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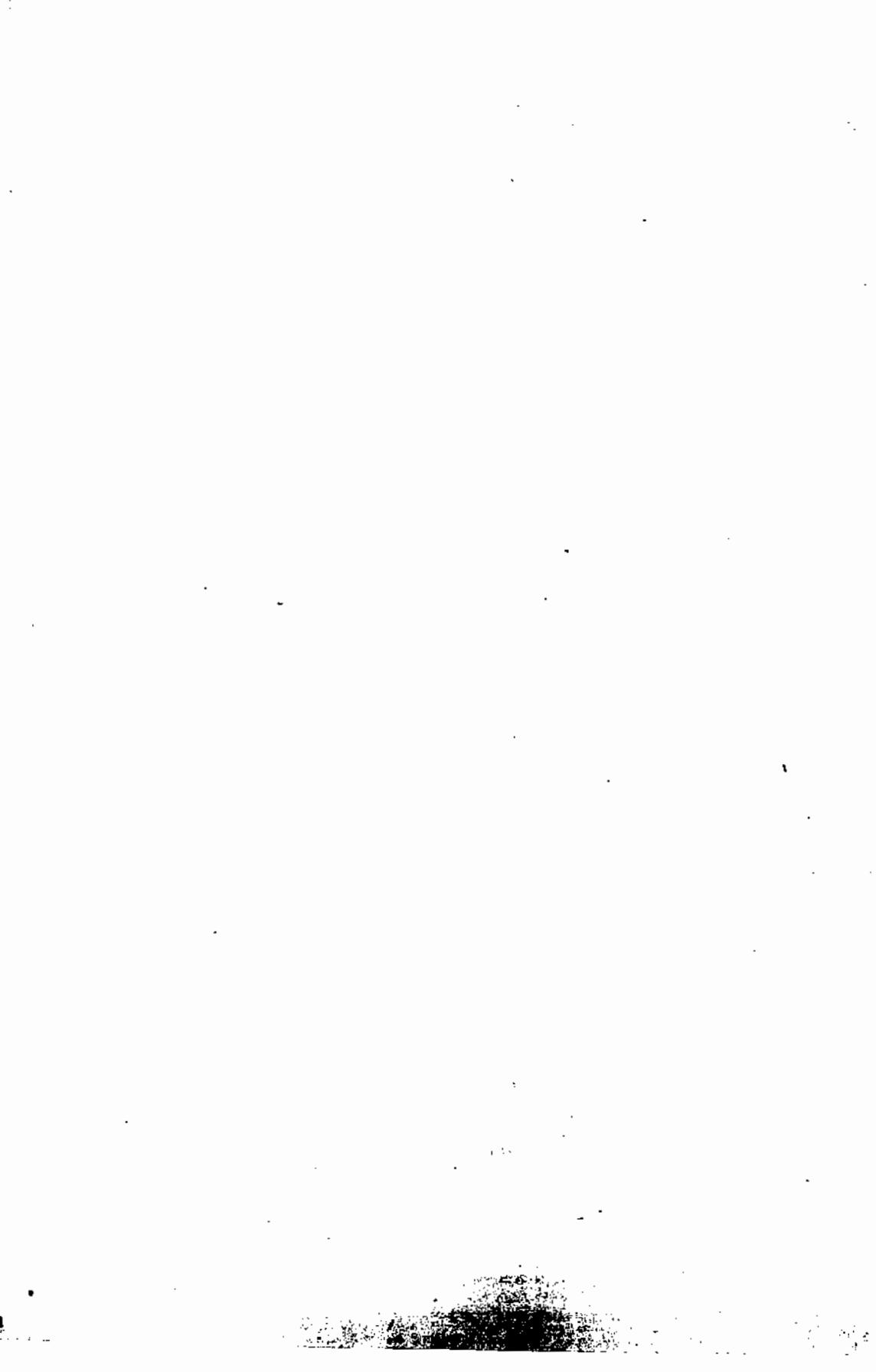
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TABLE OF CONTENTS OF THE EUROPEAN SECTION :

