

*Alexandrea*  
*ad Aegyptum. A Survey*

*by*

D. CLARKE

Lecturer, Classical & Archeological Section  
F. of Arts

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# Alexandrea ad Aegyptum. A Survey

Among all the cities of the ancient world Alexandria must ever hold a place of honour. She alone of the foundations of Alexander the Great rose to the first rank, and she too, has preserved, in recognisable form, her Founder's name. But in proportion to her status her ancient remains are conversely little, and it is not surprising that many writers have attempted the reconstruction of the Hellenistic city. It is our purpose to survey this work, and to indicate certain broad lines for future study.

The main literary authorities have been carefully and accurately collected by Calderini in his «Dizionario di Nomi Geografici e Topografici dell'Egitto Greco Romano» of which we may hope for further volumes. But in the hands of the careless this dictionary can be a weapon of self-destruction, for it makes, by its very nature, no effort to discriminate between its sources. This source-history is all too frequently ignored. Authors are quoted as gospel without the slightest effort to enquire into the authority for their statements. This is particularly true as regards quotation from the Arab historians whose love of the marvellous led them into fantastic exaggeration — if that is not too mild an expression. The author has had occasion to study medieval British writers on the subject of a Roman antiquity, and came to the conclusion that unless proved by archaeological research their statements had to be accepted with the greatest reserve. Time passes, even in antiquity, and an author who writes a thousand years after an event is not likely to know much about it unless he has access to earlier writers, and even then, if he can read them intelligently, he may misconstrue their meaning.

Local patriotism too has provoked much wasted print. Mahmoud el Falaki's plan is clearly largely fanciful, and yet it is still quoted as an authority. By the nature of his age el Falaki could not date what he found (he published 1372, before scientific study of walls, etc. was begun) and it is a commonplace that authors working to «imperial order» tend rather to do as is expected of them. Hence his streets and walls except in so far as they have been verified, should be ignored.

We can also neglect Hogarths fishing village, though we must be careful not to rush to the other extreme and see a vast and flourishing city. It was a fort, Strabo says so, (17.1.6) neither more nor less, until proved, and the absence or presence of objects of the Pharaonic age can only be accepted when they are proven to be of local application.

This leads us to the vexed question of the Serapeum, on which recent excavations have shed much new light, and I shall beg the reader's indulgence for reviewing the work in detail. At present we have but a preliminary report, and until the pottery etc. is fully published a concise judgment is of course impossible.

Mr. Rowe has corrected most of the assumptions made by Dr. Bott which called for it, and is to be congratulated for reviewing all the evidence to date. I have read somewhere, alas I cannot recollect where, that perhaps Pompey's pillar was carved out of the obelisk of Nectanebo II. This might solve the problem of how the column was erected inside the arcades. And as regards the inscription (1) built into its base and restored 'Αρσινόην Φιλαδέλφον. I am not happy as to why the name should have suffered something akin to « damnatio memoriae » if it refers to Arsinoë II.

The published plans (2) show no difference in levels, which are in fact considerable and may assist in the solution of reconciling the site to the literature. A careful study of air photos should prove helpful. At present the material is insufficient to make a tolerable restoration, still less to explain what the Roman walls are doing. As masonry they seem too poor to be Hadrianic, and if, as Wace (3) suggests, the Jews wrecked the temple at the end of Trajan's reign, it is curious that there is no reference in literature, though such an inference is in itself precarious.

Now we come to the Mausoleum (4). The thickness of the walls indicates a large building, but to argue that because its plan is similar to the real Mausoleum, that there was a trierarchy at Halikarnassos for the Ptolemaic fleet, and that an Asian (?) pot was found on the site is like a future archaeologist saying that because there was a British Boys School in Alexandria the foundations of the tower of the Scottish Church must have held an edifice like Big Ben. Also, if it is true that sherds of the 3rd cent BC were sealed above the floor of the «Mausoleum» then it must have been constructed in the early third or late fourth century, and cannot have been a Royal tomb, for the earlier Ptolemies were buried with Alexander in the palace area. Or was the Serapeum the palace area? And why was the tunnel secret? Maybe it was, but it should not be so marked on the plan (5). Are secret passages 2.60 metres wide?

The other and deeper tunnels would appear to be storage vaults. Whatever they are they were not a library, for papyrus would soon rot in so porous a rock, even if faced with stouë. As for a Mithraeum, so far as I can recollect, all Mithraea had a Mithras relief at the east end, and benches at the sides, but again it would be hard to find traces of them in limestone.

In the second Report the list of foundation deposits, though in itself useful, does not add materially to the argument. For Greece, as stated, there is no evidence, and Greece and Palestine are not the only two countries of the Hellenistic world.

