Egypt*, IV (Harvard, 1919), 172
- 15 Manning (2003), 65.
- 16 Manning (2003), 97.
- 17 Stele of pink sandstone, 73 cm high and 53.3 cm wide. The stone is a kind of milestone, a distance marker from the Nile set up by the toparch Rhodon son of Lysimachos. See R. S. Bagnall, J. G. Manning, S. E. Sidebotham, R.E. Zitterkopf, A Ptolemaic inscription from Bir 'Iayyan, *Chronique D'Egypte LXXI*, (Brussels ,1996), 320-321.
- 18 Greek unit of length, the stade, was equal to 600 Greek feet long, it means here the most common Ptolemaic stade of about 212 m. See:

- A Ptolemaic inscription from Bir 'Iayyan, 322.  
 19 Manning (2003), 66.  
 20 Manning (2003), 67.  
 21 Manning (2003), 36.  
 22 Megisteus; suburb in Ptolemais named after Megistos Theos Soter, title of Ptolemy I Soter, see Bevan (1925), 106.  
 23 W. Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae: Supplementum Sylloges Inscriptionum Graecarum*, (Toronto, 1903), 74-75, no. 48; M. M. Austin, *The Hellenistic World from Alexander to the Roman Conquest: A Selection of Ancient Source in Translation*, (Cambridge, 1981), 293; Bevan (1925), 105; حسن (١٩٩٤)، ٢٩١.  
 24 McKenzie (2003), 152, Alan K. Bowman and Dominic Rathbone, *Cities and Administration in Roman Egypt*, *The Journal of Roman Studies*, JRS, 82 (1992), 108-109.  
 25 A.H.M. Jones, *The Cities of the Eastern Roman Provinces*, (Oxford, 1973), 307.  
 26 Bevan (1925), 106;  
 زكي علي، تاريخ مصر البطلمية: بين الهد والجزر في عهد الملوك الثلاثة الأولين والجزر في عهد كليوباترة السابعة، (القاهرة، ٢٠٠٠)، ٢٥.  
 27 Cohen (2006), 351; 292، حسن (١٩٩٤).  
 28 Bevan (1925), 105  
 29 Deme is a simple subdivision of land in the countryside seems to have existed in the 6th century BC and earlier, a deme functioned to some degree as a polis in miniature. See J.V. Fine, *The Ancient Greeks: A Critical History*, (Greece, 1983), 233.  
 30 Bevan (1925), 105; حسن (١٩٩٤)، ٢٩١.  
 31 Bevan (1925), 108.  
 32 About the cult of Ptolemais we know little information; the main body of evidence has been the group of Ptolemaic inscriptions found in El- Manshah reproduced in W. Dittenberger, *Orientalis Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae* (1903) nos. 47-52 and 103, mentioned are cult of Dionysus and Zeus, a sanctuary of Isis, and an altar to Harbaktis and Hierax i.e. Horus of Bakhtis (Edfu) and the falcon god Hierax (Bjk), Bagnall (1998), 1094-1095.  
 33 Limestone votive tablet dates back to 180/179 BC, preserved in Brooklyn museum no. 16.632, see Dittenberger (1903), 179 no. 103; K. Herbert, *Greek and Latin Inscriptions in the Brooklyn Museum*, (New York, 1972): 22-24, no. 8, Pl. 7.  
 34 Bevan (1925), 107; K. Dieter Kessler, *Ptolemais Hermiu, LÄ, IV*, (Wiesbaden, 1982), 1183

- حسن (١٩٩٤)، ٢٩٣، 35 Plaumann (1910), 35;  
 ٣٦ مركز التوثيق الحضاري والطبيعي، أطلس المواقع الأثرية بمحافظة سوهاج، القاهرة، ٢٠٠٥.  
 37 The stele is preserved in the Egyptian Museum in Cairo CG 384.  
 38 The god of medicine and healing in ancient Greek religion.  
 39 The goddess of health, cleanliness and sanitation.  
 40 G. Maspero, *Guide to the Cairo Museum*, (Cairo, 1906), 319

### الخلاصة:

تعد بطوليميس المدينة الإغريقية الثالثة التي أنشئت في مصر عقب الفتح المقدوني، وقد شيدت هذه المدينة غربي النيل حيث كانت توجد قبلها مدينة مصرية، تدعى "بسوي Psoi"، ثم أطلق المصريون عليها في عهد البطالمة بسى بطوليميس، أي بسى التي أنشأها بطلميوس، وتشغل اليوم بلدة المنشية وهي تقع جنوبي سوهاج بحوالي عشرة كيلو مترات - جانباً من موقع بطوليميس التي اختفت معالمها تماماً. ومن المحتمل جداً أن مهندسى بطلميوس الأول اتخذوا من الإسكندرية نموذجاً يحتذون به في تشييد هذه المدينة الجديدة، التي لا بد من أن يكون بطلميوس قد أرادها أن تكون إسكندرية منطقة طيبة. كانت المدينة تتمتع بكافة مظاهر نظم المدن الإغريقية الحرة فالمدينة كانت تستطيع تعديل دستورها، تتمتع باستقلال ذاتي، وتوفر لها مجلس بولي Boule ومجلس آخر يضم الأحرار بها ويسمي Demos وبواسطتهما كانت تلك المدينة تدير شؤونها بحرية مطلقة ويتخاطب معها الملك بواسطة سفرائه ومندوبيه. وقد أنشئت في مدينة بطوليميس عبادة محلية لأفراد أسرة البطالمة، لها كهنة تؤرخ الوثائق بأسمائهم. ولذلك بينما كانت الوثائق في كل أنحاء مصر الأخرى تؤرخ بأسماء كهنة العبادة الإغريقية العامة، التي كان مقرها في الإسكندرية، كانت وثائق بطوليميس وكل منطقة طيبة كثيراً ما تؤرخ أيضاً بكهنة العبادة المحلية، التي كان مقرها في مدينة بطوليميس.