

**A Historical Guide to  
CAVAFY'S ALEXANDRIA  
(331 BCE – 641 CE)**

Savvopoulos, Kyriakos.

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**A Historical Guide to  
CAVAFY'S ALEXANDRIA  
(331 BCE – 641 CE)**

Kyriakos Savvopoulos

Translation of poems by  
Evangelos Sachperoglou

The Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center



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I am also more than grateful to my two reviewers, Mr. Harry Tzalas, director of the Hellenic Institute of Ancient and Mediaeval Alexandrian Studies and Dr. Robert Steven Bianchi, curator of the Collection of Antiquities, Fondation Gandur pour l'Art Geneva, as well as to Dr. Sahar Hamouda, director of the Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center, for their support from the very beginning.

Finally, I would like to dedicate this work to a 'newcomer' to the city, my wife Maria, who has followed and supported me all these years from place to place, from Europe's North Sea to the south-east of the Mediterranean.

Alexandria, August 2013  
Kyriakos Savvopoulos



## PREFACE

Alexandria of Egypt, also known as the city of Alexander, of Cleopatra and of the Ptolemies, of Pharos, and of the great Library, was the ultimate metropolis of the Greco-Roman world by any definition. It was the capital of knowledge and trade; the meeting point of peoples and cultures; a wondrous city of incomparable size and splendor, adorned with impressive monuments such as the Pharos lighthouse, the Mouseion and the great Library, the Sarapeion, the Royal Quarters, and of course the mausoleum of the legendary hero, Alexander the Great.

Unfortunately, almost nothing survives today. While one can still walk through the ancient sites of other major historical cities such as Rome, Constantinople and Athens, in Alexandria this is not possible. Still, ancient Alexandria remains alive in the imagination. Since antiquity, historians, geographers, travelers, novelists and poets have preserved the image of the 'Golden City', often mixing reality and imagination. This city was one of the main sources of inspiration for the greatest Greek Alexandrian poet of the modern era: Constantine P. Cavafy.

Born in Alexandria in 1863, Cavafy experienced the peak of the modern Alexandrian renaissance, when it became once more a cosmopolitan metropolis and major harbor of the Mediterranean. His father was a prosperous importer-exporter who had lived in England in earlier years and acquired British nationality. After his father died in 1870, Cavafy and his family settled for a while in Liverpool,

England, until 1877, when they moved back to Alexandria. In 1882, disturbances in Alexandria caused the family to temporarily move again, to Constantinople. In 1885, Cavafy returned to Alexandria, where he lived for the rest of his life, and died of cancer on 29 April 1933, on his 70<sup>th</sup> birthday.

He evokes the city which he knew in a kind of personalised spatial environment in his monumental poem, "The City". This poem has provoked—and will doubtless continue to provoke—the admiration of philologists, intellectuals and the wider educated public, placing Cavafy among the most important poets of all time. Yet at the same time, Cavafy presents a surprisingly scholarly vision of Alexandria's ancient history, which makes the historian reconsider his own methodology of reconstructing the past. Cavafy was not just a reader of historical and literary sources like Strabo and Plutarch. He seems to have been a first hand observer of raw archeological material in Alexandria's sites and museums, including inscriptions, funerary monuments, sculpture and coinage. As he admits in "Caesarion":

*In part to examine an era,  
and in part to while away the time,  
last night I picked up to read  
a collection of Ptolemaic inscriptions. (1-4)*  
Caesarion

It is through such sources that he was inspired to recreate episodes and characters from Alexandria's past. Nevertheless, Cavafy was not alone in wandering around the streets of Greco-Roman Alexandria. He was

a brilliant example of an intellectual from the Alexandrian cosmopolitan elite, which included archeologists, historians, philologists, antiquity lovers, members of the wider educated public, novelists, collectors, inspired benefactors, and of course members of the Archaeological Society of Alexandria. For them, the modern city represented the revival of Alexandria's ancient glory, which had thus become an integral part of their lives, as well as of the wider cosmopolitan ideology and lifestyle of the 19<sup>th</sup> and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Yet, unlike many contemporary scholars, Cavafy's point of view was clear, critical and far from being a heroic or romantic vision which would idealize his protagonists. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his analysis was one century in advance of his era. He even avoided any direct reference to Alexander the Great and his tomb, which was and still is the most popular topic in parahistorical and 'treasure hunt' writings. Cleopatra and Hypatia are treated in similar fashion. Although related events are mentioned, no portrait of them is offered. Instead, Cavafy deals with historical figures and events, as reflected in historical and archeological evidence, including those which many people ignore, rediscovering some of the most fascinating points of Alexandria's political, social and cultural history. Even his imaginary figures and scenes are set in an absolutely realistic context.

The city and its protagonists are treated both with love and pride—as to be expected from an Alexandrian—but also with irony, since in most cases the reader is well aware

of a different, tragic ending. Moreover, Cavafy created a vision where happiness, triumph and splendor were always ephemeral, leading inevitably towards the final destiny. This destiny could be, for instance, death for Cavafy's Alexandrians and decline for the Ptolemies. In both cases, it is a process that completed the cycle of history and life in general.

Finally, in his history-inspired poems, Cavafy evoked all the major events and figures from Alexandria's ancient past. Therefore, this book aims to place this series of poems in their context, enabling the reader to gain a broader understanding both of Alexandria's Greco-Roman past and of Cavafy's unique gift as a historical poet. The Greek Alexandrian poet takes us on an illustrated journey in space and time to both the real and the imagined Alexandria so that we can:

*an invisible company is heard going past,  
with exquisite music, with voices [...]  
as befits you were deemed worthy of such a city. (2-3, 13)*

The God Forsakes Antony



Constantine P. Cavafy









The tomb of Cavafy in the Greek cemetery of Alexandria

“*And this brings me to Cavafy. One of the joys of those years was my friendship with the great Greek Alexandrian poet who so poignantly conveys the civilization of his chosen city.*”

E. M. Forster's introduction to the 1961 edition of  
*Alexandria: A History and a Guide*, xvii



# 1

## **Cavafy's Cosmopolitan Alexandria and the Role of the Greco-Roman Heritage**

*The best way to experience the city is to walk about quite aimlessly. Once the first sense of estrangement is over, the mind finds its surcease in the discovery of the dream-city Alexandria which underpins, underlays the rather commonplace little Mediterranean seaport which it seems, to the uninitiated, to be.*

E. M. Forster's introduction to the 1961 edition of  
*Alexandria: A History and a Guide*

Constantine Cavafy's contemporary Alexandria, the cosmopolitan metropolis of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, was a city which was usually described as the revival of ancient Alexandria. This revival came after a long period of decline during the Medieval Islamic and Ottoman periods, due to political upheaval and shifts from one empire to another, and human and natural destruction which caused the shrinking of its population and its commercial and cultural collapse. The end of the Ottoman period marked the revival of the city, a truly multidimensional déjà vu through a series of coincidences in relation to its foundation in the Hellenistic period. At the turn of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, in 1801, the destiny of Alexandria began to change after the arrival

in Egypt of Mohamed Ali, an Albanian commander of the Albanian forces in the Ottoman army which had been sent to drive the French out of Egypt. By 1805, Mohamed Ali had become the new wali, or governor, of Egypt and would eventually establish hereditary rule for his descendants, creating a dynasty which ruled the country until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Mohamed Ali, the founder of modern Alexandria, was born in Kavala, Macedonia, Northern Greece, then still part of the Ottoman Empire. Like Alexander the Great, he traveled from Macedonia to Egypt, and he transformed the small town of Iskandarieh into a great metropolis, recovering its role as a major port in the Mediterranean. He succeeded in doing this with the assistance of his international British, French and Italian allies, as well as his personal friends from Greece, such as E. Tossitsas, who also contributed considerably to the agricultural and commercial revival of Alexandria. This was the beginning of the cosmopolitan period of Alexandria, which reached its climax in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but was brought to an end after the 1952 revolution.

Simultaneously, the arrival of Napoleon Bonaparte in Egypt in 1798 marks the beginning of Alexandrian archeology. Imitating Alexander the Great, the French conqueror was accompanied by a contingent of 167 scholars and scientists, whose mission was to conduct an extensive survey and documentation not only of Egypt's antiquities and monuments but also of the flora, fauna and society. The *Institut d'Égypte* was established by

Bonaparte to conduct research on the data collected by his expedition, forming the basis for the monumental work, *Description de l'Égypte*. In this magnum opus, the city of Alexandria received two exclusive descriptions in addition to plates and maps recording the ruins that the scholars found in the city, accompanied by a historical overview.

Undoubtedly, *Description de l'Égypte* contributed to the rediscovery of ancient Alexandria and Egypt by the Western world, while promoting Western patronage of Egypt's Pharaonic and Greco-Roman heritage. This is clearly displayed in the frontispiece of the *Description* designed by Dominique Vivant Denon. In the main frame there is an imaginary view of Egypt's sites and monuments, while in the upper frieze Napoleon is depicted like Apollo or even Caesar or Alexander the Great driving an Egyptian style chariot as a great warrior single-handedly conquering the Egyptian forces. The names of the conquered lands are inscribed on typical emblems of the Roman Empire. Indeed, Napoleon even imitated the personal habits of Alexander the Great to the point of carrying a copy of Homer's *Iliad* as well as Xenophon's *Anabasis* and Plutarch's *Parallel Lives*.

Despite a promising start, the development of Alexandrian archeology in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was very problematic and burdened with insurmountable issues. Its academic imperatives were always in conflict with the radical urban growth of the modern city upon the ruins of the ancient one, a situation which was grievously compounded by the indifference of the city's authorities with regard to its antiquity.

In the meantime, several Alexandrian antiquities were transferred to cities and museums of Europe and the USA, while a major international market of antiquities was set up. Despite these obstacles two determined individuals did prevail in establishing a pioneering school of 19<sup>th</sup> century Alexandrian archeology. One was an Egyptian and the other a Greek. Both managed to record as many ancient ruins as possible, before they were lost forever. The former is Mahmoud Bey el Falaki who, after personally conducting over 200 cross-sections, created the only archeological map so far of ancient Alexandria's layout. Since the 19<sup>th</sup> century all the subsequent maps have been based on his work. The second scholar was Dr. Tassos Neroutsos, the so-called father of Alexandrian archeology. Neroutsos was the first to record and publish all the existing monuments and inscriptions of Alexandria, offering the first true monumental topography of the city. Cavafy was lucky enough to meet him personally at a young age, decribing him as the 'wizard' of Alexandrian archeology. Undoubtedly, several of the inscriptions recorded in the publications of Neroutsos, who was the first Alexandrian scholar to publish in international academic journals, inspired Cavafy.

The flowering of Alexandrian cosmopolitan society by the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and the foundation of its autonomous political and cultural institutions offered more stable ground for the preservation and study of Alexandria's ancient heritage. The two Alexandrian institutions which fulfilled this task were the Graeco-Roman Museum and the Archaeological Society of Alexandria, inaugurated in



1892 and 1893 respectively. Already within the first years of activity, the museum received generous donations from several eminent Alexandrians such as Antoniadēs, Daninos, Demetriou, Glymenopoulos, Harris, Toussoun and Zizinia. Their initiatives are appropriately acknowledged in the following quotation:

*“These ancient objects belong by right of the Museum of Alexandria, having been found in Egypt and acquired exclusively for science, with money acquired in the same country, as hospitable as celebrated. That’s why in sending them to their destination I consider that I’m not making a gift properly speaking but simply a restitution.”*

Efstathios Glymenopoulos, Great Donor of the Graeco-Roman Museum

The collection of the Graeco-Roman Museum continued to be enriched by excavations conducted under the supervision of its directors, such as Botti, Breccia, Adriani, Girghis, Riad and others, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Alexandria, the Delta, Fayum and elsewhere. The finds from those excavations enriched the holdings of the Graeco-Roman Museum because it became the exclusive repository of Greco-Roman antiquities for the whole of Egypt.

The Archaeological Society, the 'living spirit' of the Graeco-Roman Museum, was as cosmopolitan and polyglot as the city herself, composed both of local Alexandrians and international scholars, as well as of lovers of antiquity and educated individuals from almost all ethnic groups resident in the city. The first president was a Greek, Ambroise Rally,

while the first general secretary was an Italian, G. Botti, also first director of the Graeco-Roman Museum. Prince Omar Toussoun, an amateur archeologist, collector, scholar and important donor of the Graeco-Roman Museum, was a perennial honorary president of the Society. There were also Brits such as Sir Charles Cookson, Admiral Blomfield, the controller of the port, and the banker John Reeves; Italians like the architect Manusardi; Swiss like Nourrisson; other Greeks such as the engineer Albert Daninos and John Modinos; and Jews such as Baron Jacques de Menasce.

This movement towards the reconstruction of Alexandria's glorious past can be justified by the fact that Greco-Roman Alexandria had a direct and indirect impact on the cosmopolitan period of the city. In official Roman documents the city was referred to as *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum*—near Egypt, but not in Egypt—being erroneously interpreted as separate or even autonomous, which evokes a symbolic validation of the autonomous status of the cosmopolitan city in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century until the 1950s. Hence, cosmopolitan Alexandrians saw themselves as the 'legitimate' successors of the city's glorious legacy.

Two popular monographs of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century express this idea of the Alexandrian revival very well: E. Breccia's *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* (1914), and Forster's *Alexandria, a History and a Guide* (1922). These two books present a history of both ancient and cosmopolitan Alexandria. Both volumes, together with the work of Neroutsos, must have been quite influential to Cavafy's poetry, especially that of Forster, who was a friend of the great Alexandrian

poet and did his best in order for his poetry to become internationally known. In the same period, another major publication appeared on the market: Svoronos' *Coinage of the Ptolemies* (1906), a catalogue which was one of the major sources of inspiration for Cavafy.

Analogous trends were—and still are—detectable in the city's public spaces, monuments, and even street names. For example, street names such as Alexander the Great, Ptolemies, Deinocrates, Plato, Soter, Herodot and Pharaohs resonate as constant reminders of that past. In such a revivalistic atmosphere, it seems that Greek Alexandrians, Cavafy's compatriots, felt a special connection with Alexandria's Greco-Roman past. The Greek Community of Scientists founded in the 1890s was named after the founder of the Hellenistic Mouseion and Library: 'Ptolemy I'. Moreover, periodicals and magazines including *Pharos*, *Alexander the Great*, *Zenon*, *Pantaenus*, *Papyrus*, *Sarapeion*, *Isis*, as well as numerous monographs, were representatives of such intellectual activities, all of which were published in Greek.

As expected, buildings and monuments of the Greek community reflect this identity through the use of ancient and neoclassical elements alike, such as the Tossitsas Boys School and Averof Girls School in Manshieh. In the Greek cemetery, monumental tombs such as those of the Kotsikas, Salvagos and Sivitanidis families recall the form of a shrine, or *naiskos*, in the Ionic order. The Sivitanidis tomb has two tanagra style statues, a distinctive element of Alexandrian Hellenistic minor sculpture.

