Alexandria endures in our imagination as the first model of cultural interaction – of cosmopolitanism, to use both classical and contemporary terminology – and as the cultural and intellectual capital of the ancient world. The intermingling of races and beliefs, and the exchange of ideas, undoubtedly produced the knowledge that modern scholarship still celebrates.

This book is a testimony that the value embodied by Alexandria and its Library continue to inspire noble minded scholars whose pursuit for knowledge transcends boundaries and time. The breadth and scope of the papers presented do credit to the spirit of Alexandria – its multiculturalism, and its passion for science and scholarship. The book in our hands confirm that the multiculturalism of the Ancient World, rippling out from Alexandria to extend throughout the Hellenistic period and beyond, is as valid now as it was then – perhaps more so today, when globalization has given a new meaning to the internationalism envisioned by Alexander the Great centuries ago. Now, with the “clash of civilizations” dominating our discourse, it is pertinent to remember the lesson Alexandrea ad Aegyptum taught us: that the interaction between cultures can only lead to the betterment of the human condition and carry us to heights unimagined.

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Librarian of Alexandria

The excellent contributions gathered in this book dedicated to the city of books, Alexandria, are undoubtedly traced along the lines of Amr and John’s dialogue. Intolerance, which is borne almost always out of ignorance, threatens continuously the peaceful meeting and coexistence of peoples and cultures nowadays. Alexandria, its people and books remind us that the search for dialogue, the reflection on the forms of unity in diversity are at the same time our greatest heritage and the most dramatically pressing agenda.

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Abstract: Starting with the guidelines that can help us to understand the framework of demotic culture during Greco-Roman Period this chapter is focused on the Egyptian background behind the multicultural tradition that rose in the Serapeum of Alexandria. Despite of its Hellenistic atmosphere, the Alexandrian Serapeum was the cradle of a new multicultural tradition: within its sacred precinct Greco-Egyptian deities received cult in the temple of Sarapis, while a multicultural community of scholars was actively engaged in the creation of a vast repertoire of texts and iconography. With its roots grounded on the Egyptian wisdom, such tradition was expressed in Greek or demotic philosophical discourses and was in use by a wide multicultural population, reaching so disparate territories as the Egyptian oasis of the Western Desert or the shores of the Atlantic.

For more than three thousand years, the Egyptian civilization developed a unique culture which, although firmly grounded on its Nilotic background, would have a bold impact, not only among its African neighbours, but also in some of the cultures of the Ancient Near East. And yet, with the exception of political propaganda, it seems that Egypt never aimed to seek an audience in what concerns cultural exchange with its neighbours. Acculturation of local populations apparently occurred massively in Nubia, but no particular efforts seem to have been made to adapt the Egyptian culture and cults to the Nubian population. On the contrary, the foundation of Egyptian temples on occupied territories underwent a massive and deep Egyptianization of Nubia, to such an extent that, in the 25th Dynasty, Nubian
Pharaohs felt themselves entitled to remind the Egyptians of the «Egyptian» ways. As to the Asian neighbours, economic exchanges certainly led to the diffusion of Egyptian motifs, particularly as regards the use of Egyptian iconography in the decoration of objects. Nonetheless, the true Egyptianization seems restricted to the ruling elite: the children of the Asian city rulers were brought to Egypt to be educated in the royal kep itself in order to be instructed in the Egyptian culture, knowledge and literature. In spite of the restricted target of this acculturation, it certainly played a very important role in the diffusion of Egyptian wisdom and religious literature in the Near East. It is a strong possibility that this phenomenon may have created intellectual circles outside the borders of Egypt that were familiar with Egyptian literature. Such cultural trend eventually led to the translation of the Egyptian texts themselves, a phenomenon particularly clear in Israel, where such translation seems to have been the result of the scholarly work of biblical writers and not so much the result of Egyptian scholars aiming to reach foreign audiences.

EGYPTIAN TRADITION IN NEW CONTEXT: THE ALEXANDRIAN MULTICULTURALISM

Even according to contemporary definitions, Alexandrian society was fully multicultural: it «was at ease with the rich tapestry of human life and the desire amongst people to express their own identity in the manner they see fit»3. It is in this context that we assist, apparently for the first time, to a new cultural trend which consisted in the «translation» of the Egyptian tradition itself. Hellenistic language and culture was sought, in Greco-Roman Egypt, as a way to spread autochthonous ideas and cults to a foreign, wider audience.