Alan J. B. Wace	:	The Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great . . .	I-II
O.H.E. Khs. Burmestre O.H.E. Khs.	:	The Temple and Cult of Aphrodite at Paphos . .	12-26
Etiemble	:	1. De quelques pièces noires 2. Photographie et Classicisme	27-34
J. Grenier	:	Deux Entretiens sur l'Existentialisme.	35-42
Dr. James J. Auchmuty	:	History and the Historian	43-57
»	:	The American System of Government	58-60
Gwyn Williams	:	The Oedipus Complex in Coriolanus	61-66
A. Bourham	:	Esprit de Solidarité chez les Bédouins	67-73
D. J. Enright	:	Stefan George, Friedrich Gundolf and the Maximin Myth.	74-82
J. G. Warry	:	Distinctions in Literary criticism	83-98



THE SARCOPHAGUS OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT

This paper is the substance of a lecture delivered before the Faculty of Arts on March 27th. 1947. In preparing it for publication I have benefited much from comments and suggestions made by several friends, notably M. Drioton, Dr. Tarn, Professor Sidney Smith, and Mr. I.E.S. Edwards to whom my best thanks are due. I am also specially indebted to Mr. Alan Rowe who has generously communicated to me from time to time the progress of his important researches into the history and monuments of Pharaonic Rhakotis which will shortly be published in the *Annales du Service des Antiquités*. The present paper is to be regarded as an attempt to reconcile fact and tradition and is here published as a basis for discussion pending the discovery of further archaeological evidence.

Alexander the Great after the capture of Tyre in 332 B.C. and the submission of the rest of Phoenicia and of Cyprus marched on Egypt which was still held by a Persian satrap (1). It was essential for him to secure these countries before he marched eastwards against Darius and the heart of the Persian Empire, because Persia drew its naval strength from those seaboard countries and Alexander could not afford to leave behind him a hostile fleet which might cut his communications with Macedonia and Greece and make his position difficult. In Egypt too he was likely to be well received. Egypt had never submitted tamely to Persian domination and the history of Persian rule in Egypt is a history of revolts and of Persian reconquest. The Greeks in their immemorial feud against Persia had always been ready to lend aid to the Egyptians against their hereditary foes. The successful stand made by the two last native Egyptian dynasties, the xxixth and xxxth had been strongly supported by Greece. To assist Tachos of the latter dynasty Sparta had sent her aged king Agesilaus to command the land forces and from Athens had come Chabrias one of her best known admirals. It was barely more than nine years since in

341 B.C. Artaxerxes Ochus had succeeded in reducing Egypt once more. Alexander was thus hailed as a deliverer and the Persian garrison caught between his army and the Egyptians in constant unrest surrendered at discretion. Alexander as usual behaved in the most conciliatory manner. He worshipped the Egyptian gods who had been insulted by the Persians. At Memphis, where he paid due reverence to Apis who had been dishonoured by the Persians, he was probably proclaimed king. After descending the river towards Mareotis he paid his famous visit to the shrine and oracle of Ammon and it is possible that Alexander having been hailed as King of Egypt and consequently like all kings of Egypt qualified as son of Amen-Ra (2) wished in order to calm possible Greek objections, to have his title confirmed by an oracle familiar to the Greeks and often consulted by them. Ammon recognised him as his son and thus the legitimacy of Alexander as King of Egypt was divinely acknowledged by a god worshipped both by Egyptians and by Greeks. On his return to Mareotis Alexander laid the foundations of his great new city, Alexandria, on the site of the ancient Pharaonic Rhakotis with its adjacent port Pharos. Like so many Hellenistic and later foundations Alexandria was not an entirely new city built on virgin soil, but an ancient city refounded, enlarged, and magnified, as Pagasae became Demetrias, as Cardia became Lysimacheia, and, best of all perhaps, as Byzantium became Constantinople.

