

DEFENDERS, CONQUERORS, AND VANQUISHED

Lecture 28: Alexandria

Ancient Alexandria

(1st c. B.C.–1st c. A.D.)



Alexandria: Landscape and Harbours

Since Alexandria and its vicinity form the largest and most important part of this work, I must begin with them. The coast from Pelusium as one sails towards the west as far as the Canobic mouth is about 1,300 stades long (c. 227.5 km); this is what I have called the base of the Delta. From there to the island of Pharos is a further 150 stades (c. 26.25km) Pharos is an oblong island, very close to the mainland, and forms with it a harbour with two entrances. The shore has the shape of a bay, as it has two promontories jutting out into the sea; between these lies the island which closes the bay, for it stretches lengthwise along the shore.

The western entrance does not offer easy access, though it does not demand so much caution. It too forms another harbour, that of Eunostus as it is called; it lies in front of the closed harbour which was dug out artificially. The harbour which has its entrance on the side of the tower of Pharos which I have mentioned is the Great Harbour, while the (other harbours) lie continuously with it in their recess, being separated from it by the embankment called the Heptastadium. This embankment forms a bridge stretching from the mainland to the western part of the island, and leaves only two passages into the harbour of Eunostus, which are bridged over. This work formed not only a bridge to the island but also an aqueduct, at least when the island was inhabited.

Pharos

Of the extremities of Pharos the eastern one lies closer to the mainland and to the promontory which faces it (this promontory is called Lochias), and this makes the entrance of the harbour narrow; in addition to the narrowness of the channel there are also rocks, some under water and others above, which at all times roughen the waves that strike them from the open sea. The extremity of the islet (Pharos) is also a rock, washed all round by the sea, with on top of it a tower magnificently built of white stone, several stories high, which bears the same name as the island. This was dedicated by Sostratus of Cnidus, a 'friend' of the kings, for the safety of sailors, as the inscription declares. For since the coast was harbourless and low on both sides, and also had rocks and shallows, those who were sailing there from the open sea needed a tall and conspicuous sign to enable them to make straight for the entrance of the harbour.



Alexandria: City

The shaper of the area of the city is like a cloak (*chlamys*); the long sides of it are those that are washed by the two seas, and have a diameter of about 30 stades (c. 5.25km) while the isthmuses form the short sides, each of them 7 or 8 stades wide and cut off on one side by the sea and on the other by the lake. The whole city is criss-crossed with streets suitable for the traffic of horses and carriages, and by two that are very wide, being more than 1 plethrum (c. 30m) in breadth; these intersect each other at right angles. The city has magnificent public precincts and the royal palaces, which cover a fourth or even a third of the entire city area. For just as each of the kings would from a love of splendour add some ornament to the public monument, so he would provide himself at his own expense with a residence in addition to those already standing.... All however are connected with each other and with the harbour, even those that lie outside it.

Population

- Diodorus estimate 300,000 “free” inhabitants (Diodorus 17.52.6)
- Total population 500,000

○ ye gods, what a big crowd! However are we to get through this crush, and how long will it take? Ants, numberless and immeasurable! You’ve conferred a great many benefits on us, Ptolemy, since your father (Ptolemy I) went off to join the gods. Nowadays no criminal harms the passer by, sneaking along in Egyptian fashion.

Theocritus *Idyll* 15

Festivals

GORGON

Praxinoa, do come here. Before you do anything else I insist upon your looking at the embroideries. How delicate they are! and in such good taste! They're really hardly human, are they?

PRAXINOA

Huswife Athena! the weavers that made that material and the embroiderers who did that close detailed work are simply marvels. How realistically the things all stand and move about in it! they're living! It is wonderful what people can do. And then the Holy Boy; how perfectly beautiful he looks lying on his silver couch, with the down of manhood just showing on his cheeks, – (*religioso*) the thrice-beloved Adonis, beloved even down below!

Theocritus *Idyll* 15, 77ff.