Even today, Alexandria's ancient heritage remains an integral part of the modern city, despite the fact that the majority of her modern residents neglect it. In the early 1990s, the Greek Community of Alexandria, among the last remnants of the cosmopolitan period, offered a statue of Alexander the Great to the city, which was placed on the site of its ancient Eastern Gate—Bab Sharki—recalling Alexandria's past and the ancient ties between Greek and Egyptian Alexandrians. A few years later, the Library of Alexandria was reborn, under the name of Bibliotheca Alexandrina, in an attempt to revive the city's role as a center of knowledge. Finally, we might spend a few moments in the neoclassical toll booths on the Desert Road entrance to Alexandria Governorate, which bear a bilingual inscription welcoming us both in Greek and in Arabic to Cavafy's eternal beloved cosmopolis.





The entrance of the Graeco-Roman Museum. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



A general view taken in the 1920s of the Apis Hall in the Graeco-Roman Museum.



The Monastery of St. Saba, also known as the Church of the Greeks, as it appeared in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, before the renovations of the 1980s and 2000s





The courtyard of Tossitsas Boys School in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today it houses the premises of the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate of Alexandria.



The Averof Girls School in present day Sidi Metwalli Street, next to Tossitas Boys School.



The Kotsikas family tomb in the Greek cemetery of Alexandria



The Sivitanidis family tomb with two tanagra style statues



The statue of Alexander the Great, donated by the Greek community of Alexandria in the 1990s, erected on the site of the ancient Eastern Gate: Bab Sharki.



The neoclassical toll booths on the Desert Road leading in and out of Alexandria Governorate.

## 2

# **Cavafy's Alexandria (331 BCE – 640 CE) in Historical Context**

### **On Alexander's *Oikoumene***

*Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks except the Lacedaemonians. (1)*  
In the year 200 B.C.

The expedition of Alexander the Great against the Persian Empire brought fundamental changes beyond imagination in the Mediterranean and Asia. While the prestige of both Athens and Sparta, during the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE, was based on their success in defending the natural borders of their own territory, the royal House of Macedon, the 'grandchildren of Heracles'—since they claimed descent from Temenus of Argos, the great-great-grandson of the demi-god—not only conquered the Persian Empire, but also changed the history of the known world in all of its aspects, political, social, cultural and economic.

No pre-Hellenistic Greek could have imagined that this far-flung geographic expanse stretching from the Ionian Sea to the River Indus would, after the death of Alexander the Great, be divided into several independent kingdoms ruled by Greek kings for almost three centuries, that new

Greek cities would be founded and that Greeks would both emigrate and circulate from one place to another, that Greek culture would be simultaneously adopted and adapted after interacting with local traditions, and that a new economic model would be initiated which in many ways anticipated contemporary globalism and universalism. In other words, no one could have predicted that the dream of Alexander, his *Oikoumene*—the 'civilized world' in terms of the group of civilized nations which have common interests, as opposed to the barbarian nations—would have materialized and developed in precisely this way.

Hence Cavafy, in his "In the year 200 B.C." makes a comparison between the old Greek world, as represented by Sparta, and the Hellenistic *Oikoumene*, by poignantly stating that we:

*... do not need to talk about Lacedaemonians now! (32)*

In the year 200 B.C.

Indeed, the political role of the classical world before Alexander the Great now seemed to belong to another era, an era that was out-of-step with contemporary developments and seemed to be behind the times.



## The House of Ptolemy: A Close-up

Related poems: "The Glory of the Ptolemies"; "Envoys from Alexandria"; "Alexandrian Kings"; "If Only They had Seen to It". Appendix: "Fugitives".

*I am the Lagid, king. The complete possessor  
(by my power and wealth) of sensual pleasure.  
No Macedonian or barbarian can be found  
to be my equal or even to come close to me. (1-4)*  
The Glory of the Ptolemies

The Ptolemies, also known as Lagids after Lagos the father of Ptolemy I Soter, were the royal family of Alexandria, one of the most storied Hellenistic monarchies some of whose members during their three centuries of rule attained great fame, whilst others great infamy. Their personalities were a combination of multiple contradictions: they were both dreamers and pragmatists, patrons of culture and science yet notorious warriors, representatives of Alexander's *Oikoumene* whilst at the same time advocating Egypt's ancient traditions. Despite their different personalities, the paradoxical behavior of individual members of that dynasty makes them persons of interest.

If nothing else, the Ptolemies can be identified as warriors, in fact gladiators, in a battle for individual survival. All the Ptolemies from Ptolemy I Soter to Cleopatra VII participated in wars such as the Wars of the Diadochoi, the Syrian wars and the Alexandrian War. All of them aspired to be the only lords of the Hellenistic world, while they did not hesitate to punish anyone who disputed their

absolute power and tolerated no mutinies. Take the case of the Celtic mercenaries who, during the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, revolted against the palace because it did not keep its promise to grant them land. Unfortunately for the Celts, Ptolemy kept his promise. He led the Celtic troops to a small isolated rocky island in the Nile, where he abandoned them, letting thousands of their number die of thirst and starvation. Nevertheless, soon after this incident, this very same Ptolemy enlisted additional Celtic mercenaries in order to continue his military campaigns.

More fascinating still is the fact that many members of the Ptolemaic family fought against one another: sibling against sibling, mothers and fathers against their children, children against their parents. At the same time, the red line between consanguineous marriage and murder was thin and easily crossed. Arsinoe II, the sister of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, managed to eliminate almost all possible candidates to succeed Ptolemy I Soter in favor of her own brother, whom she married, resulting in both obtaining the same epithet: Philadelphoi (loving siblings).

Their union set the precedent for subsequent consanguineous marriages, not only between brothers and sisters but also between fathers and daughters and cousins. Cleopatra II wed both of her brothers, Ptolemy VI Philometor and Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. Moreover, her second husband, Ptolemy VIII, killed their own son in her very presence. A few years later, when he was exiled in Cyprus, he killed an heir apparent and sent the dismembered body to Cleopatra II on the occasion of her birthday celebration.

Whereupon, Cleopatra publically exhibited the body parts of her own son in order to fan the anger of the Alexandrians against Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. This act was undoubtedly an unusual reaction for a mother in any era! It is clear that beyond any blood tie, for the Ptolemies—as well as for the other major Hellenistic dynasties—monocracy was the only destiny, the only reason for existence.

Still, there was a distinctively positive side, which might balance our view and partially rehabilitate the name of the Ptolemies in history as one of the most successful dynasties. They were the founders of the great Library and Mouseion, the so-called repository of the world's culture. Groomed to become potential 'leaders of the known world', they were educated by the most brilliant scholars of their era. It is worth noting that Philip II had Aristotle appointed as the tutor of young Alexander. Aristotle was responsible for the education of the heir to the throne: to raise Alexander with the ideals of the royal family and to develop his understanding of both culture and politics. Similarly in Alexandria, a series of major scholars were responsible for the education of young royals. For example, Philitas of Kos, Zenodotus and Straton of Lapsakos were the royal tutors of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, Apollonius of Rhodes was the tutor of Ptolemy III Euergetes, and Aristarchus of Samothrace was the tutor of the children of Ptolemy VI Philometor.

Nevertheless, at times the close relationship between kings and scholars proved to be quite sensitive. The involvement of intellectuals in royal issues could cause serious tribulations. Thus, when Ptolemy II Philadelphus succeeded

Ptolemy I Soter to the throne, he forced Demetrius of Phaleron to abandon his position as chief librarian and probably caused him to commit suicide, perhaps because the latter had advised Ptolemy I Soter not to recognize Ptolemy II Philadelphus as the heir to the throne but an older Ptolemy from his marriage with Eurydice. Then, Zenotodus, Philadelphus' tutor, was chosen in his place as head of the Alexandrian Library. The chief librarian, Aristarchus of Samothrace, was expelled from Alexandria by Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, because he supported Cleopatra II, the king's sister and enemy at the royal court. For the same reason, Euergetes II further persecuted a series of Alexandrian scholars.

Also of note is the personal intellectual contribution of the Ptolemies as members of the Alexandrian Library and Mouseion. According to the noted historian, P. M. Fraser, the "Ptolemies were men of considerable culture". They are repeatedly represented in sources as active members of Alexandrian academia:

- Ptolemy I Soter wrote an account of the campaigns of Alexander the Great. He also commissioned Hecateus of Abdera and Manetho—a young Egyptian priest who was his advisor—to write historical and geographical works;
- Ptolemy II Philadelphus was an amateur of science, while it seems that he took a personal interest in the translation of the Bible into Greek, the so-called Septuagint version;

- Ptolemy III Euergetes wrote an account of Seleucia and Antioch in the form of a personal narrative;
- Ptolemy IV Philopator wrote the tragedy *Adonis* and dedicated a temple to Homer;
- Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II wrote Homeric criticism and a memoir;
- Cleopatra VII was credited with having composed a number of works on various themes.

There is no reason to doubt that indeed several Ptolemies were intellectually gifted and did eventually contribute to the works of the Mouseion and the Library. Nevertheless, it is also true that propaganda was a most profound and intensive aspect of Ptolemaic policies. Whether truly intellectual or not, it is reasonable to assume that it was essential for each Ptolemy to promote himself as an intellectual, adding prestige to his reputation, especially when literary works alluded to the personal character of the king and his great deeds. Similarly, as often occurs in royal courts of ancient times, there was a cycle of poets who praised Ptolemaic charisma and wonders. In the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, both Callimachus and Theocritus placed their talents at the disposal of Ptolemaic ideology. The former is famous for his poem "Lock of Berenike", and the latter for celebrating the union between the two full siblings Arsinoe II and Ptolemy II Philadelphus, likening them to gods. In addition, the promotion of sophisticated royal qualities reflected intellectual interests. Such works could sometimes counter the negative reputation of the Ptolemies, such

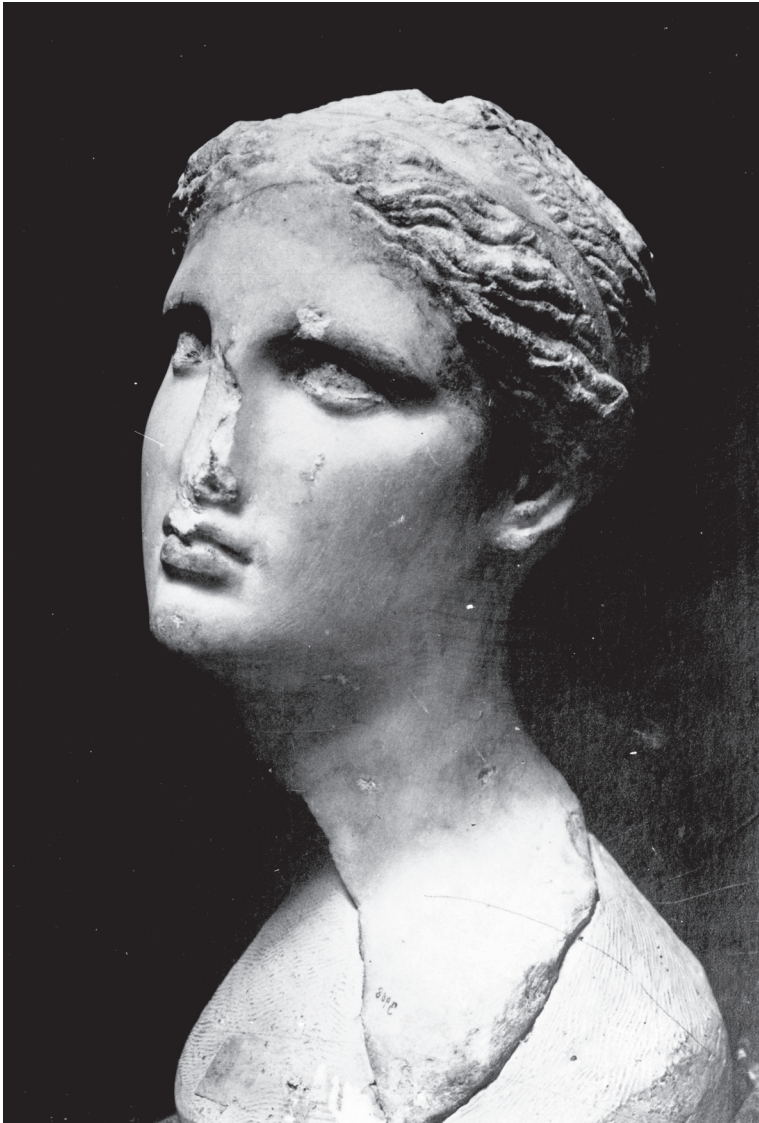
as the violent character of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. Even so, there is no doubt that the Mouseion and Library of Alexandria were greatly indebted to the ruling dynasty of Alexandria.



Silver tetradrachm of Alexander the Great. On the reverse: Athena Promachos with the inscription ΑΛΕΞΑΝΔΡΟΥ.



Gold coin. On the obverse: profiles of Ptolemy II and Arsinoe II with the inscription ΑΔΕΛΦΩΝ (siblings). The reverse side bears profiles of Ptolemy I Soter and Berenike I with the inscription ΘΕΩΝ (gods).



Head of Berenike II from the Sarapeion of Alexandria. Graeco-Roman Museum 3909.





Head of Ptolemy III Euergetes or Ptolemy IV Philopator from the Sarapeion of Alexandria. Louvre Ma3168.

## The Ptolemaic Dynasty in History

Related poems: “The Glory of the Ptolemies”; “In Sparta”; “Come, O King of the Lacedaemonians”; “Those who Fought for the Achaean League”; “In the Year 200 B.C.”; “Envoys from Alexandria”; “If Only They Had Seen to It”; “The Displeasure of Seleucid”; “Theodotus”; “Alexandrian Kings”; “In Alexandria 31 B.C.”; “The God Forsakes Antony”; “In a Township of Asia Minor”; “Caesarion”. Appendix: “A Great Feast at the House of Sosibius”; “Lagid’s Hospitality”; “Return from Greece”; “The End of Antony”

As already mentioned above, the Ptolemies’ major aspiration was to become the leaders of the Hellenistic world, promoting their supremacy over other dynasties. This ambition was evident in the abduction of the body of Alexander the Great in Gaza, while it was en route to the royal cemetery of Aigai. Throughout their history, the Ptolemies promoted their image as Pan-Hellenic rulers, protectors of freedom, autonomy and other traditional Greek values, as other Hellenistic royal houses also did, in this way legitimizing their presence in Greece. The formation of the League of the Aegean Islands found fertile ground under the protection of Ptolemaic Egypt. The primary aim of this alliance was to develop a common monetary and financial system in the Aegean and Eastern Mediterranean, under the full control of the Ptolemies.

At the same time, a Ptolemaic thalassocracy was developed in the Eastern Mediterranean through the creation of a network of spheres of influence, alliances and friendships with cities such as Sparta, Athens and others in the Peloponnese, Byzantium, Miletus, Samos, Halicarnassus, Caria, Lycia and Telmessos, accompanied by the creation of military-commercial bases, such as Rhodes, Thera

(Santorini) and Tenos in the Cyclades and Itanos in Crete, as well as by the acquisition of territories such as Cyprus, Cilicia and Cyrenaica, where they established new cities like Arsinoe in Cyprus, Ptolemais, Philotera and Philadelphia in Syria, Arsinoe in Lycia, Ptolemais, Arsinoe and Berenike in Cilicia.

