THE PTOLEMIES AND EGYPTIAN RELIGION

When Alexander the Great entered Egypt, he took care to show his respect for the Egyptian gods. He was probably even crowned king while he was in Memphis, where he visited the Apis bull, the living image of the god Ptah. After his visit to the oracle of Ammon in Siwa, Alexander ordered construction works in the temples of Amun at Thebes, where he would be depicted as a pharaoh with an Egyptian royal titulary. The legend of the foundation of the city of Alexandria records that Alexander ordered a temple for Isis to be built in the city. As the Persian kings had not made a similar effort, this project was clearly one of the factors that made Alexander instantly popular with the Egyptian population.

His immediate successors carried out the policies laid down by Alexander, and when Ptolemy the son of Lagos had himself crowned king of Egypt, he also made sure to follow Alexander’s lead. He allowed temple buildings to be erected to the indigenous gods, and he took care not to alienate the Egyptian priesthood. As a result, the indigenous culture thrived under the Ptolemies.

Apart from their patronage of the arts and scholarship, the Ptolemies actively engaged in the religious life of the country. The office of Pharaoh was essentially a religious function, one that connected the person of the king to the Egyptian gods. As the incarnation of the god Horus on earth, the king was believed to communicate with the great gods of Egypt and, through the temple cult, keep them satisfied. No other person was able to do this; even the priests in the temples carried out their duties in the name of the king. In order to secure their position, the Ptolemies emphatically embraced their cultic duties. As the royal role was connected especially with Isis and her son Horus, the Greek rulers bestowed funds especially on the cults of those two deities, undertaking major building projects at temples for them. Thus, Ptolemy II erected two large temples to Isis, one at the island of Philae (fig. 5–2) at the southern border of the country and one at Behbeit el-Hagar...