Festivals

...also twenty-six Indian zebus entirely white, eight Aethiopian, one large white she-bear, fourteen leopards, sixteen genets, four caracals, three bear-cubs, one giraffe, one Aethiopian rhinoceros. Next in a four-wheeled cart was Dionysus at the altar of Rhea, having found refuge there while being pursued by Hera; he had on a gold crown, and Priapus stood at his side, with a gold ivy-crown. The statue of Hera had a gold diadem. Then there were statues of Alexander and Ptolemy, crowned with ivy-crowns made of gold. The statue of Goodness which stood beside Ptolemy had a gold olive-crown. Priapus stood beside them also wearing an ivy-crown made of gold. The city of Corinth, standing beside Ptolemy, was crowned with a gold band. Beside all these figures were placed a stand for cups, full of gold vessels, and a gold mixing-bowl of fifty gallons capacity. Following this cart were women who wore very rich robes and ornaments; they bore the names of cities, some from Ionia, while all the rest were the Greek cities which occupied Asia and the islands and had been under the rule of the Persians; they all wore gold crowns. In other carts, also, were carried a Bacchic wand of gold, one hundred and thirty-five feet long, and a silver spear ninety feet long; in another was a gold phallus one hundred and eighty feet long, painted in various colours and bound with fillets of gold; it had at the extremity a gold star, the perimeter of which was nine feet."

Alexandria: Museum

The Museum also forms part of the royal palaces; it has a covered walk, an arcade with recesses and seats and a large house, in which is the dining hall of the learned members of the Museum. This association of men shares common property and has a priest of the Muses, who used to be appointed by the kings but is now appointed by Caesar.

Museum



In the populous land of Egypt there is a crowd of bookish scribblers who get fed as they argue away interminably in the chicken coop of the Muses.

Timon of Phlius: Athen. 1.22d

Museum

- Organisation of books:
- *Tables of persons eminent in every branch of learning, together with a list of their writings or Tables (Pinakes) – Callimachus*
- 120 books
 - ▣ Table of Orators,
 - ▣ Table of Philosophers
 - ▣ Table of Lyric Poets

Homer



- Create a definitive edition of Homer
- Homeric commentaries

Alexandria: Sema

The so-called *Sema* (tomb) is also part of the royal palaces; this was an enclosure in which were the tombs of the kings and of Alexander. For Ptolemy son of Lagos got in ahead of Perdiccas and took the body from him when he was bringing it down from Babylon.... He gave it burial in Alexandria, where it now lies, though not in the same sarcophagus. The present one is made of glass, while Ptolemy placed it one made of gold.

Alexander's Body

Meanwhile, the Persians were fighting, since they wanted to take the king to Persia and worship him together with the god Mithra. And the Macedonians wanted to take him to Macedonia. To this, Ptlomeos said: "there is an oracular shrine of the Babylonian god. I shall get an oracle from him as to where we should take the body of Alexander." And when he was asked, the god of the Babylonians answered thus: "I personally give you an order which is advantageous to you all. There is a city on the Nile, near the streams of Oceanus, which has five very fertile kingly fields near the land of the Amazons; it is called Memphis. Take your son who has become one of the gods there and put him to rest, for he, the horned king, has become a cause for rejoicing," Thus did the divine oracle answer. And then Ptlomeos took him to Egypt and made a leaden slab for him and poured upon him mnesiotas honey and hipatic aloe; and the body was embalmed with incense and oil and put upon a mule cart and taken to Egypt. And when they reached Pellas [se. Pelusium], the Memnians [sc. Memphites] came forth with trumpeters to meet at the altars in their accustomed way. And they took him to Memphis near Sesonchousis [sic], the world-conquering demigod. A voice issued forth saying: "take him to his city which he himself built. For wherever that man's body be, that place shall have no surcease from war and from turmoil, for he is a child of war." So at that time, Ptlomeos made a grave for him in Alexandria, which is still called Alexander's Body. And he put him there with splendid honor, since Alexander had requested that this be done. For the city was called by his name and is destined to rule all others.