An interesting example specifically mentioned by Cavafy, was Sparta, an ally of Ptolemy III Evergetes under its king, Cleomenes III. Cleomenes, perhaps the last great Spartan leader, attempted to regain control of the Peloponnese against the Achaean League, the competing power in the region. The latter was an ally of the Macedonian king Antigonos III, while Cleomenes was allied with Ptolemy III Evergetes.

Ptolemy III Evergetes continued his father's policy of supporting anti-Macedonian allies during much of his reign. Thus, he initially financed the Achaean League, which opposed Macedonia at that time, and which consisted of a group of cities united in a confederacy. The League had a common federal citizenship, but each city retained independent control of its internal affairs. However, when the League came into conflict with Sparta in about 228 BCE, Ptolemy III calculated that Sparta would prove a more effective ally against Macedonia, and therefore switched his allegiance to them.

Then, the King of Sparta, in exchange for subsidies, sent his mother and children to Egypt as hostages. Of course, this shows that Ptolemy, as the ruler of the powerful Hellenistic kingdom of Egypt, was in a strong position, leaving no second option for his 'friend'. This is another indication

that the old Greek world had finally lost its hegemony. Cleomenes was eventually defeated in the Battle of Sellasia and fled to Alexandria hoping to regain his crown. Meanwhile, Antigonos had reestablished the Hellenic League, appointing himself protector, as Phillip II had done a few centuries earlier. Unluckily for the Spartan king, when Ptolemy III died, his son and successor, Ptolemy IV Philopator, neglected Cleomenes and eventually placed him under house arrest. Together with his friends, he escaped from his house arrest in 219 BCE and tried to incite a revolt. When he received no support from the population of Alexandria, he avoided capture by committing suicide.

While Philopator showed disinterest in Cleomenes, he was mostly interested in securing his northern-eastern borders in order to make serious preparations to meet the attacks of Antiochus III the Great in Coele Syria, including Judaea. He finally defeated the Seleucid army at the Battle of Raphia in Gaza (217 BCE), where Ptolemy IV Philopator was accompanied by his wife Arsinoe III in military dress riding at the head of the infantry.

After his victory and until the end of this life, Philopator was devoted to orgiastic forms of religion and literary dilettantism. Furthermore, he built a temple to Homer and composed a tragedy, and is said to have built a giant ship known as the Tesseractonteres, a huge type of galley with forty rowers in each column of oars that propelled it.

The death of Ptolemy IV Philopator marks the beginning of a long decline for the Alexandrian royal house. The key figure of this period was Sosibius, one of the most interesting

personalities of Hellenistic history in general. Sosibius, a eunuch and high official in the Ptolemaic palace since the time of Ptolemy IV Philopator, had played an important diplomatic and military role in the Battle of Raphia. He was also widely known and regarded in the Hellenistic world as victor in the Isthmian, Nemean and Panathenaic Games. Intelligent, but at the same time bloodthirsty and extremely ruthless throughout his career, Sosibius assassinated most members of the royal family, including Berenike II, and after the death of Philopator, Arsinoe III, leaving as sole ruler Ptolemy V Epiphanes, a boy of five. He then became the virtual ruler of the kingdom. The Rosetta Stone, a bilingual decree stele written in two languages, Greek and Egyptian, but in three different writing systems, Hieroglyphic, Demotic and Greek, records the ascent of Ptolemy V Epiphanes to the throne of Egypt. Within a few years, Egypt lost most of its power outside Egypt, while suffering from internal revolts in Thebes and elsewhere.

The course of decadence continued with one of the most difficult periods for Alexandria's royal house, the period of Ptolemy VI Philometor, Cleopatra II and Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II. The three siblings ruled Egypt with each other in all possible combinations, both as a triad, and as a dyad. Cleopatra married both, while each Ptolemy was deposed and restored to the throne at least twice, after defeating the other.

The antagonism between the two brothers is well documented in numerous dedications discovered at key points of the Greek world such as Delos, the sacred

Island of Apollo in the heart of Cyclades. The number of inscriptions dedicated to the royal house of Alexandria during this chaotic period is comparable with the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus or III Evergetes. While perpetuating a feigned image of prestige, both brothers could easily simultaneously petition Rome for either financial or political support. Nevertheless, even in this period of decline the Hellenistic world had opportunities to resist and impede Roman aspirations, as in the last years of Philometor's reign when the crown of Syria was offered to him. Perhaps, had Ptolemy I Soter, Ptolemy II Philadelphus or Evergetes I been on the throne, Egypt might have regained her dominant role in the Mediterranean, but under Philometor, she was too weak to achieve such a revival.

Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II, possessed of a more abrasive character than his brother Ptolemy VI Philometor, was given the informal epithet Kagergetes (the Malevolent) by the Alexandrians, who seemed to favor Philometor. They even attempted to burn him alive by setting fire to the royal palace in 132 or 131 BCE, but Kagergetes escaped to Cyprus. He was also responsible for the greatest persecution of scholars and scientists of the Alexandrian Library, including Aristarchus of Samos and Apollodorus the Athenian. After the death of Ptolemy VI in 145 BCE, Kagergetes returned once more to Alexandria to become king.

As noted above, the power vacuum created by the weakening of all Hellenistic Kingdoms was immediately filled by the Romans. Having conquered the Hellenistic kingdom of Macedon in 168/167 BCE and defeated the Achaean

League in 146 BCE, the Romans gradually granted 'freedom' to areas that were formerly under Ptolemaic and Seleucid influence, such as Athens, the Aegean Islands and Asia Minor, while preventing any attempt of either Ptolemaic or Seleucid recovery. The Romans communicated their vision for the Mediterranean and the East, which was nothing other than the incorporation of the Hellenistic world in their own growing empire.

*Clad in old clothes, humble, he entered Rome,  
and lodged in a simple artisan's home.  
And later on he appeared before the Senate  
as a wretched person and a pauper,  
thus more effectively to beg. (26-30)*  
The Displeasure of Seleucid

In point of fact, the influence of Rome became so strong and obvious that the legitimacy of any Hellenistic king and the very existence of any Hellenistic kingdom was dependent on Rome's plans. Such was the case of the so-called Day of Eleusis in July of 168 BCE, during the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor, when Antiochus IV, after conquering Egypt, arrived at the eastern suburb of Alexandria, the village of Eleusis, and demanded the city. Upon receiving this news, Gaius Popillius Laenas, the ambassador of Rome at Delos, arrived in Alexandria and presented Antiochus with the ultimatum to depart. When Antiochus asked for time to consider the matter, Popillius drew a circle around Antiochus with a stick, and informed him that he could not leave the circle until he had reached a decision!

Some years later, Philometor supported Demetrius against his ex-son-in-law, Alexander Zabinas, once married to the Ptolemaic princess Cleopatra Thea. When both contenders died, the priests of Antioch offered Philometor the crown of Seleucid Syria. However, Ptolemy wisely refused to accept the crown, realizing that his acceptance would be a *casus belli* for Rome.

Certainly, in his "Envoys from Alexandria", Cavafy's portrayal of Delphi, which received gifts from the two Ptolemaic brothers, represents another case in which a poem corresponds to the historical reality illustrating in a most interesting way the mentality of the Ptolemies in contrast to the reality of the declining Ptolemaic dynasty. So, as Cavafy ironically notes:

*The oracle was pronounced in Rome; it was there the deal was made.* (16)  
Envoys from Alexandria

The situation worsened in the following reigns of Ptolemy IX Soter Latheros and Ptolemy X Alexander. The latter is known for having replaced the sarcophagus of Alexander the Great with a glass one, and melted the original down in order to strike emergency gold issues of his coinage. Ptolemy X Alexander was driven out of Egypt almost immediately, but he was caught at sea en route to Cyprus by the Alexandrian admiral Chaereas, and was killed in 88 BCE.

In 80 BCE, Ptolemy XI Alexander II, who was appointed to the throne by the Romans, murdered his wife Cleopatra Berenike nineteen days after their marriage which caused



the violent loss of both his throne and his life by the raging Alexandrian mob which reacted to the loss of its beloved queen. Ptolemy XII Auletes, father of Cleopatra VII, paid the vast sum of 6,000 gold talents in order to be recognized by Rome as King of Egypt. However, Auletes had to take drastic measures against his own children, since they organized a conspiracy against him, with the exception of Cleopatra VII Philopator.

Another crucial palatial conflict erupted between Cleopatra VII and Ptolemy XIII, resulting in the Alexandrian War in 48 BCE and the intervention of Julius Caesar in favor of Cleopatra. The reason for Caesar's choice was indirectly related to the civil war waged by Caesar against the Roman general Pompey. Slightly earlier, at the end of July 48 BCE, Pompey, who had lost the decisive Battle of Pharsalus against Julius Caesar, appeared on the Egyptian coast near Pelusium and asked the allied Ptolemaic pharaoh for asylum and assistance. The advisers of Ptolemy XIII officially agreed to the petition of Pompey in order to gain time but then decided to murder Pompey, upon the suggestion of Theodotus. The experienced Alexandrian rhetorician advocated that the best course was to put Pompey to death because Caesar would be pleased by such an act and the murdered Roman general would no longer be a danger because a dead man cannot bite. Within two days Caesar arrived in Alexandria with a fleet whereupon Theodotus immediately delivered the head of Pompey and his signet ring to Caesar. But the Roman general was allegedly disgusted and wept.



Head of Cleopatra. Provenance Unknown. Berlin, Antikensammlung 1976.10.



Colossal Head of Octavian from Egypt. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 24043. Today in the Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum.



The Rosetta Stone, dating to the reign of Ptolemy V Epiphanes. London, British Museum EA 24.



Part of Pnferos temple from Theadelphia, once in the courtyard of the Graeco-Roman Museum. The entrance is crowned with a dedicatory inscription to Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II and Cleopatra II, dedicated by Agathodorus from Alexandria.

With the death of Julius Caesar in 44 BCE the Roman imperial period began, inaugurated by the struggle for the succession between the two main contenders, namely, Mark Antony and Octavian, both of whom invoked their close relationship with the deceased Caesar to promote their own legitimacy in the ensuing war of propaganda. Cleopatra benefited from the upcoming civil war between these two contenders and reached an accord with Mark Antony, even funding his military expeditions into the Eastern Mediterranean.

Shortly thereafter, in 34 BCE, the last major Ptolemaic public performance occurred, which was commemorated by Cavafy in "Alexandrian Kings". Held in the Alexandrian Gymnasium, the so-called ceremony of the Donations of Alexandria witnessed how Cleopatra and Mark Antony proclaimed their sovereignty over all the eastern dominions of Rome including Parthia. The couple appeared dressed as Osiris-Dionysus and Aphrodite-Isis seated on golden thrones, while Caesarion was presented as Horus, the son of Isis and heir to the throne. Meanwhile in 33 BCE, Octavian, ever popular in Rome and having secured the loyalty of the Roman army, declared war against the 'traitor' Mark Antony and the 'witch' Cleopatra. The last act in this historical drama occurred in 31 BCE at Actium, in western Greece next to the Island of Leukas, where the Egyptian fleet was destroyed. Cleopatra retreated from the battlefield, and Mark Antony followed the queen, abandoning his own fleet.

In 30 BCE Octavian invaded Egypt. Initially, Cleopatra apparently attempted to negotiate with Octavian even offering Mark Antony. Octavian however never intended to make any concessions. Soon after the suicide of Mark Antony, Cleopatra VII, the last of the Ptolemies, put an end to her life in her own mausoleum on Cape Akra Lochias, concluding in the most dramatic way the final chapter of the Ptolemaic dynasty and the end of the Hellenistic world. Its three centuries-old saga, full of glory, war, intrigue and great intellectual and socio-cultural achievements came to a close.

The drama of Cleopatra represents another case where Cavafy presents an alternative view. Unlike most of his contemporary scholars, Cavafy does not see Cleopatra as the last glorious Ptolemy, a female hero, an enchantress, or even as the Hellenistic alter ego of Nefertiti. Rather, he refers to key events that mark the beginning of the end, like the Donations of Alexandria. Cavafy seems unsurprised by the failure of Cleopatra's and Mark Antony's plans. The long decline of the Ptolemaic kingdom, the gradual but unstoppable rise of Rome, as well as the longterm control of the Ptolemaic royal house by the Roman authorities can be seen as precursors of their defeat.

However, the permanent presence of Roman armies in the land of the Nile since the time of Julius Caesar marked a point of no return for the history of Egypt: the transition to the Roman imperial era, with or without Cleopatra. In this context, Cavafy reflects the cynicism of the Alexandrian audience in the Gymnasium of Alexandria:

*The Alexandrians sensed, of course  
that these were mere words and theatricals. (20-21)*  
Alexandrian Kings

Once more, Cavafy approaches his heroes and their deeds with tragic irony, implying the chronicle of a death foretold, which however would not necessarily have been realized by the Alexandrians, who a few years later would easily believe:

*the monstrous lie  
of the palace—that Antony is victorious in Greece. (10-11)*  
In Alexandria 31 B.C.

Cavafy further deals with a special moment between Cleopatra and Mark Antony, a mourning scene after the defeat of the Roman general in the naval battle of Actium, which is presented in "The End of Antony". Mark Antony is portrayed as a victim of his passion for the 'Alexandrian life', as represented by the queen and all his experience in the city, which in his final hour seems so alien to him.

Cavafy finally experiences a unique encounter with Caesarion, the son of Cleopatra and Caesar, the last Alexandrian crown prince, who never fulfilled his destiny to become king. Cavafy's Caesarion is a silent ghost wandering Alexandria, searching for an answer to his eternal question: why was history so cruel to him?



## Alexandria under the Ptolemies

According to ancient sources, Alexandria was founded by Alexander the Great in April of 331 BCE on the isthmus between the sea and Lake Mareotis. This constricted piece of land was described by ancient authors as being shaped like a chlamys. The new city incorporated the pre-Hellenistic settlement of Rakhotis, which became the Egyptian district. Various literary accounts indicate that other initial settlers were incorporated into the population of Alexandria. These were the inhabitants of the nearby area of Canopus, present day Abukir, the residents of twelve or sixteen villages, the inhabitants of unspecified adjacent cities or, more generally, everybody who lived within a thirty mile radius of Alexandria. It seems that Alexander's intention was to build a city harbor, which would connect the land of the Nile and the Delta with the rest of his empire. Yet under the Ptolemies the city developed a multiple role, which can be summarized in four main points:

- As the capital of the Ptolemaic Empire;
- A cultural and intellectual center, famous principally for its great Library, Mouseion and Schools of Philosophy;
- As the first advanced *cosmopolis* of the Mediterranean, where different cultures and peoples coexisted and interacted with each other, forging a new Hellenistic idiom of life;
- As one of the most important harbors of the known world.