Among the remains of Greek literature which have come down to us is a History of Romance of Alexander the Great (3). This in the form in which we have it is not older than the third century A.D., but most critics are of the opinion that the kernel of this Romance dates back to Ptolemaic times and is in the nature of a popular tale of Alexander's life and exploits composed in Egypt and based on historical facts. It is, we might say, the earliest historical novel. This is the Romance of Alexander which has spread all through the Orient and through Europe and has been translated into almost all the languages of those regions, including for instance Ethiopian and Armenian and it is known from the British Isles to the Malay Peninsula. The romance, which is usually well informed about Egyptian conditions, says that Rhakotis was an important town and the capital of a district which included sixteen towns. This is confirmed by Mr. Rowe's recent

researches into the monuments and history of Rhakotis which indicate that it was the key fort and town of the northwest frontier district towards Libya probably from xviiith dynasty times, certainly from the Ramessid age. The early harbour works observed by M. Jondet (4) off the northeast end of Pharos island are probably also Pharaonic and at any rate suggest that Rhakotis and its port were the main outlet for Egyptian communications with Mediterranean countries. It was perhaps the main-port of Egypt for trading with Greek lands in the days of the xxvth, xxixth, and xxxth dynasties. The Samian (5) ship which relieved the Theraean colony about 640 B.C. on the island of Platea was on its way to Egypt and Pharos would be the first Egyptian port to be reached by a ship coasting along eastwards from Platea. Thucydides too knew of Pharos (6). A port in northwestern Egypt would be more suitable for communication with Greek lands than one near Pelusium or Damietta, for these latter were too near Palestine, Syria, and the power of Persia. All the evidence available indicates that Rhakotis was an important town under the later Pharaonic dynasties, and not a wretched village as Hogarth believed (7). The seat of the xxxth dynasty was Sebennytos, but in view of the close contact between the two last dynasties, the xxixth and xxxth, and Greece it is likely that Rhakotis was then almost as important as Sebennytos, for it would have been the port for external communication. These two dynasties depended so much on assistance from Greece. The importance of Rhakotis in late Pharaonic times is another reason in support of Alexander's choice of it as the site of his new city.

Nectanebo II (Nekht-har-heb) (8) the last king of the xxxth dynasty ruled well and successfully for eighteen years. He was also a great builder and restorer of monuments and temples. He apparently achieved a great reputation and was regarded as a magician by Greeks as well as by Egyptians, as is shewn by a Greek papyrus of the second century B.C. from Memphis (9). The Persians in 343-342 B.C. drove him from the Delta and from Memphis, but he succeeded in maintaining himself in Upper Egypt till 341 B.C. He may have made Asswan his capital, for his monuments are conspicuous both there and at the neighbouring Philae. After 341 B.C. he vanishes from history. One tale says he fled to Nubia where he died, but nothing is certain except that the time and place of his death and burial are unknown.

Alexander who like all Egyptian kings since Hatshepsut was qualified as son of Amen-Ra, called by the Greeks Ammon, as

already stated, wished himself to be regarded as the legitimate successor of Nectanebo II and the xxxth dynasty. Thus in the Romance we find two conflicting tales. One was that Alexander was the son of Nectanebo II who had taken refuge in Macedonia at the court of Philip II and had become the father of Alexander by visiting Olympias in the guise of Ammon which he had assumed by his magic. The other tale was that Nectanebo II though he had fled from Egypt would one day return rejuvenated and deliver his country from its Persian oppressors. Either of these tales would serve to justify Alexander's position as King of Egypt. He was given royal titles and cartouches like all Pharaohs, and the Ptolemies, who succeeded him, also had Egyptian royal titles and cartouches. The Ptolemies too we know were crowned kings of Egypt in the Egyptian fashion usually at Memphis, though we know that on one occasion, that of the coronation of Ptolemy XI, Auletes, the ceremony took place in 76 B.C. at Alexandria whither the high priest journeyed, specially from Memphis (10). The Ptolemies completed or decorated many temples and monuments which had been begun by Nectanebo II especially in Upper Egypt, as at Karnak, Philae, Asswan, Edfu, Denderah, and Medamud. In doing so they definitely associated themselves with the last king of the xxxth dynasty. Their object was to conform to Egyptian opinion, custom, and religion and to consolidate their position as kings of Egypt. In this they undoubtedly followed Alexander's broadminded policy of conciliation.

Thus far we have two clear points :-

a) Nectanebo II (Nekht-har-heb) was far from being an unimportant king and it seems certain that he died outside Egypt, at all events outside Lower Egypt. As the last king of the last Pharaonic dynasty he was invested with a halo of romance which was enhanced by his reputation as a great magician in popular legend both among Egyptians and among Greeks.

b) Alexander, on being proclaimed King of Egypt and probably also crowned with due Egyptian rites at Memphis, naturally was acknowledged as the son of Amen-Ra and so was regarded as legitimate king of Egypt and successor of the xxxth dynasty and its last king Nectanebo II. Alexander and his Ptolemaic successors encouraged this by a studied policy of conciliation towards Egyptian religious belief and ceremonial (11).