One would be glad if excavation reports could be made to contain all the material, including coins and pottery, for if they do not there is a great danger (I could quote examples) of these useful, if humble items never seeing the light of day. No one can fully interpret someone else's finds. There is plenty more to be done, and it will be of profit if it is not rushed. The contents of every pit should be classified — an easy task with rock-cut pits, which abound in the plans, yet we have no word about sherds of common wares. Finally surely a better photo of the gold plaques — a highly interesting discovery — could be given to posterity than the badly lighted plate II and the blank lumps of plate X?

But the reader may justly feel that destructive criticism is not enough. What of future activity?

Firstly, and most important, the Museum must not only be open, but must display all its material. If this means building a new one, then treasure hunters must be ignored and all funds devoted to building an adequate and enlargeable edifice. There is much to be said for the growing idea that all digging save that occasioned by building operations and chance discoveries should be suspended until all past work is published and all museums are in order.

Breccia and Adriani have promised us but we have never had, catalogues of sculpture, mosaics, and lamps. The stamped amphora handles are unpublished, and the inscription catalogue could be revised and re-issued. Of vases, a comparative study of the Hadra and similar materials is long overdue, and the red-figure and black-figure fragments call for separate treatment. «Kleinfunde» such as bronzes, bone objects, etc., and also glassware can be added to the list.

Then, as Adriani began to do, a map of Alexandria should be made, showing the location of all known finds, but care should be taken to distinguish between chance material, and walls etc. in situ (see below). The rock cuttings under the sea at Chatby show that the land has sunk since ancient times, and it is surprising how no one has hence seen that Jondet's constructions seen off Ras el Tin, in so far as they are blocks and not rocks, are as one would expect the Hellenistic harbour works. Again, an air photo of the comparatively shallow eastern harbour might help to place the Tiionium and Antirrhodos — whose absence today is surely another proof that the land has sunk.

Here it is fitting to utter a warning about the use of «in situ». It is best illustrated by an example.

- (a) A column drum found in its place in a colonnade is in situ, but
- (b) if it rolls off onto a grave, a photo of the grave may (wrongly) be captioned «Grave with drum in situ».

This may seem obvious when baldly stated, but when smeared with verbal jam the bread of truth is often obscured. For example a head found between Canopus and Hadra need not necessarily have been carved in Egypt, still less be a proof of an Alexandrian school of art. The presence of a sarcophagus in somebody's cellar means nothing whatever unless there are associated facts.

I am not at all sure that the stone object mentioned by Rowe (6) and earlier writers and inscribed Διοσκουριδου Γ τομοι is not a fake. Its present absence is perhaps significant. Even if it is not, it has no bearing on the site of the Library, for 1500 years of builders must have moved most of the portable material many times.

At this point I venture to launch an appeal for the abolition of the term Graeco-Roman, a phrase invented by lazy and bigoted Egyptologists. The period can be divided into Hellenistic, Roman and Coptic at least, and these can be subdivided into Early Middle and Late. No archaeologist worthy of

the name should date an object outside of this scheme, and if he plead that he has insufficient parallels, then we must plan to supply them. Even the Graeco-Roman museum contains Coptic material, and this, of course overlaps into Early Islamic.

Excavation is still carried out on principles long obsolete elsewhere. Pits, totally ignored, likewise foundation trenches, slopes, and roads are visible on every site in Alexandria. As one who has had to clear a 6-metre deep mediaeval cesspool of little save its constituent substance my heart bleeds when I see a pit full of pottery has been ignored in the treasure hunt for statuary.

For future work in Alexandria then, I suggest:

1. Study of SOURCES of ancient writers.
2. Study of Air photos.
3. Continuance of work on the Serapeum.
4. Continuance of work on the Chatby Necropolis — well published, but we could learn more now.
5. Test pits on vacant sites in the town.
6. Verification of the route of the Arab and Hellenistic walls by test trenches.
7. Cross section of the great fosse by the Rosetta gate to determine its date.

Finally may I append a reply to Professor Wace's recent article on the Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great, where he suggests it may be identified with the sarcophagus of Nectancho II, now in London. Against his view:

- a. Would a Greek be buried in an Egyptian sarcophagus in view of the current separatist feeling.
- b. The presence of the sarcophagus in Alexandria can be explained on the same lines as that of Cleopatra's Needle
- c. Had Alexander been buried in it would not the priests have changed the cartouches, for which there is ample precedent, even if it is not demanded by religion
- d. Was Ptolemy unable to pay the finest Greek sculptor then living, (and he had plenty of choice) to carve a sarcophagus, or was he likely to miss the chance for the display of his power and wealth?

However, the problem is mainly academic, and one may be forgiven for feeling that the Great Emathian sleeps with his honour as his best shroud.

D.T.-D.C.

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