The city itself was surrounded by a 15 kilometer enclosure. Its street plan was based on the hippodamian system in which the streets were at right angles to each other forming a grid. According to Diodorus, Alexander himself laid out the plan for the most important streets on the grid system, as well as the position of the agora and individual temples. The rest of the urban planning was delegated to Deinocrates of Rhodes. The two main arteries of the city were the Canopic Street stretching east-west the length of the city and the Soma Street, thus named after the re-burial of Alexander in the city, and which was orientated north-south. Both streets were 30 meters wide and were lined with colonnades.

### **The Harbor, Pharos Island and the Lighthouse**

Alexandria's harbor was in fact divided into two: the Megalos Limen (Great Harbor) to the east, and the Eunostos (Port of Good Return) to the west, with a smaller interior harbor at its eastern end, named Kibotos. The Heptastadion was the causeway that linked the mainland to the Island of Pharos, thus creating the two harbors. These two harbors made Alexandria a great center of maritime activity and trade, and also a major center of the shipbuilding industry.

Pharos Island was where Alexandria's famous lighthouse once stood. It was built in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE and designed by the architect Sostratos of Knidos. It was conceived and initiated by Ptolemy I Soter in around 290 BCE but completed after his death, during the reign of his son, Ptolemy II Philadelphus. It was then dedicated to Theoi Soteres, the Saviour Gods: Ptolemy I Soter and his wife Berenike.

The lighthouse consisted of three storeys. The first was square, the second octagonal, and the third circular. The circular storey contained a fire and a mirror which projected the light out to sea. On top there was statue of Zeus, Poseidon or Triton. In total, the lighthouse must have been more than a hundred meters high and became one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World.

### **The Quarters**

The city itself was divided into five quarters, designated by the first five letters of the Greek alphabet. Alpha was the royal district where the palace complex (Basileia) was situated; Beta was the district of the Greek aristocracy. Districts Alpha and Beta together were also known as the Broucheion. Gamma was dedicated to the settlement of Greek commoners, and Delta was the district of foreign minorities such as Syrians, Persians and Jews. Finally, Epsilon was the district for native Egyptians, known also by its Egyptian name, Rakhotis.

### **The Basileia**

The eastern section of Megalos Limen was devoted to the royal quarters, named Basileia. There, the Royal Harbor was delimited at the western side of Cape Akra Lochias, which corresponds today to the promontory of Silsileh. South west of Cape Lochias was the peninsula on which stood the Timonium, Mark Antony's palace, and the Poseideion, the sanctuary dedicated to Poseidon. Behind the Poseideion was the Emporeion where the customs

house was stationed. South west of the peninsula was the Island of Antirrhodos, while the cape itself housed a palace of Cleopatra's, her mausoleum and a temple of Isis.

Basileia was a city within a city, formed by groups of royal buildings and public precincts remarkable for their monumentality and splendor, as well as the Mouseion, the Library and the Gymnasium. All of the Ptolemies contributed to the royal quarter's development. Among their contributions was the Sema or Soma, built by Ptolemy IV Philopator as the burial place of Ptolemaic kings, and which also contained the body of Alexander the Great. The part of the modern city corresponding to the royal quarter is the area east of Cecil Hotel, from the Metropole Hotel opposite Ramleh Station, to the Silsileh promontory (ancient Cape Akra Lochias).

### **The Library and the Mouseion**

*Alexandria is the educator, the pan-Hellenic pinnacle;  
in every discipline, in every art the wisest. (7-8)*  
The Glory of the Ptolemies

The Library and Mouseion, which flourished under the patronage of the Ptolemaic dynasty, comprised the largest and most important repository of knowledge and research facilities in the ancient world. Indeed, documents from the major centers of the Greek world such as Athens and Rhodes as well as Persian, Egyptian and Jewish texts, were collected and studied in Alexandria.

The key figure for the foundation of the Library was Demetrius of Phaleron, advisor of King Ptolemy I Soter, and an experienced person both in letters and politics. He probably helped Ptolemy understand how Alexandria might most effectively be developed as a cultural center, while he laid the foundations of institutional patronage for the next generation. He was the first to invite important scholars to the Alexandrian court, possibly including Euclid.

Several early projects aimed at understanding cultures other than Greek included the translation and study the Old Testament into Greek. This project resulted in the so-called Septuagint version, named after the 72 rabbis, whom Ptolemy I Soter hired and housed at Demetrius' suggestion. This project must have been completed in Ptolemy II Philadelphus' reign.

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE, the Library of Alexandria became a major meeting point of the most important scholars and scientists, creating works of universal character and forming a center of universal knowledge. If nothing else, the obsession to create the largest repository of data in the ancient world can be seen as inspired by Ptolemaic megalomania, which was expressed by other Ptolemaic projects of monumentality such the Pharos lighthouse.

This period is marked by the librarianship of the major Greek scholars Zenodotus, Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes and Eratosthenes, who were the first, second, third and fourth chief librarian of Alexandria respectively. Interestingly the vast majority of scholars came from intellectual centers of the Greek world like Cyrene, Kos,

Cnidos, Samos, Rhodes and Byzantion, which were politically connected to Ptolemaic interests through intensive diplomatic relations or possessions or spheres of influence. We should also mention scholars in different fields including Euclid, Eratosthenes and Eudoxis of Cnidos in mathematics; Archimedes in applied science; Callimachus, Theocritus, Apollonius of Rhodes and Aristophanes of Byzantion in literature; Praxagoras of Kos in medicine.

A major blow to this intellectual creativity occurred during the reign of Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II in the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. By the king's order, several Alexandrian scholars, including the chief librarian Aristarchus of Samothrace, had to abandon the city or were persecuted. The years of Cleopatra VII witnessed a short revival before the Ptolemaic demise, even though the visit of Julius Caesar during the Alexandrian War in 48 BCE is linked to a disastrous fire in the Alexandrian Library. However, a few years later Mark Antony managed to upgrade the collection by transferring volumes from a major competitor, the Pergamene Library.

### **The Sarapeion**

Sarapeion was the name given to the sanctuary dedicated to Sarapis, the head of Alexandria's divine triad in the Greco-Roman period. It was situated in the Egyptian quarter of the city, known as Rakhotis. Today, the site is known as Pompey's Pillar, or Amoud el Sawary, due to mistaken identifications of the site in later periods.

Sarapis' name derives from Osiris-Apis, a popular Memphite cult version of Osiris in the form of a bull, Apis.

Yet, the god had the appearance of a Greek god as an aged bearded human figure with thick hair, crowned either with a kalathos, or with the Egyptian Atef crown. He was associated with Greek gods such as Dionysus, Hades, Asclepius and Zeus. His counterpart, Isis, was identified with Greek deities such as Demeter and Aphrodite. She further became popular in the form of Isis Pharia, mistress of the sea and protector of sailors. Harpocrates—the Hellenized version of Egyptian Horus the Child—was the holy infant of the triad.

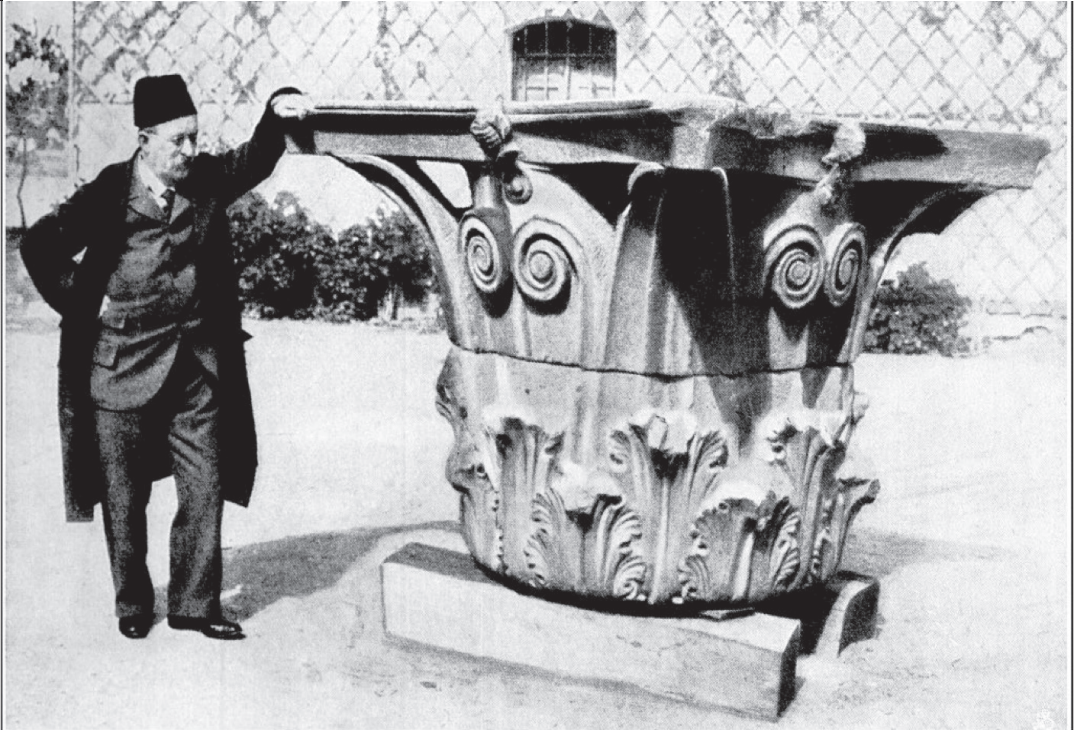
The main temple to Sarapis dates to the reign of Ptolemy III Euergetes. It was designed in the Greek Corinthian order, but also adorned with monumental sphinxes and both Egyptian and Greek style statues of the Ptolemies. The foundation plaques of the temple, made of gold, silver and glass, were bilingual, written both in Greek and hieroglyphics. Inside the temple was the gold and ivory, or chryselephantine, statue of Sarapis, the work of the Greek sculptor Bryaxis. In the reign of Ptolemy IV, a small temple dedicated to Harpocrates was erected adjacent to it.

Several renovations took place during the Roman period, since the sanctuary became a major pilgrimage center. Meanwhile, the Alexandrian triad became immensely popular all over the Roman world. A new larger Roman temple was built in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE, replacing the previous one which was destroyed by fire. By the end of the same century the Column of Diocletian was erected supporting a statue of that emperor.



Reconstruction of Pharos lighthouse, according to Hermann Thiersch, 1904. Model construction by The Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center.





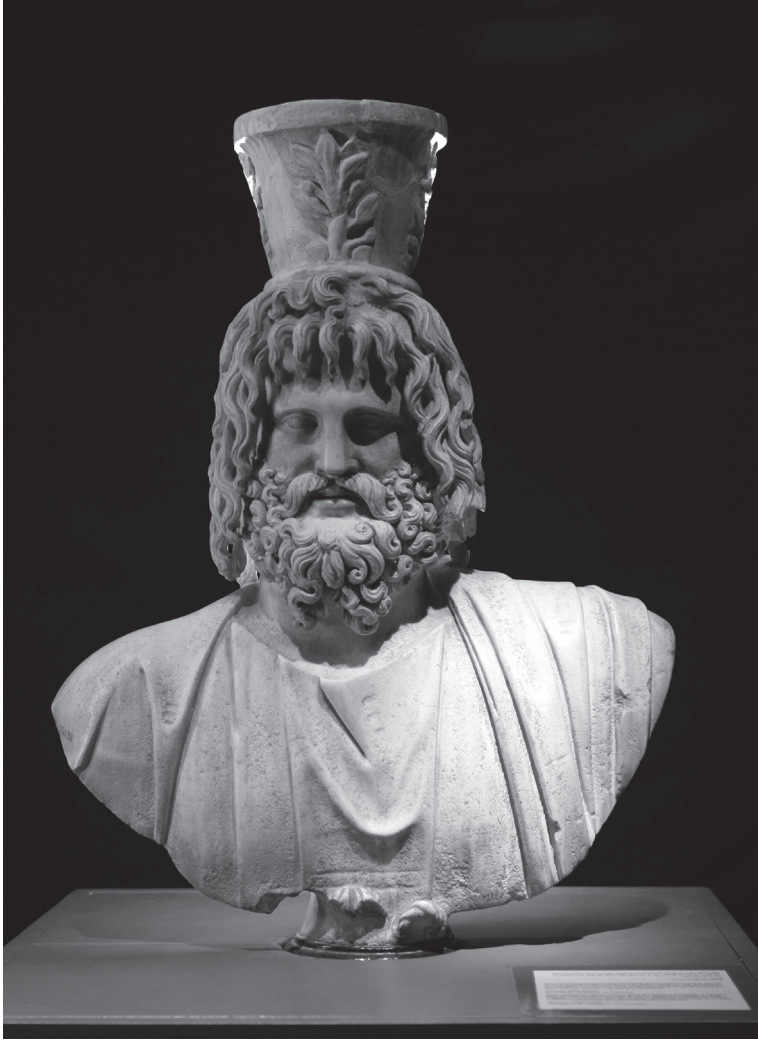
Johannes Schiess Pasha, director of the Arab Hospital of Alexandria and president of the Alexandrian Antiquities Commission, beside a colossal column capital, found in the area of the Royal Quarters. Early 20<sup>th</sup> century.



Statue of Demetrius of Phaleron. Bibliotheca Alexandrina.



The hill of Sarapeion (early 20<sup>th</sup> century).



Bust of Sarapis from the Sarapeion of Alexandria. 2<sup>nd</sup> century CE. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 22158.



Roman Alexandrian coin with an image of Isis Pharia.



Sarapeion today. The column of Diocletian, also erroneously known as Pompey's Pillar. In front one of the two Ptolemaic sphinxes of the site.

## Alexandrian Society: A Micro-model of Alexander's Oikoumene

Related poems: "In the year 200 B.C."; "The Potentate from Western Libya"; "Tomb of Eurion"; "Of the Hebrews"; "Tomb of Iases"; "Tomb of Lanes"; "For Ammones who Died Aged 29 in 610"; "Aemilianus Monae, Alexandrian, A.D. 628-655". Appendix: "Epitaph"; "Alexandrian Merchant".

*An Alexandrian youth, aged twenty-five.  
On his father's side, of old Macedonian stock;  
from Jewish magistrates, his mother's lineage. (5-7)*  
Tomb of Eurion

Alexandrian society, a unique assemblage of cultures and people, is a recurrent theme in Cavafy's poems, confirming the intention of the poet not only to commemorate the city's well-known legendary heroes, but also to portray the true history and people of the city. And here we encounter an interesting paradox. Despite his realistic approach to the subject, most of Cavafy's ordinary Alexandrians are products of his imagination resulting in yet another example of his poetic genius. Unlike qualified historians who cannot avoid adding imagination to reality, Cavafy does not hesitate to add reality to his imagination.

Alexandria must have witnessed an influx of immigrants such as Greeks, Jews and Syrians arriving in the city due to the open door policies of the first four Ptolemies, which offered opportunities for work in all fields, including commerce, arts, letters and of course war. These different cultural traditions and people coexisted and interacted with each other, resulting in a unique multicultural assemblage.