The Tomb of Alexander

- Original Resting Place: Memphis
 - “From the Time when Antigonus crossed to Asia, and Alexander was laid to rest in Memphis”

Parian Marble FGrH 239 B 11

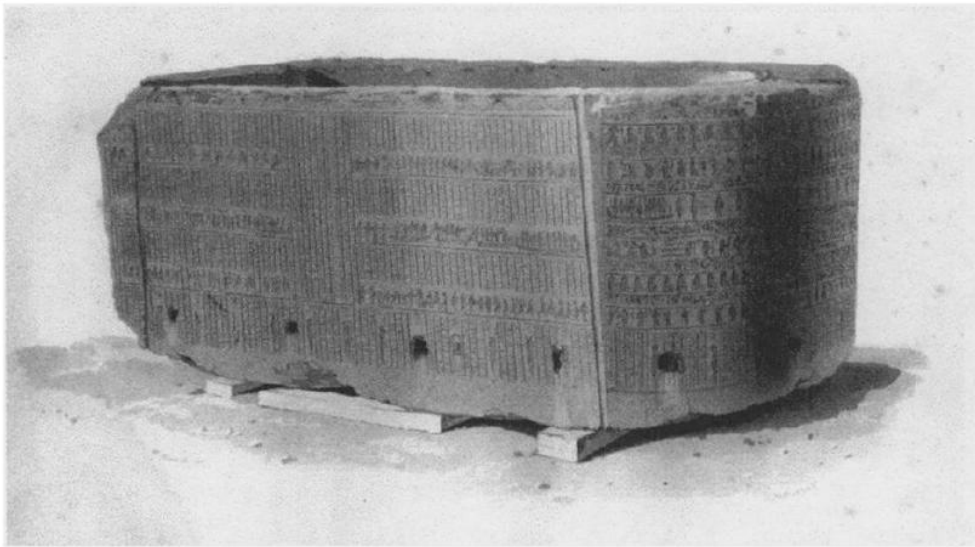


Fig. 2: The sarcophagus in an engraving from E. D. Clarke, *The Tomb of Alexander* (Cambridge, 1805).

Chugg, A. “[The Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great?](#)” *Greece & Rome Second Series*, Vol. 49, No. 1 (Apr., 2002), pp. 8-26

Alexandria: Harbour

In the Great Harbour at the entrance on the right there is the island and the tower Pharos, and on the other side are the rocks and the promontory Lochias with the royal palace. As one sails into the harbour there are on the left the inner royal palaces, which are joined to those on the Lochias and have groves and many colourful lodges. Below these lies the artificially dug harbour which is not visible and is the private property of the kings, and Antirrhodos, a small island in front of the dug harbour which has both a royal palace and small harbour. They gave it this name as being a rival of Rhodes. Above it lies the theatre, then the Posideum, a kind of headland jutting out from the so-called Emporium and the store houses...

Alexandria: Necropolis and Summary

Beyond the canal only a little of the city is left. Then there is the suburb Necropolis in which are many gardens and tombs and installations suitable for the embalming of corpses. Within the canal there is the Serapeum and other ancient precincts which have been virtually abandoned because of the construction of new buildings at Nicopolis; for example there is an amphitheatre and a stadium and the quinquennial competitions are celebrated there, while the old buildings have fallen into neglect. In a word, the city is full of dedications and sanctuaries; the most beautiful building is the Gymnasium which has porticoes over a stade (c. 175 m) in length. In the middle of the city are law-courts and the groves. There is also the Paneium, an artificially made height, conical in shape and resembling a hill, and ascended by a spiral stair. From the top one has a panoramic view of the whole city lying below...

Egyptian Elements?



Follow-up Reading

- Erskine, A. “Culture and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Museum and Library of Alexandria” *Greece & Rome Second Series*, Vol. 42, No. 1 (Apr., 1995), pp. 38-48.