There was in the Attarin Mosque in Alexandria a large (10 feet 3 1/2 long, 5 feet 3 3/4 wide, 3 feet 10 3/4 high) and fine sarcophagus of breccia which served as a water tank for the ablution

fountain. This was removed by Napoleon's expedition of 1798, (12) but subsequently captured by the British at the same time as the Rosetta Stone and taken to the British Museum as spoil of war (13). The hieroglyphic inscriptions on the sarcophagus, the lid of which is missing, could not then be read. Now that we can decipher the hieroglyphs we know that this sarcophagus was intended for Nectanebo II (Nekht-har-heb) (14). He can never have been buried in it, for he did not die in Egypt, at least not in Lower Egypt. Why then was his sarcophagus in Alexandria? Mr. Rowe's researches have emphasized the importance of Rhakotis in Pharaonic times. Though, as stated, Sebennytos was the capital of the xxxth dynasty, there is evidence that Rhakotis maintained its importance under this dynasty also as is shown by the monuments of this period found in and about Alexandria. Along these monuments there is in the Greco-Roman Museum the sarcophagus of a prominent general of xxxth dynasty date (15). This and other funerary monuments suggest that there may have been in or near Rhakotis a cemetery of this period in which important officials and nobles were buried. Perhaps there were royal tombs of the xxxth dynasty in the same cemetery. This would account for the presence of Nectanebo II's sarcophagus in Alexandria. As is well known an Egyptian king had his tomb and sarcophagus prepared during his life time. If this was done in the case of Nectanebo II and there was a royal cemetery of that date at Rhakotis not only would a tomb have been prepared for him, but a royal sarcophagus also. We do not know the burial place of the kings of the xxxth dynasty and it may be objected that if Sebennytos was their capital why should Rhakotis have been chosen as their burial place. On the other hand we must remember that before Professor Montet's discoveries no one would have ventured to predict that royal tombs of the xxist and xxIInd dynasties would be found at Tanis (16). It is therefore not impossible that Nectanebo II was arranging for a tomb and sarcophagus for himself at Rhakotis. The sarcophagus is so large that it is not likely to have been brought from a great distance on account of its size and weight. The builders of the Attarin Mosque would hardly have brought it to Alexandria from some other site in the Delta or Lower Egypt, and Middle and Upper Egypt are further away still. The Attarin Mosque was originally the Church of St. Athanasius (dedicated probably in the fourth century A.D.) till the Arab conquest in 641 A.D. when it was converted into a mosque. Its foundation inscriptions (17) state it was built in 1084 A.D. and thus the traditions connected with it probably go back at least

to that date. The tradition always connected with the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II which was in the mosque for so many years is that it was the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great. It was much venerated by all, Moslems and Christians alike, as the sarcophagus of the great conqueror. It was owing to this belief that the French and the British contended, so to speak, for possession of it. In those days the hieroglyphs could not be read and when the hieroglyphs were ultimately deciphered through the researches of Young and Champollion, it was believed that this was the sarcophagus of Nectanebo I, because it was then thought that Nekht-nebf was Nectanebo II. Now however, we know that Nekht-nebf was Nectanebo I and we realise that Nectanebo II (Nekht-har-heb) for whom the sarcophagus was destined could never have used it, the tradition attached to the sarcophagus assumes another aspect. Is it in fact possible that the tradition that this was really the sarcophagus of Alexander correct? It is possible that it is correct.