The population of Greco-Roman Alexandria is estimated by modern scholars to have been around 500,000 while Diodorus, by the beginning of the Roman period, suggested 300,000. During the Hellenistic period it was divided in two main categories: the Greeks and the non-Greeks. The Greeks were divided in four subcategories: 1) the citizen body; 2) partial and probationary citizens; 3) Greeks with no particular civil status; and 4) Greeks with foreign ethnicity. The second category consisted of 1) the Egyptian population; and 2) the foreign non Greek immigrants such as Jews, Syrians and slaves.

During the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE the citizen body was organized according to the model of the Greek polis composed of demes, tribes and civil institutions. Access to this civic body was restricted to Greeks only, but did not include all of them. Moreover, contact between the Greeks and the Egyptians was probably restricted, which may have caused feelings of hostility from the Egyptians. However, this rigid segregation became difficult to maintain since Ptolemaic society was marked more strongly by social stratification than by place of origin. Hence, amongst the middle and lower classes, this gap between Greeks and Egyptians seems to have been gradually bridged by intermarriage, already since the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. Also, it seems to have initiated an informal use of 'ethnic' epithets for practical purposes. For example, the wife of a Greek was characterized as a Greek, regardless her origin, while at a certain point, all non Egyptian residents in the country were officially identified by the Ptolemaic census as 'Greeks'. Yet, children of mixed marriages were



not considered as Greco-Egyptians, but either Greeks or Egyptians.

The court and the higher level of the state's machinery were mostly composed of Greeks, but nevertheless, there were exceptions. Ptolemy I Soter had among his closest confidants the Egyptian Manetho, who seems to have helped him to understand Egypt and to achieve his state model, and who significantly influenced the religious policies of the king. The succeeding Ptolemies maintained the Greek character of the upper level of the state and army, since the king remained firmly Macedonian. Therefore, the use of Greek language and a certain degree of Hellenization were the necessary preconditions for someone who wanted to reach high positions within the state machinery.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> and 1<sup>st</sup> centuries BCE were marked by the rise of Egyptian nationalism, while an extensive process of Egyptianization of the citizen body took place, causing a gradual change in Alexandria's social structure. The traditional citizen body continued to exist, but citizenship was not as heavily restricted to Greeks as it had been in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE. In addition, more Egyptians, but also others ethnicities such as the Jews, appear to have held more important posts in the court and administration than before as a result of the process of Hellenization in terms of names, education and lifestyle. However, this Hellenization does not mean that such people neglected their Egyptian origin. Instead, they seemed to preserve both Greek and Egyptian identities expressed in private and public spheres of life. At the same time Greeks, especially the elites, were

gradually initiated more and more into Egyptian culture, a fact that is clearly reflected in the funerary customs, where mummification, and its related Egyptian funerary tradition, became quite popular in a distinctive Alexandrian version, which also involved a Greek visual vocabulary. This overall picture was summarized by Polybius in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE:

*Alexandria is inhabited by three classes of people, first the native Egyptians, an acute and civilized race; secondly by the mercenaries, a numerous, rough, and uncultivated set, since it was an ancient practice to maintain a foreign armed force that had learnt to rule rather than to obey owing to the weakness of the kings; thirdly there were the Alexandrians themselves, people not genuinely civilized for the same reason, but still superior to the mercenaries, although they were mongrels, they came from a Greek stock and had not forgotten Greek customs.*  
(Cited in Diodorus of Sicily text, XXXIV, 14)

Undoubtedly, after three centuries or more of Greco-Egyptian interaction both Greek and Egyptian traditions were integral components in the expressions of Alexandrian identity. Within this long process, terms like Greek and Egyptian cannot be used as absolute values, but should be used as characterizations dependent on the context in which they coexisted and interacted with each other.

Such a picture might justify the impression of Livy, who visited Alexandria just after the Roman conquest. He observed that "*Makedones in Aegyptios degenerarunt*". Indeed, in the eyes of a representative of Rome, which was just at the beginning of its long imperial saga, such socio-cultural phenomena could be considered as a type



Mustapha Kamel Necropolis, Tomb 1, upon its discovery. It belonged to Greek Alexandrians of Macedonian descent. 3<sup>rd</sup>-2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE.



Kom El Shoqafa. The façade of the main tomb.

of degeneration, but in Alexandria those prejudices would have been discarded for quite some time by then. In fact, Alexandrian society is better regarded as an applied cosmopolitan micro-model in a world—in this case the Roman Empire—in which different people and cultures shared common values while simultaneously preserving their own local traditions.

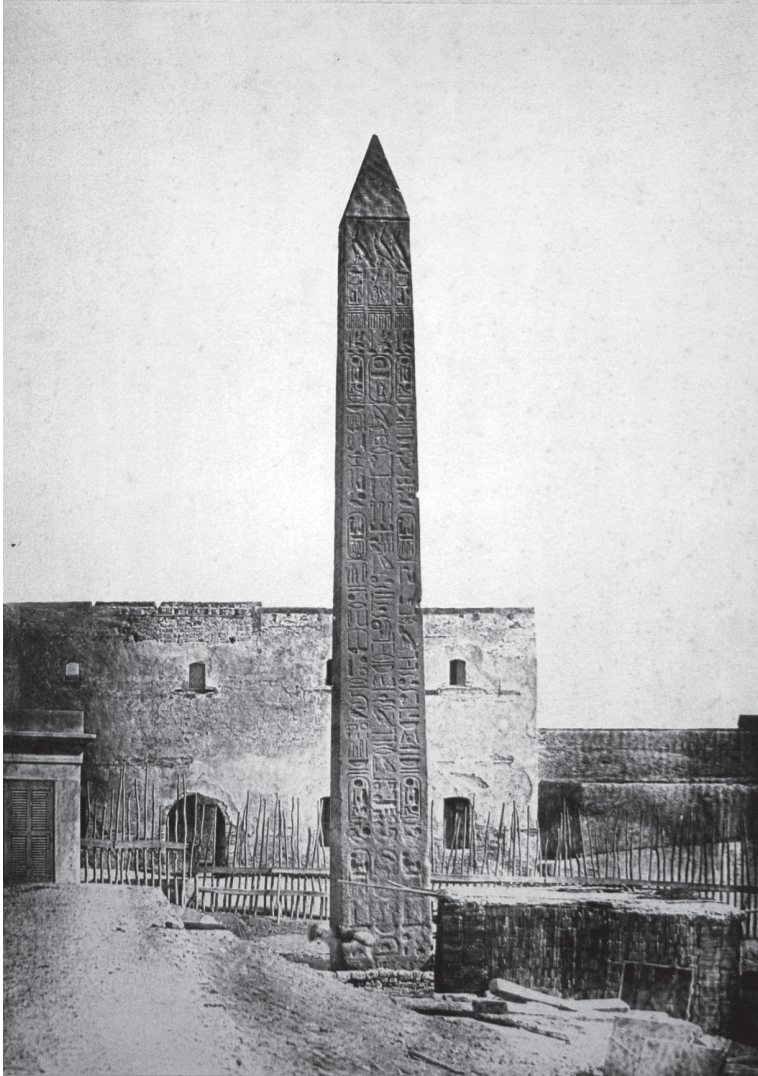
## Alexandria and Rome

After the fall of the Ptolemies in 30 BCE, Egypt became a province of the Roman Empire. Nevertheless, Alexandria preserved its prestigious status as the second most important city of the empire. The public space of the city was adorned like other cities of the Hellenistic East with colonnades, tetrastyles, fountains, city gates and triumphal arches. Several emperors such as Hadrian and Antoninus Pius seem to have contributed to a further monumentalization of the city during the Roman period. Many of the Greek style facilities, the theater, the Lageion (hippodrome), the Gymnasium and the agora among them, were preserved and renovated, whereas new buildings such as the Hadrianeum and Caesareum were also erected. The latter was the symbol of Roman imperial power in Alexandria, of which nothing remains today. It was initially founded by Cleopatra VII most probably in honor of Caesar, but she never completed it due to the demise of the Ptolemaic state. Augustus completed the temple, rededicating it to himself, Augustus Epibaterius. The temple stood near the shore facing the center of the Great Harbor, corresponding approximately to south of Saad Zaghloul Square in the modern city. It was a lavish temple with porticoes, gardens and libraries. The most distinctive attributes of this temple were the so-called Cleopatra's Needles that once stood in front of it. These two red granite obelisks bear the names of Tuthmosis III, Seti I and Ramses II and were brought to Alexandria from Heliopolis by the Romans twenty years

after Cleopatra's death. These giant obelisks stayed in situ, although one had fallen during an earthquake in 1303, until the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century when they were transferred and re-erected on the Thames Embankment in London and Central Park of New York, in 1877 and 1880 respectively.

The relationship between Alexandria and the Roman emperors was characterized by a subtle equilibrium. Several times emperors like Vespasian, Trajan, Hadrian and Septimus Severus visited Alexandria in order to experience the city, to venerate the tomb of its founder and to study from valuable sources of knowledge. This relationship was of course precarious, ready to break whenever the Alexandrians supported a rebellion against Rome, as in the case of the occupation of the city by Zenobia of Palmyra and its subsequent liberation by Marcus Aurelius, after a highly destructive siege. Bloody insurrections are also documented, the most notorious of which was provoked by the reaction of Caracalla to ironic comments made by the Alexandrians regarding his self-identification as Alexander the Great, which led to a massive slaughter of Alexandrian youth.

The list of those committing bloodshed in Alexandria includes emperors such as Decius and Diocletian, who went down in history for the massacre of proto-Alexandrian Christians and others. The situation changed for Christians in 325 CE with the official recognition of Christianity by Constantine the Great at the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea and the subsequent establishment of patriarchates,



The standing obelisk of the two so-called Cleopatra's Needles. Second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.





Kom El Dikka. General View of the Odeon (right) and the lecture halls (left), oftenly related with the School of Philosophy in Byzantine Alexandria (4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> century CE).

one of which was in Alexandria itself. The ensuing Christian period is marked by a series of important patriarchs, not only in Alexandria but also in the entire see of Eastern Christianity, whose number included Peter I, Theonas and Athanasius, all of whom were cumulatively responsible for the broad diffusion of the Christian faith.

Meanwhile, Alexandria was experiencing a genuine intellectual revival, which owed much to the previous meeting of Greek thought with Egyptian and other Eastern traditions. This interaction is already discernable by the turn of the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE as seen for example in the works of scholars such as the Jewish philosopher Philo, whose contributions led to major religious and philosophical movements such as Neoplatonism, Gnosticism and early Christian thought.

The dialogue among those phenomenally different schools of thought was quite intensive, while to a certain extent they shared a common intellectual background. This becomes clear in the case of Ammonius Saccas, founder of the Neoplatonic school. Ammonius was born of Christian parents, while his two most important disciples were Plotinus and Origen, representatives of pagan and Christian philosophies respectively. Plotinus is regarded as the co-founder of the Neoplatonic school, while Origen is regarded as one of the greatest Christian theologians. Thus, the Neoplatonic school initially included both Christians and pagans. For example the Christians were able to attract as students those immersed in the philosophical teaching of Asclepiodotus Tacticus while pagan students were followers

of the teaching of the Christian Aphthonius. However, this common path became forcibly severed during the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE with the rise of religious fundamentalism in the city. Hypatia, the daughter of Theon, who lived in the first half of the 5<sup>th</sup> century CE, was the last representative of the Neoplatonic school. She continued to use the title of professor, typical of Neoplatonic philosophers.

## The Pagan-Christian Conflict and the Demise of Alexandria's Hellenistic Spirit

Related poems: "A Priest of Serapeum"; "Myres: Alexandrian, A.D. 340"; "Perilous Things"; "From the School of the Renowned Philosopher"; "Kleitos' Illness"; "If Dead Indeed"; "Tomb of Ignatius". Appendix: "Fugitives".

*He was a student of Ammonius Saccas for two years;  
but he grew tired of both philosophy and Saccas. (1-2)*  
From the School of the Renowned Philosopher

Late Roman/Byzantine protagonists of Cavafy illustrate the religious fluidity of that era in the most consummate way. All cases show that the transition from paganism to Christianity was not that simple or rapid. In the reality of everyday life, the process was much slower, followed by questioning, wavering, and in several cases hypocrisy, due to the pressure from one side or the other. Such was the case of the desperate maid of Kleitos, who retrieved the image of a hidden pagan divinity, simply because the pagan religion was still practiced.

Moreover, with regard to the perception of the divine, even within the dominant institutionalism of Christianity, early Christians seem to have adopted and adapted the visual vocabulary as well as to a certain extent pagan interpretations of divine expressions. For instance, the iconic image of the Virgin Mary holding or nursing the holy child was inspired by another divine mother, Egyptian Isis and her holy child, Horus, who had been habitually portrayed in

that way since the Pharaonic period. Yet, there is no better visual way to illustrate the concept of maternity than this canonical, time-honored image of a mother nursing her child.

Alas, the spread of Christianity did not bring peace to the city, but led to religious fundamentalism in the 4<sup>th</sup> century CE, which precipitated a devastating conflict between Christians and pagans. The final victory of the Christians during the reign of Theodosius the Great was characterized by the systematic and frequently violent Christianization of the city's sacred topography, including the destruction of the Sarapeion, a singular act which in itself marks the end of Alexandrian paganism.

In 391 CE, Patriarch Theophilus initiated the construction of a church in the center of Alexandria. During this process, Theophilus discovered a Mythraeum, where cult images and other sacred objects were still in situ. The pagan images were publically displayed in city's agora, offending the pagans enough to provoke bloody street battles. Eventually, the pagans retreated into the Sarapeion. From this easily defended position, they occasionally made sorties against the Christians besieging them. This situation finally caused imperial intervention. Theodosius issued a decree declaring the slain Alexandrian Christians as martyrs and offered amnesty to the pagans, but he also ordered the suppression of the pagan cults responsible for the violence. Subsequently, the Sarapeion was abandoned. A soldier finally severed the head of the ivory and gold statue of Sarapis with his sword, which he then carried through the

whole city. Other dismembered parts of this cult statue were burned in different areas of the city while the torso itself was burned in the theater.

Theophilus built a church near the Sarapeion in order to house the bones of Saint John the Baptist and of Elisha. He also converted a pagan temple facing the Church of Saint Peter I into the Church of Cosmas and Damian. Similar cases of such transformations of pagan buildings into Christian churches included the conversion of the Isis Pharia temple into the church dedicated to Hagia Sophia and that of the Kroneion into the Archangel Michael Church. Some years earlier, the Caesareum, once the temple of the Roman imperial cult, was converted into a Christian cathedral of the city by the patriarch, Saint Athanasius the Great. As a result, there were no architectural precincts nor buildings left in which pagans might practice their old religion. All remaining pagans sooner or later were converted to Christianity:

*I lament, O Christ, for my father  
though he was —dreadful to say—  
a priest at the accursed Serapeum. (11-13)*  
A Priest of the Serapeum

At this point it is worth mentioning the role of the parabolans, a group of monks, who took the role of 'guards of faith', attacking and occasionally persecuting 'enemies' like Hypatia in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century CE. Hypatia's horrific death came to symbolize the end of the Hellenistic spirit of Alexandria. Certainly this was not a fitting epilogue for the

city of pioneering scientists and inspired philosophers, the city envisioned by Alexander, Ptolemy I Soter and Demetrius of Phaleron.