It is with no surprise that we detect the first attempts of this cultural trend in the Hellenization of the iconography of the Egyptian gods. At the time of the Macedonian conquest, Memphis was the most important Egyptian city and, certainly for that reason, its local cult of Osirapis, a funerary manifestation of Apis, supposed to be the embodiment of the Ba (divine power) of Ptah, became the main source of inspiration for the new syncretic cult of Sarapis promoted by Ptolemy I. From then on, the once purely Egyptian deities manifested themselves with Hellenized names, such as Sarapis, Isis and Harpokrates (from the Egyptian Horpakhered, «Horus-the-child») and were fully rendered in Greek iconography.

2 The influence of Egyptian wisdom literature on biblical texts is detectable not only in the translation and adaptation of some of its texts but also in the influence of Egyptian in the Hebrew language. See SHUPAK, 1993: 348.
3 BLOOR, 2010.
4 Already in the Late Period, religious syncretism was as distinctive feature of Egyptian religion, which undoubtedly paved the way for the syncretic identification of Egyptian deities with Greek gods under Ptolemaic rule.
Once clad with Greek identities, these deities were soon escorted by other Greco-Egyptian deities such as Agathodaimon (the Egyptian god Shay, «Fate»)\(^5\), Hermanubis (resulting from the identification between Hermes and Anubis), Cerberus (the Greek guardian of the Hades equated with Anubis), Sirius (the star-goddess Sopdet) or Thermosthisis (the Hellenized serpent-goddess Renenutet).

These cults not only resulted from a process of translation of the Egyptian tradition into Greek language and imagery, as they were the object of syncretic assimilation with Greek divinities as well. Without discarding the direct involvement of Egyptian priests in this «translation» process, still, it is a strong possibility that the Greeks themselves were actively involved as well. After all, Greek interest in the Egyptian gods is at least as old as the conquest of Egypt by Alexander. A temple of Isis at Piraeus is attested as early as the same year of the conquest of Egypt (332 B.C.)\(^6\). Under Ptolemaic rule, however, these cults soon became the very expression of the multicultural character of Alexandria.

The interaction of Greek and Egyptian traditions was brilliantly used by the Ptolemaic kings to empower their political and religious status in ways that would be difficult to achieve if they followed the traditional Macedonian ideology alone. In fact, Hellenization of the Egyptian deities involved a reversed process of Egyptianization of Hellenistic rulers\(^7\). Alexander started this process by adopting the horns of Amun in his own iconography and by making himself depicted in Egyptian temples, such as in the Luxor Temple, with the typical pharaonic regalia. Macedonian kings and Roman emperors followed his example, particularly in the walls of the newly built Egyptian temples, depicting themselves as «true» Pharaohs. Through this Egyptianization, Macedonian rulers gained divine status and achieved a broader acclamation of their «universal» power. Thus, Alexandrian multiculturalism must always be understood at the light of the political ideology of the Ptolemaic kings who search for their own «universal» acclamation.

With this ideological purpose in mind, Alexandrian art increasingly blurred the frontiers between the Egyptian and the Greek style. Royal statues once again give us a number of different examples of this phenomenon with Ptolemaic kings and queens adopting the hieratic attitude and regalia of the Egyptian tradition, while displaying a fair naturalistic portrait. The once purely Egyptian deities were also the object of intriguing sculptures, displaying a subtle combination of the Greek canon of proportions with the Egyptian hieratic attitude. One of the finest statues of this kind was recently found in the sunken site of the ancient Pharos lighthouse and it depicts the goddess Isis who, in spite of the hieratic attitude and Egyptian dress, presents an unexpected dynamism wisely achieved by means of the «wet drapery» that reveals her sensual body magnificently recalling the myth of

\(^{5}\) Hornung, Bryan, 2007: 211.
\(^{6}\) Hornung, 2001: 64.
\(^{7}\) Sales, 2005: 52.