If the assumption is right that Nectanebo II was preparing in Rhakotis a royal tomb and a royal sarcophagus for himself there would then have been there on Alexander's coming to Egypt an unused royal tomb and an unused royal sarcophagus waiting for a royal tenant. So when Alexander's body was brought to Alexandria it is possible that the unused tomb and the unused sarcophagus of Nectanebo II were employed for his burial. The burial of Alexander in that tomb and in that sarcophagus would have linked him definitely to the xxxth dynasty. In Alexander's day and in Ptolemaic days the hieroglyphs could be read and if Alexander had been buried in Nectanebo II's tomb and sarcophagus the inscriptions would reveal that fact. Popular belief, as remarked above, recorded in the Romance held that Alexander was either Nectanebo II returned rejuvenated to deliver his country from the Persians or else the son of Nectanebo II. In either case Alexander's burial in Nectanebo II's sarcophagus would have been appropriate. The son would surely have a right to inherit his father's sarcophagus, if unused. This might have meant a change in the cartouches in the inscription and so far as we know no change is observable, but it is possible that the change might have been made only on the lid which is missing. On the other hand if Alexander were a rejuvenated Nectanebo II the sarcophagus would be undoubtedly his and no change in the cartouches would be necessary, although Alexander has his own cartouches.

When Alexander died he was wrapped in gold (presumably a golden anthropoid sarcophagus or mummy case) and brought by

Ptolemy I in a splendid funeral car to Egypt for burial (18). He was at first entombed at Memphis and later either the first or the second Ptolemy transferred the body to Alexandria where it was entombed in a suitable royal sepulchre. Is it possible that Alexander, and the Ptolemies after him, were buried in an old cemetery of the xxxth dynasty at Rhakotis? If that cemetery were a royal one then the mere fact that Alexander and the Ptolemies were buried in it would make the Macedonian kings still more Egyptian and emphasize their continuity with the Pharaohs. Would the Greeks have objected to the burial of Alexander in an Egyptian sarcophagus and in an Egyptian tomb? The Greeks and Macedonians had already been obliged to accept many of Alexander's ideas about the union of East and West in the adoption of Persian customs and in the marriage of Persian wives. Alexander encouraged too the theory of divine descent or even of actual divinity for kings and royalty. Greek heroic pedigrees however in many cases go back to divine ancestors. It is true that there were some who protested like Callisthenes, but in general apparently there was no violent opposition. We know too that the Ptolemies were crowned with Egyptian ceremonial, and appear in Egyptian guise on Egyptian monuments and statues and Greeks and Macedonians seem to have accepted this. The same would also probably hold true in the Seleucid kingdom which included Babylonia, another country with an immemorial religion and deep-rooted religious ceremonies and customs.

Ever since hieroglyphs have been read in the nineteenth century A.D. scholars have unanimously rejected the idea that this sarcophagus from the Attarin Mosque can ever have been Alexander's. This was partly due, no doubt, to the belief that Nekht-har-heb for whom it was made was Nectanebo I and not as we now know Nectanebo II. Since the tradition that it was Alexander's persisted all through the ages when hieroglyphs could not be read it is conceivably possible that the tradition is right.