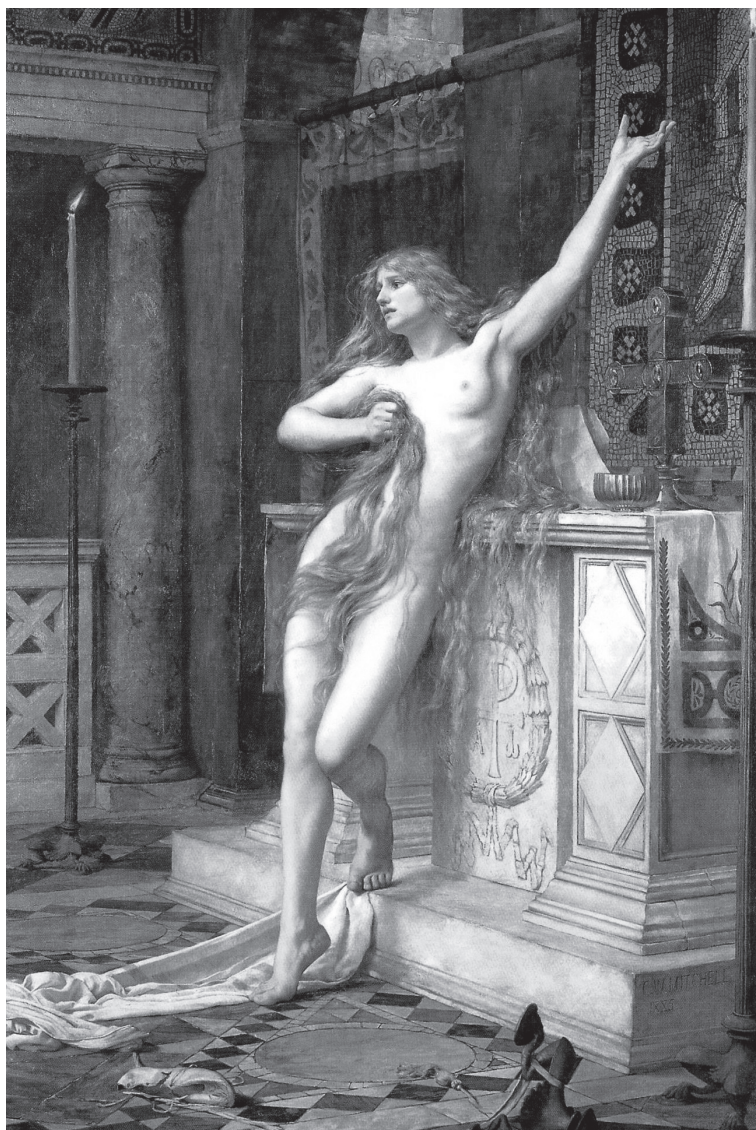
This period was not only characterized by an anti-pagan religious movement, but also by a growing anti-imperial (Byzantine) atmosphere, resulting in the split of the Church of Alexandria into the Melekite (Imperial)—also known as Greek-Orthodox—and the Coptic—local Egyptian. This may well have been a contributing factor to the beginning of the shrinking of the Greek community in Alexandria, which was further accelerated by the conquest of Egypt by the Arabs under the leadership of Amr Ibn el As in 641 CE. Many Alexandrians preferred to live in other areas of the Byzantine Empire such as Constantinople.

Nevertheless Alexandria remained a sizable city. Amr Ibn el As stated that Alexandria had 4,000 palaces, 4,000 baths, 400 arenas and theaters and 1,200 gardens. Although these figures are exaggerated, what remained of ancient Alexandria obviously impressed the general. Once more, Cavafy's imagination created a more realistic picture of Byzantine Alexandria, which doubtless no other scholar of his era painted:

*Always and ever the same Alexandria; all you have to do  
is walk a bit along the straight road ending at the Hippodrome  
and you will see palaces and monuments that will have you marvel.  
No matter how much damage it suffered in the wars,  
no matter how much it shrunk in size, it is always a wondrous place.*

(1-5)

Fugitives



Hypatia, before her death. Charles Williams Mitchell (1885). Newcastle upon Tyne, England. Laing Art Gallery







The interior of St. Saba Monastery with eight Roman granite columns carrying the nave.



## Epilogue

# The “Church of the Greeks”: The Last Survivor of Ancient Alexandria

*My mind travels to the great glories of our race,  
to our illustrious Byzantine past. (10-11)*  
In Church

Any visitor to Cavafy's flat in Alexandria, which today houses the Cavafy Museum, located on the second floor of 4 Cavafy Street (formerly Rue Lepsius), can enjoy the view of the Church of the Greeks, better known today as the Sanctified Monastery of St. Saba in the Greek Orthodox Patriarchate Street. Even more fascinating is the experience of entering that church, which one does by walking down the stairs leading from the side walk of the present day street to the late Roman/Byzantine strata, where the history of this church begins somewhere in the early 7<sup>th</sup> century CE. In reality, the actual history of its site goes back to the Greco-Roman period, since according to sources, the Sanctified Monastery of St. Saba was possibly built on the ruins of a pagan temple dedicated either to Dionysus, Mythra or Apollo.

St. Saba has the singular distinction of being the most ancient church in Alexandria to have been in continuous use since antiquity. Throughout its history, this church played several roles: as a cemetery for patriarchs, as the Seat of the Patriarchal Throne, and as a hospital and school. In the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the monastery became the training institute

for Greek Orthodox clergy, while Patriarch Meletios Pegas, one of the most distinctive patriarchal figures of Alexandrian Christianity, who studied classical philology, philosophy and medicine in Padua, became the first teacher of the school.

Today, the visitor to St. Saba can see eight large red granite monolithic columns carrying the nave, because the monastery is situated on the site where part of the Forum was once located in the area of the Caesareum. Cavafy would have envisioned the Byzantine performances and rituals in this very church, while some meters further on, one can still imagine Patriarch Athanasius the Great inaugurating the converted Caesareum into the Great Cathedral of Alexandria.

These all belong to the city's past, which is buried deep under the foundations of the modern city. Still, it remains Alexandria, the city of Alexander, a gifted place, always able to impress any visitor. We just need to follow Cavafy on his morning walks along Alexandria's Corniche.

*The morning sea's and cloudless sky's  
radiant violet hues and yellow shore; all  
beautiful and brightly lit.*

Hopefully, this will never change....



Early 20<sup>th</sup> century photo of Ras el Tin Palace on the west side of the Pharos Island.







**3**

**The Poems**

## THE GLORY OF THE PTOLEMIES

I am the Lagid, king. The complete possessor  
(by my power and wealth) of sensual pleasure.  
No Macedonian or barbarian can be found  
to be my equal or even to come close to me. He is ludicrous,  
that Seleucid, so vulgarly effete.  
If, however, you ask for more, here it is in plain words:  
Alexandria is the educator, the pan-Hellenic pinnacle;  
in every discipline, in every art the wisest.



Statue of a young Ptolemaic ruler in Pharaonic dress discovered under water near Pharos Island (Qaitbey). 2<sup>nd</sup>-1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Bibliotheca Alexandrina.

## IN SPARTA

King Cleomenes didn't know, he didn't dare—  
He didn't know how to say this  
to his mother: that Ptolemy demanded  
she too be sent to Egypt and kept  
a hostage, as security for their agreement,

a highly humiliating, unbecoming thing.  
And he kept visiting her; and always wavered.  
And always started to say something; and always stopped.

But that wonderful lady saw through him  
(some rumours about it had reached her as well),  
and she encouraged him to speak out.  
And she laughed and said, of course she'd go,  
and as a matter of fact, she was glad to be  
still useful to Sparta in her old age.

As for the humiliation—well, she couldn't care less.  
A Lagid, a king of only yesterday, was of course  
unable to grasp the Spartan spirit;  
wherefore his demand could not truly  
humble such a Distinguished Lady  
as she; mother of a Spartan king.



Silver tetradrachm of Cleomenes, 227–222 BCE.

## COME, O KING OF THE LACEDAEMONIANS

Cratisicleia felt it beneath her to be seen  
by the people crying and lamenting;  
and she kept on walking in majestic dignity and silence.  
Her imperturbable countenance displayed none  
of her consuming pains and sufferings.  
But even so, for one moment, she could bear it no more;  
before embarking on that wretched ship for Alexandria,  
she took her son to the temple of Poseidon,  
and once they were alone, she embraced him  
and kept kissing him, while he was 'in great  
pain,' says Plutarch, 'and violent agitation'.  
But her stalwart character prevailed;  
and regaining her composure, that wonderful woman  
said to Cleomenes: 'Come, O King of the  
Lacedaemonians, when we are outside  
nobody should see that we've been crying,  
or doing anything unworthy of Sparta.  
That is the only thing still in our power;  
as for our fortunes, they will be with us as god might grant.'

And she entered the ship, on the way towards that 'might grant'.



Head of Ptolemy III Evergetes from Sparta. Museum of Sparta 5366.

## THE FIRST STEP

The young poet Eumenes complained  
to Theocritus one day:  
'Two years have passed since I began to write,  
and all I've composed is just one idyll.  
It is my only completed work.  
Alas, it's high, so I see,  
the stairway of Poetry is so very high;  
and from the first step, where I stand,  
miserable me, I'll never climb higher.'  
Theocritus said: 'These words  
are blasphemous and unbecoming.  
Even though you stand on the first step,  
you still ought to be proud and happy.  
To have come so far is no small matter;  
to have done so much is great glory.  
For even this first step is still  
by far above the common people.  
In order to set foot upon this step,  
you must be in your own right  
a citizen in the city of ideas.  
It is both difficult and rare  
to be made a citizen of that city.  
In its agora you come across Lawgivers  
that cannot be deceived by any opportunist.  
To have come so far is no small matter;  
to have done so much is great glory.'





Late Hellenistic silver tray with a pastoral scene. The seated figure to the left has been identified as Theocritus. Hermitage Museum.

## IN THE YEAR 200 B.C.

‘Alexander, son of Philip, and the Greeks except the Lacedaemonians.’—  
We can very well imagine  
how indifferent everybody was at Sparta  
to this inscription: ‘except the Lacedaemonians’—  
but naturally. The Spartans were not  
to be led and to be ordered about  
like prized servants. Anyway,  
a pan-Hellenic expedition without  
a Spartan king in command  
wouldn’t seem to them of high repute.  
Well, of course, ‘except the Lacedaemonians’.

This, too, is an attitude of life. It’s understandable.

So, ‘except the Lacedaemonians’ at Granicus  
and then at Issus; and in the final  
battle where the awesome army was swept away,  
which the Persians had amassed at Arbela,  
which set out from Arbela for victory, and was swept away.

And out of that wondrous pan-Hellenic expedition,  
the victorious, the most brilliant,  
the widely renowned, the praised for glory  
as no other has ever been praised,  
the incomparable, we came to be:  
a new Hellenic world, a great one.

We: the Alexandrians, the Antiochians,



Marble head of Alexander the Great found in Kom el Dikka. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 4397.

the Seleucians, and the numerous  
other Hellenes of Egypt and Syria,  
and those in Media and those in Persia, and so many others.  
With their extended dominions,  
and their various attempts at judicious adaptations.  
And the Greek koine language—  
all the way to outer Bactria we carried it, to the peoples of India.

Do we need to talk about Lacedaemonians now!



Head of Alexander the Great, discovered at the city center. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 1918.

## ENVOYS FROM ALEXANDRIA

They haven't seen for centuries such lovely gifts in Delphi  
as those that had been sent to them by both of the two brothers,  
the rival Ptolemaic kings. But after they'd received them,  
the priests began worrying about the divination.  
They'll need all their experience—how to compose astutely:  
which of the two, of such as these two, will have to be offended.  
So they hold a meeting secretly at night  
to talk about the Lagids' family plight.

Lo and behold, though! The envoys are back. They bid goodbye.  
They are returning—so they say—to Alexandria, and they  
don't want an oracle at all. The priests listen with joy  
(and as it is well understood, they keep the splendid presents),  
but they are at the same time completely bewildered,  
unable to perceive what this abrupt indifference means.  
For they don't know that yesterday the envoys heard grave news.  
The oracle was pronounced in Rome; it was there the deal was made.



Gold ring with portrait of Ptolemy VI Philometor. Paris, Louvre Museum Bj1093.

## IF ONLY THEY HAD SEEN TO IT

I've been reduced almost to a homeless pauper.  
This fateful city, Antioch,  
has eaten up all my money,  
this fateful city with her extravagant way of life.

Yet, I am young and in perfect health.  
With an admirable mastery of Greek.  
(I know Aristotle and Plato inside out,  
orators and poets and what have you.)  
I'm familiar with military matters,  
and have befriended several commanders of the mercenaries.  
I'm well-informed about administrative affairs, too.  
Last year, I spent six months in Alexandria;  
up to a point (and that is useful), I know what's happening there:  
Kakergetes' designs and villainies, et cetera.

Wherefore, I consider myself fully  
suited to be of service to this country,  
my beloved native land, Syria.

Whatever job they put me in, I'll do my best  
to be useful to the country. That's my intention.  
If, however, they get in my way with their methods—  
We know these busybodies now; need we say more?  
If they get in my way, how am I to blame?





Granite head of Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II, wearing the Double Crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. Brussels, Koninklijke Musea voor Kunst en Geschiedenis.

I'll turn to Zabinas first,  
and if that moron does not appreciate me,  
I'm off to his adversary Grypos;  
and if that idiot, too, won't employ me,

I'll go right away to Hyrkanos.

Anyway, one of the three should take me on.

And my conscience is at peace  
about the random nature of my choice.  
All three of them are equally harmful for Syria.  
But, a ruined man, how am I to blame?

I'm trying—poor wretch—to make ends meet.  
If only the almighty gods had seen to it,  
and had created a fourth man, a good one,  
happily I would have sided with him.



Silver tetradrachm of Alexander Zabinas from Syria. 128–122 BCE.

## THE DISPLEASURE OF SELEUCID

The Seleucid king Demetrius  
was displeased to hear that in Italy  
a Ptolemy arrived in such a wretched state;  
with three or four slaves only,  
shabbily dressed and on foot. At this rate,  
their dynasties will eventually become  
the laughing-stock, the plaything of Rome.  
Deep down the Seleucid knows that they've  
become a sort of servant to the Romans;  
that the Romans are those who give and take away  
their thrones at will, as they please; that he knows!  
But in their appearance they should  
preserve at least some dignity,  
and not forget that they are kings still,  
that they (alas!) are still called kings.

This is why the Seleucid King Demetrius  
was upset. And offered Ptolemy at once  
robes of royal purple, a splendid diadem,  
precious diamonds, numerous  
servants and attendants, his most expensive horses,  
that he present himself properly in Rome,  
as befits an Alexandrian Greek monarch.

But the Lagid, who had come intent on begging,  
knew his business and refused it all;  
he had no need at all of such luxuries.  
Clad in old clothes, humble, he entered Rome,  
and lodged in a simple artisan's home.  
And later on he appeared before the Senate  
as a wretched person and a pauper,  
thus more effectively to beg.



Granite head of Ptolemy X Alexander. Paris, Louvre Museum Ma970.

## THOSE WHO FOUGHT FOR THE ACHAEAN LEAGUE

Valiant are you, who fought and fell in glory;  
undaunted by those victorious everywhere.  
Unblemished are you, if Diaeus and Critolaus were to blame.  
Whenever the Greeks will want to vaunt,  
'It's such as these that our nation breeds', they'll say  
of you. So marvellous will be your praise.—

Written in Alexandria by an Achaean—;  
seventh year of Ptolemy Lathyros.



Silver coin of the Achaean League. 250 BCE.

## THEODOTUS

If you are one of the truly elect,  
be careful how you attain your dominance.  
No matter how much you are glorified, how much  
your Italian and Thessalian exploits  
are acclaimed by the city-states,  
how many honorific decrees  
are issued for you in Rome by your admirers,  
neither your happiness nor your triumph will last,  
nor will you feel like a superior being—superior indeed—  
when, in Alexandria, Theodotus brings you  
upon a bloodstained tray  
the wretched Pompey's head.

And do not rest assured that in your life,  
circumscribed, settled, and mundane,  
such spectacular and dreadful things do not exist.  
Perhaps at this very hour, in some neighbour's  
neat and tidy home, enters—  
invisible, incorporeal—Theodotus  
bearing just such a ghasty head.





Marble head of Pompey. Copenhagen, Ny Carlsberg Glyptotek 733.

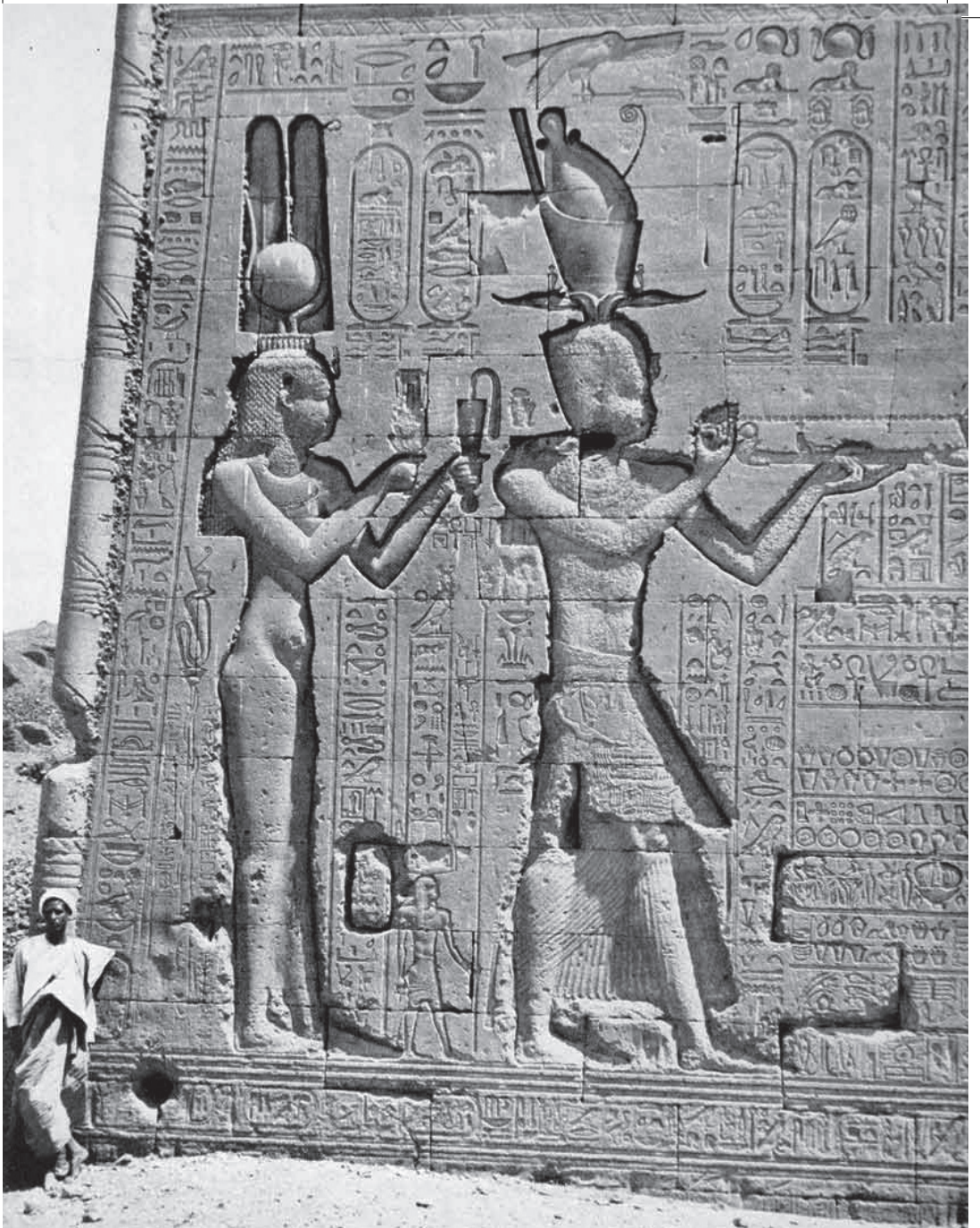
## ALEXANDRIAN KINGS

The Alexandrians gathered together  
to see Cleopatra's children,  
Caesarion and his young brothers,  
Alexander and Ptolemy, who for the first  
time were brought out to the Gymnasium,  
there to be proclaimed kings  
amid the splendid array of the troops.

Alexander—they named him King of  
Armenia, Media, and the Parthians.  
Ptolemy—they named him King  
of Cilicia, Syria, and Phoenicia.  
Caesarion was standing more to the front,  
dressed in rose-coloured silk,  
a posy of hyacinths upon his chest,  
his belt a double row of amethysts and sapphires,  
his shoes fastened with white ribbons  
embroidered with rose-coloured pearls.  
Him they named above his younger brothers,  
him they named King of Kings.

The Alexandrians sensed, of course,  
that these were mere words and theatricals.

But the day was warm and poetical,  
the sky a pale azure,  
the Alexandrian Gymnasium  
a triumphant accomplishment of art,



Cleopatra VII and Caesarion depicted on the pylons of Philae Temple.

the extravagance of the courtiers exceptional,  
Caesarion full of grace and beauty  
(Cleopatra's son, Lagid blood);

and so the Alexandrians rushed to the festivities  
and grew enthusiastic and kept cheering  
in Greek and in Egyptian and some in Hebrew,  
enchanted by the lovely spectacle—  
though they knew full well what all this was worth,  
what hollow words were those kingly titles.



Head of a young Ptolemaic ruler, possible Caesarion, as discovered in the area of Hadra. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 11275.

## IN ALEXANDRIA, 31 B.C.

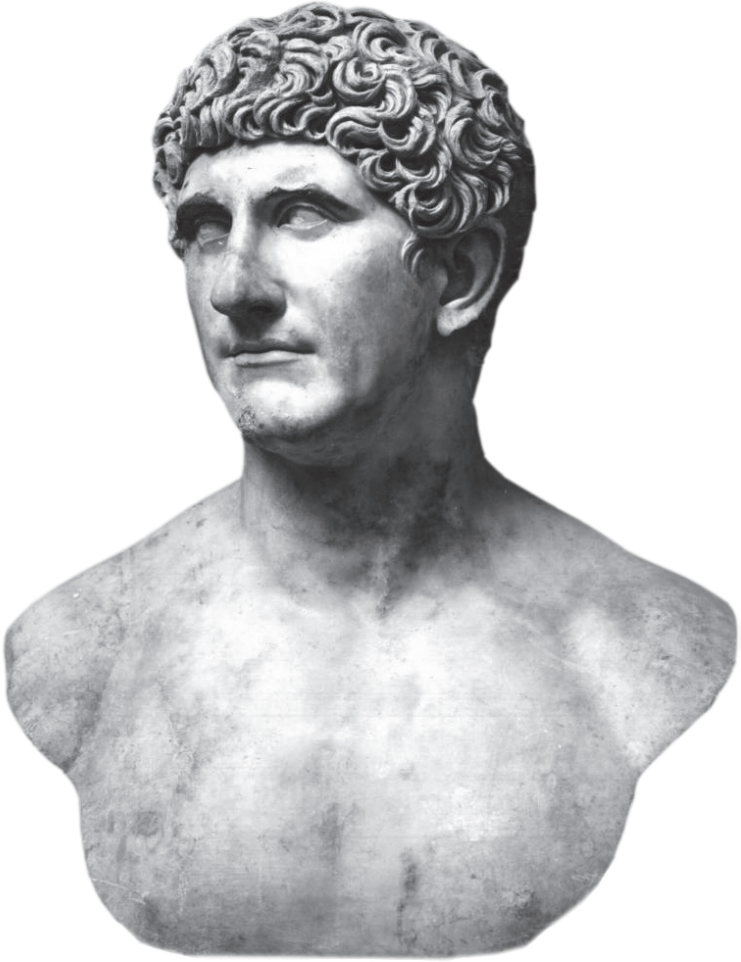
From his little village near the outskirts  
and still covered with the journey's dust,

arrived the peddler. 'Incense' and 'Gum!'  
'Excellent Oil' 'Perfume for the hair!'

he cries through the city streets. But amid the great hustle,  
the music and the parades, how can he be heard?

The crowd jostles him, carries him along, jolts him violently  
and when, in total bewilderment, he asks: 'What's all this  
madness?'

someone hurls at him too the monstrous lie  
of the palace—that Antony is victorious in Greece.



Bust of Mark Antony. Vatican Museums.

## THE GOD FORSAKES ANTONY

When suddenly, at the midnight hour  
an invisible company is heard going past,  
with exquisite music, with voices—  
your fate that's giving in now, your deeds  
that failed, your life's plans that proved to be  
all illusions, do not needlessly lament.

As one long since prepared, as one courageous,  
bid farewell to the Alexandria that's leaving.  
Above all, don't be misled, don't say it was  
a dream, that your ears deceived you;  
don't deign to foster such vain hopes.

As one long since prepared, as one courageous,  
as befits you who were deemed worthy of such a city,  
move with steady steps toward the window  
and listen with deepest feeling, yet not  
with a coward's entreaties and complaints,  
listen as an ultimate delight to the sounds,  
to the exquisite instruments of the mystical company,  
and bid farewell to the Alexandria you are losing.





Silver dinar of Augustus. 28 BCE. On the reverse side, a crocodile with the inscription *Aegypto Capta* (Egypt is captured).

## IN A TOWNSHIP OF ASIA MINOR

The news about the outcome of the naval battle at Actium  
was to be sure unexpected.

But there is no need to draft a new document.

Only the name needs changing. There,  
in the last lines, instead of 'Having delivered  
the Romans from that disastrous Octavian,  
that travesty of a Caesar',

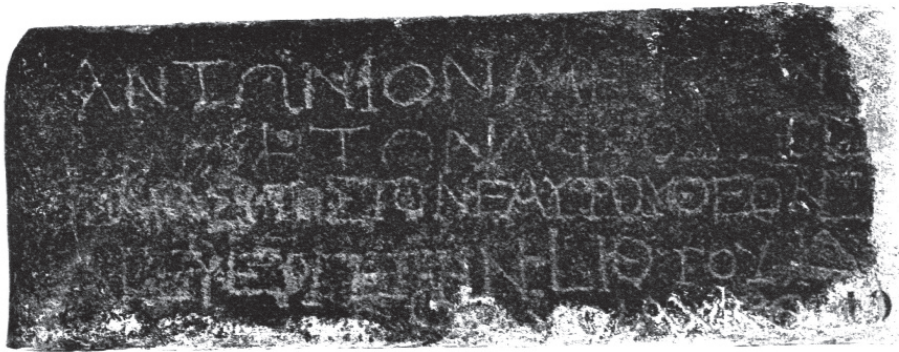
now we can insert 'Having delivered the Romans  
from that disastrous Antony'.

The entire text fits quite nicely.

'To the victor, the most glorious,  
the unsurpassed in every military endeavour,  
admirable for his great political achievement,  
on whose behalf the Demos fervently  
prayed for victory: to Antony.

Here, as we said, comes the substitution: 'to Caesar—  
considering his victory the finest gift from Zeus—  
the mighty protector of the Greeks,  
who graciously pays honour to Greek customs;  
beloved in every Hellenic land;

well-deserving of exalted praise  
and a detailed account of his exploits,  
in the Greek language, both in verse and prose;  
in the *Greek language*, which is the vehicle of fame,'  
and so on and so on. Everything fits splendidly.



Inscribed statue base of Mark Antony found in the area of the Caesareum.  
Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 10.

## CAESARION

In part to examine an era,  
and in part to while away the time,  
last night I picked up to read  
a collection of Ptolemaic inscriptions.  
The copious praises and the flatteries  
befit them all. All are illustrious,  
glorious, mighty, beneficent;  
their every endeavour most wise.  
As for the females of that line, those too,  
all the Berenices and the Cleopatras are admirable.

When I'd managed to examine the era,  
I would have put the book away, were it not  
for a small, insignificant mention of King Caesarion  
which at once attracted my attention ...

And there you appeared with your indefinable  
allure. In History only  
a few lines are dedicated to you,  
and thus I could form you more freely in my mind.  
I made you beautiful and sentimental.  
My art bestows upon your face  
a dreamlike, genial grace.  
And so fully I envisaged you  
that late last night, as my lamp  
died out—I deliberately let it die out—  
I imagined that you entered my room;  
it seemed to me that you stood right before me;



Head of a young Ptolemaic ruler, possibly Caesarion. Alexandria, Bibliotheca Alexandrina Antiquities Museum 1079.

pale and weary, as you would have been  
in vanquished Alexandria, ideally beautiful in your sorrow,  
still hoping they would show you mercy,  
the villains who were whispering: 'Too Many Caesars!'



Head of a late Ptolemaic Queen (Cleopatra?). Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 21992

## THE POTENTATE FROM WESTERN LIBYA

He was generally liked in Alexandria  
during the ten days he sojourned there,  
the potentate from Western Libya,  
Aristomenes, son of Menelaus.  
As with his name, his dress properly Greek.  
He gladly accepted the honours, but  
didn't solicit them; he was modest.  
He bought books in Greek,  
particularly on history and philosophy.  
But above all, he was a man of few words.  
He must be profound of thought, it was rumoured,  
and such people have it in their nature not to say much.