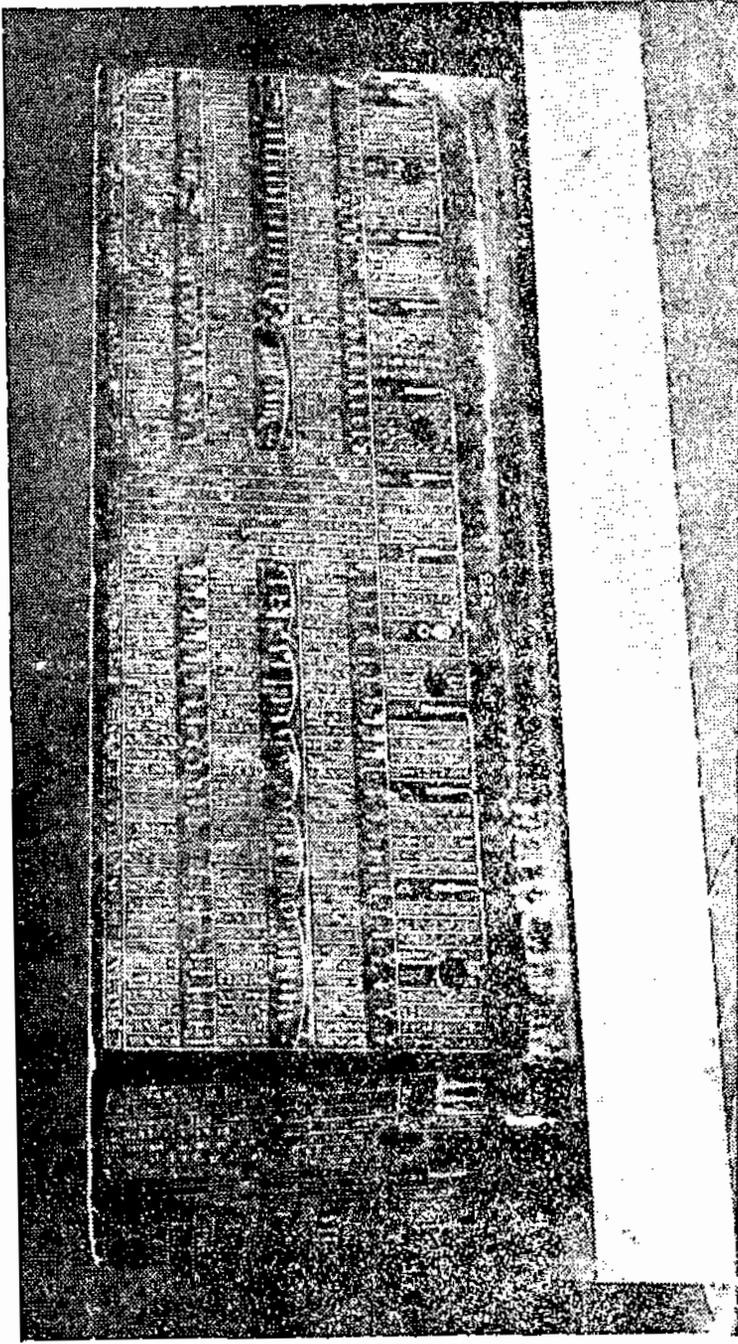
The body of Alexander in its golden wrappings would probably have been laid in a coffin of gold and then placed in the stone sarcophagus of Nectanebo II. The inner gold coffin is reported to have been removed by Ptolemy IX, Alexander I, when in need of funds, and replaced by one of glass. Cleopatra is also said to have taken valuables from the tomb. In the tomb (19) were also some at least of Alexander's royal and military equipment, for Caligula removed the cuirass and we know that the sarcophagus and its contents could be inspected. Octavianus on his

arrival in Egypt in 30 B.C. according to Suetonius inspected the body of Alexander and in doing so, Dio Cassius says, broke the nose. It would seem then that the tomb and sarcophagus with the gold encased body of the great conqueror were always able to be seen by distinguished visitors. Perhaps the *procurator Neaspoleos et Mausolei Alexandriae* of whom we hear in two inscriptions was the custodian of Alexander's Tomb. Septimius Severus is said to have shut up all the sacred books of Egypt in the tomb and Caracalla laid in the tomb his cloak, his belt and other valuable objects. If the tomb were a rock cut royal tomb like other Egyptian royal tombs and if the breccia sarcophagus of Nectanebo II was the outer sarcophagus such visits would always have been possible.

We thus have two reasons for the burial of Alexander in Alexandria. The first is that it was his own city and the founder of a Greek city was usually when possible buried in its centre, as was Battus at Cyrene and Brasidas at Amphipolis. The second reason is that if he were buried in the sarcophagus of the last king of the xxxth dynasty in a royal tomb in the cemetery of that dynasty that mere fact would strengthen his claim and the claim of his Ptolemaic successors to be legitimate kings of Egypt and true heirs of the xxxth dynasty.

If the possibility of Alexander's burial in the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II can be provisionally accepted one further point arises. Did the legend of Alexander's connection with Nectanebo II, as told in the Romance, derive from his burial in the sarcophagus or did the burial in the sarcophagus take place because of the legend? Possibly the legend arose from Alexander's burial in the sarcophagus. The hieroglyphs could then be read and if the question were asked why Alexander was buried in the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II (Nekht-har-heb) the reply, following the popular belief already mentioned, would be either because he was Nectanebo rejuvenated and returned to Egypt as a triumphant deliverer of his country from the Persians or because he was the son of Nectanebo II. Either explanation would satisfy not too critical an enquirer.

If Alexander was buried in the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II in an old royal cemetery of the xxxth dynasty in Rhakotis where was the cemetery and where was the Tomb of Alexander? This problem remains for further research. The suggestion that Alexander's Tomb lay under Kom ed Dik is possible, but that hill



according to the latest excavations does not appear to possess a core of rock like the hill at the Serapeum (Pompey's Pillar and Kom esh Shuqafa). The greater part of the hill of Kom ed Dik is an accumulation of the Mameluke period being the débris from an active potters' and glassmakers' quarter. The Tomb of Alexander may have lain under the Mosque of Nebi Daniel at the western foot of Kom ed Dik which has attached to it the long tradition of the tomb of the mysterious Nebi Daniel. There is no reason however to connect Alexander with Nebi Daniel whoever he was. Perhaps the tomb may have lain under or near the Attarin Mosque which in its original form was constructed from the Church of St. Athanasius. On the other hand there is nothing in any legend other than the sarcophagus to connect either the Attarin Mosque or the Church of St Athanasius with Alexander.

Thus the position of Alexander's Tomb must remain an open question. On the other hand if this attempt to reconcile tradition with the facts we possess be accepted then we may believe that the sarcophagus of Nectanebo II once in the Attarin Mosque before its reconstruction where it was the object of the greatest veneration may be in spite of all scepticism the actual sarcophagus in which gold encased body of the great Macedonian conqueror was laid.

ALAN J. B. WACE

NOTES

(1) For the history of Alexander the Great see the appropriate chapters by Dr. Tarn in the *Cambridge Ancient History* Vol. VI.

(2) In their official titles Egyptian kings were sons of Ra only, but in their proclamations of their rights and claims to the throne they all, from Hatshepsut onwards, declared themselves to be sons of Amen-Ra and built birth chapels to support this. See also G. Maspero, *Comment Alexandre devient dieu en Egypte*.

(3) The best text of the *Historia Alexandri Magni* (Pseudo-Callisthenes) is that of W. Kroll, Berlin 1926. The latest account of the Romance is that of Professor Haight in *More Essays on Greek Romances*, New York 1945.

(4) See Jondot, *Les Ports submergés de l'ancienne île de Pharos* in *Mémoires présentés à l'Institut Egyptien* Vol. IX, Oairo 1916.

- (5) Herodotus, IV 162.
- (6) Thucydides, I 104.
- (7) Hogarth, *J.E.A.* 1915 (Vol. II), p. 55.
- (8) For the history of Nectanebo II see Drioton-Vandrier, *Peuples de l'orient méditerranéen* II, p. 583 ff.
- (9) See Wilcken, *Mélanges Nicole*, p. 579 ff.; *Id.*, *Urkunden d. Ptolemäerzeit*, p. 369 ff.; compare *Annales du Service des Antiquités* XL (1940), p. 13.
- (10) Bevan, *History of Egypt under the Ptolemaic Dynasty*, p. 346 ff.
- (11) Bevan, *op. cit.*, p. 182 ff.
- (12) *Description de l'Égypte, Antiquités, Planches* Vol. V, 38, 39, 40
- (13) See Clarke, *Tomb of Alexander*, Cambridge 1805.
- (14) British Museum, *Guide to Egyptian Galleries (Sculpture)*, p. 248, No. 923, Pls. xxxii, xxxiii.
- (15) Greco-Roman Museum Alexandria, Room 9, No. 39 (440), see Daressy, *Annales du Service des Antiquités* V, p. 123, no. xxi. It is possible that there were royal tombs of the XXVIth Dynasty at Rhakotis, see Rowe, *Bull. Soc. Arch. Alex.* no. 38, p. 33 ff.
- (16) See Montet, *Tanis*.
- (17) *Corpus Inscript. Arabic., Egypte* I, No. 518; *Bull. Inst. Egypt.* XXIV, p. 147 ff.
- (18) See Kurt Müller, *Der Leichenwagen Alexanders des Grossen*; Wilamowitz, *Jahrb. Deutsch. Arch. Inst.* 1905, p. 103 ff.; Bulle, *ibid.* 1906, p. 52 ff. The description is given by Diodorus, XVIII 26-28.
- (19) The references to the Tomb of Alexander are given by Calderini, *Dizionario Topografico Egitto Greco-Romano*, s.v. Ἀλεξάνδρεια, Σῶμα.