He was neither profound of thought, nor anything.  
Just an ordinary, silly man.  
He assumed a Greek name, he dressed like a Greek,  
taught himself to behave—more or less—like a Greek;  
and trembled in his soul lest  
he mar the tolerable impression  
by speaking Greek with dreadful barbarisms,  
and have the Alexandrians poke fun at him,  
as is their habit—awful people.

And for this reason, he confined himself to a few words,  
fearfully paying attention to the declensions and the accent;  
and he got bored no end, having  
so many things to say piled up inside him.





Marble head of a young male, from Alexandria. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 3241.

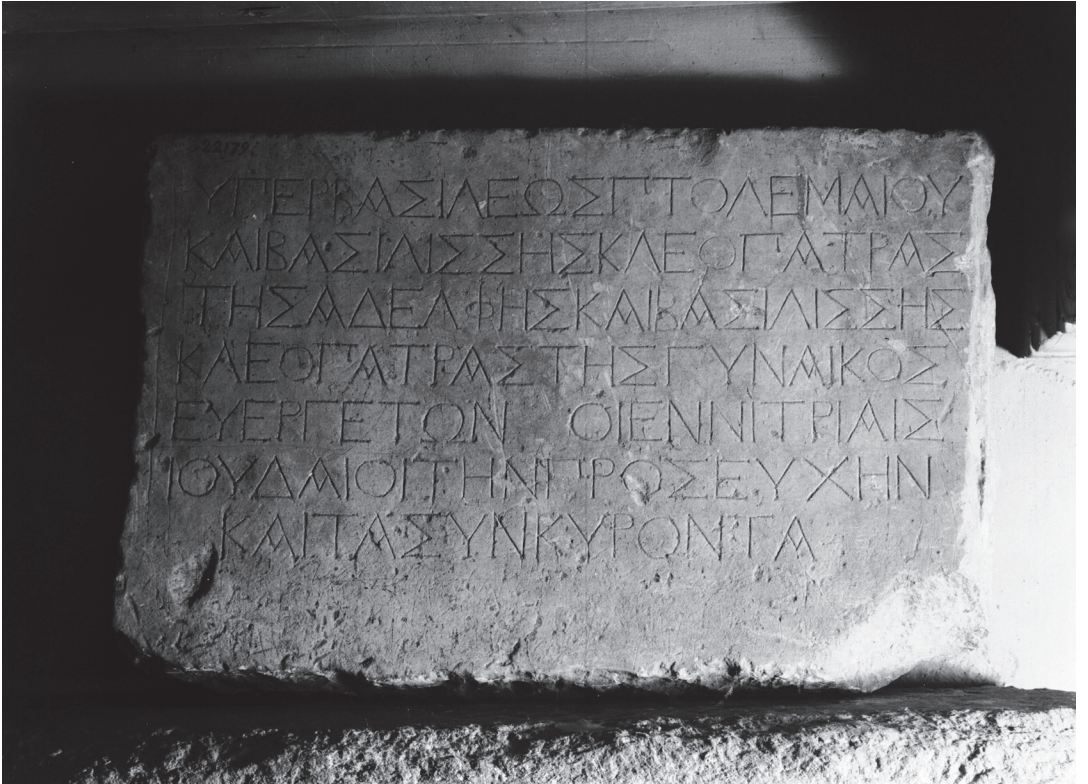
## OF THE HEBREWS (A.D. 50)

Painter and poet, runner and discus-thrower,  
handsome as Endymion: Ianthes, son of Antony.  
From a family friendly to the Synagogue.

‘My most precious days are those  
when I leave behind the aesthetic quest,  
when I abandon the beautiful and demanding Hellenism,  
with its prevailing attachment  
to perfectly constructed and perishable white limbs.  
And I become the one I should always wish  
to remain: son of the Hebrews, son of the holy Hebrews.’

Most ardent is his statement: ‘Always  
to remain of the Hebrews, the holy Hebrews—’

But he did not remain such a man at all.  
The Hedonism and Art of Alexandria  
kept him their own devoted child.



Dedicatory inscription by the Jewish community in Nitria (Wadi Natrun) to Ptolemy VIII Euergetes II and Cleopatra II. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 22179.

## TOMB OF EURION

In this most artfully ornate memorial  
entirely built of syenite stone,  
covered with so many violets, so many lilies  
the handsome Eurion is laid to rest.  
An Alexandrian youth, aged twenty-five.  
On his father's side, of old Macedonian stock;  
from Jewish magistrates, his mother's lineage.  
He was a student of Aristocleitus in philosophy,  
of Paros in rhetoric. The sacred scriptures  
he studied at Thebes. He wrote a history  
of the Arsinoïte nome. That will, at least, survive.  
But we have lost the most precious of all—his living image,  
which had the semblance of an Apollonian vision.



The Gabbari Stele, found in the Western Necropolis of Alexandria. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 3215.

## TOMB OF IASES

I, Iases, lie here. Of this great city,  
the young man most renowned for beauty.  
Profound sages admired me, as well as the shallow,  
the simple folk. And I delighted equally in both.

But for so long people considered me both Narcissus and Hermes,  
that excesses wore me out, killed me. You passer-by,  
if an Alexandrian, you will not reproach. You know the pace  
of our lives; what fervour it has; what utter sensual bliss.



Plaster bust of a young male found in the Western Necropolis. Alexandria Graeco-Roman Museum 3339.

## TOMB OF LANES

Marcus! The Lanes whom you loved is no more in this place,  
within the tomb near which you come and weep and stay long hours.  
The Lanes whom you so much loved, you have him closer to you  
when you shut yourself at home and gaze upon his portrait  
that somehow has preserved alive what of him was of value,  
that somehow has preserved alive what of him you so cherished.

Remember, Marcus, when you brought from the Proconsul's palace  
the Cyrenian painter who was of great renown,  
and with what guileful artistry immediately he endeavoured,  
as soon as he had seen your friend, to persuade you both  
that by all means he must portray him as Hyacinthus  
(since this way his painting would be much better known).

Your Lanes, though, did not lend out his beauty in this manner  
and steadfastly opposing this, he bade to be portrayed  
not in the least as Hyacinthus, or indeed as any other,  
but only as Lanes, Rhametichos' son, of Alexandria.





Plaster bust of a young male found in the Western Necropolis. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 3337.

## MYRES: ALEXANDRIAN, A.D. 340

When I heard the tragic news that Myres was dead,  
I went to his house, even though I avoid  
entering Christian homes, particularly  
during their sorrows or celebrations.

I stood in a hallway. I did not want  
to proceed further inside, because I sensed  
that the dead man's relatives kept looking at me,  
with obvious perplexity and displeasure.

They had placed him in a large room,  
part of which I could see from the corner  
where I stood; full of precious carpets  
and vessels made of silver and gold.

I was standing and crying at one end of the hallway.  
And I kept thinking how our gatherings and excursions,  
without Myres, won't be as worthwhile any more;  
and I kept thinking that I wouldn't see him again  
at our lovely, brazen night-long parties,  
revelling and laughing and reciting verses,  
with his perfect sense of Greek rhythm;  
and I kept thinking that I'd lost forever  
his beauty, that I'd lost forever  
the young man I ardently adored.

Some old women near me spoke in subdued voices  
about the last day of his life—  
upon his lips constantly the name of Christ,  
in his hands, clasping a cross.—  
Then, four Christian priests  
entered the room, reciting fervent  
prayers and supplications to Jesus  
or to Mary (I don't know their religion that well).

We knew, of course, that Myres was a Christian.  
We knew it right from the start, when  
he joined our group of friends two years ago.  
But he led his life exactly as we did.  
More given to sensual pleasures than any of us,  
squandering his money lavishly on amusements.  
Oblivious of his reputation in society,  
he threw himself readily into nocturnal street-brawls,  
when our group of friends chanced  
to encounter a hostile company.  
He never spoke about his religion.  
As a matter of fact, we told him once  
that we'd take him with us to the Serapeum,  
but he appeared displeased  
with this little joke of ours: I remember now.

Oh yes! Two more occasions come now to mind.  
When we were offering libations to Poseidon,  
he withdrew from our circle, and turned his eyes elsewhere.  
When one of us, in his excitement,  
said: 'May our company be under

the auspices and protection of the great,  
the sublimely beautiful Apollo'—Myres whispered  
(the others didn't hear), 'except for me.'

The Christian priests were praying in loud voices  
for the young man's soul.—

I was noticing with what meticulous care  
and intense attention to the rituals  
of their religion they were preparing  
everything for the Christian funeral.  
And suddenly I was overwhelmed by an eerie  
awareness. Vaguely, I felt  
as if Myres was drifting away from me;  
I felt that he, a Christian, was being united  
with his own kind, and I was becoming  
*a stranger, a total stranger*; I could already feel  
a certain ambivalence closing in: was it possible I'd been misled  
by my passion, that I had always been a stranger to him?—  
I hastened out of their dreadful house;  
I left in a hurry, before their Christianity could snatch away,  
before it could distort the memory of Myres.



Statue of the Good Shepherd (Jesus Christ). From Marsa Matrouh. Early Byzantine period. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 22277.

## PERILOUS THINGS

Said Myrtias (a Syrian student  
in Alexandria during the reign of  
Augustus Constans and Augustus Constantius;  
in part pagan, in part with Christian leanings):  
'Fortified by Theory and Study  
I shall not fear my passions like a coward.  
I shall abandon my body to sensual pleasures,  
to dreamlike delights,  
to the most daring erotic desires,  
to the lascivious impulses of my blood,  
without any fear, for when I wish and  
I'll possess the will, as I shall be  
fortified by Theory and Study  
at critical moments I shall find again  
my spiritual self, ascetic as before.



Gold coin of Augustus Constans 337–340 CE.

## FROM THE SCHOOL OF THE RENOWNED PHILOSOPHER

He was a student of Ammonius Saccas for two years;  
but he grew tired of both philosophy and Saccas.

Then he went into politics,  
but gave it up. The Eparch was an idiot;  
and those around him pompous, officious numbskulls;  
thrice-barbarous their Greek, the miserable wretches.

The Church attracted his interest  
for a while; to be baptized,  
and pass as a Christian. But quickly he  
changed his mind. He'd surely embitter  
his ostentatiously pagan parents;  
and—perish the thought—they would suspend  
at once their most generous allowance.

And yet he ought to do something. He became  
a regular customer of Alexandria's corrupt houses,  
of every clandestine den of debauchery.

Fate appeared to him in this benevolent,  
endowing him with most attractive looks.  
And he delighted in the god-sent gift.

His beauty would endure at least  
another ten more years. And after that  
perhaps, once more, he'd go to Saccas.





Kom el Dikka. Lecture hall in apsidal form. 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

And if in the meantime, the old man were to die,  
he would go to some other philosopher or sophist;  
there is always a suitable one around.

Or in the end, he might well  
go back to politics—in commendable remembrance  
of his family traditions, his duty to his country,  
and other such resounding platitudes.



Kom el Dikka. A lecture hall complex 4<sup>th</sup> – 7<sup>th</sup> centuries CE.

## A PRIEST OF THE SERAPEUM

My kind old father  
who always loved me the same;  
my kind old father I mourn,  
who died two days ago, just before dawn.

Jesus Christ, the ordinances  
of your most holy church I uphold  
in everything I do, in every word,  
in every thought it is my daily  
endeavour. And I abhor  
all those who deny you. —But now I mourn;  
I lament, O Christ, for my father  
though he was—dreadful to say—  
a priest at the accursed Serapeum.



Headless statue of a priest of Sarapis, from Alexandria. 3<sup>rd</sup> century CE.  
Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 3904.

## KLEITOS' ILLNESS

Kleitos, a likeable young man,  
about twenty-three years old—  
with excellent upbringing and rare Greek learning—  
is gravely ill. He caught the fever  
that swept through Alexandria this year.

The fever found him also morally exhausted  
from pining for his companion, a young actor,  
who ceased to love and want him.

He's gravely ill and his parents are trembling.

And an old servant woman who had raised him  
is trembling too for the life of Kleitos.  
Deep in her terrible distress,  
an idol comes to her mind, which she worshipped  
as a girl, before she entered there, a servant  
in the home of prominent Christians, and converted.  
She secretly takes some unleavened cakes, wine and honey.  
She puts them before the idol, intoning those chants  
of supplication she still remembers: bits and pieces. The fool!  
She doesn't realize that the dark demon couldn't care less  
whether a Christian were to get well or not.



Terracotta figurine of Harpocrates. Roman Period. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 10802.

## IF DEAD INDEED

‘Where did he retire to, where did he disappear, the Sage?  
Following his numerous miracles  
and the fame of his teaching  
which spread to many a nation,  
he went suddenly into hiding, and no one ever learnt  
with any certainty what had happened  
(nor did anyone ever see his grave).  
Some spread the rumour that he died at Ephesus.  
But Damis did not record it;  
about the death of Apollonius Damis wrote down nothing.  
Others said that he vanished into thin air at Lindos.  
Or perhaps that other story is true,  
that he ascended to the skies in Crete,  
at the ancient sanctuary of Dictynna.—  
On the other hand, we have that wondrous,  
that supernatural appearance of his  
to a young student at Tyana.—  
Maybe the time’s not come for him to return  
and to manifest himself to the world again;  
or perhaps, transfigured, he goes about  
among us, unrecognized.—But he will reappear,  
just as he was, teaching what is right: and then,  
of course, he’ll restore the worship of our gods,  
and our elegant Hellenic rituals.’





Statue of a draped male figure. c.300 CE. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 24006.

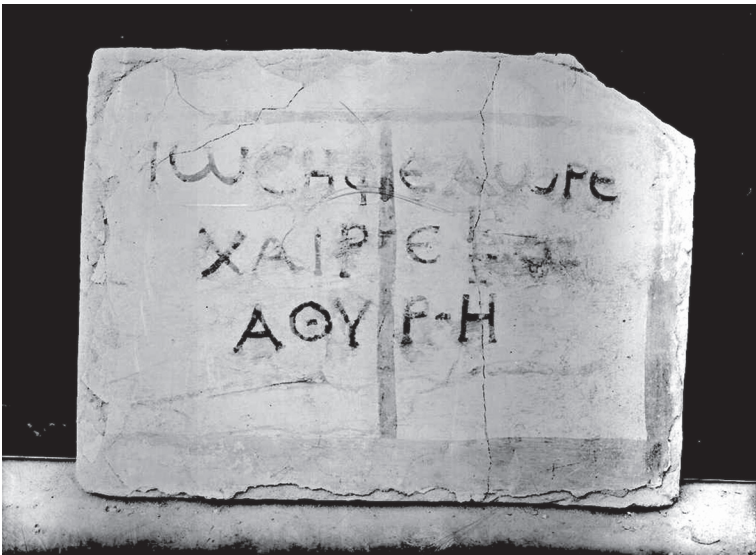
So he mused in his simple dwelling—  
following a reading of Philostratus'  
On Apollonius of Tyanaonc  
of the few, very few pagans  
who still remained. Besides—an insignificant  
and ciwardly man—he posed in public  
as a Christian and attended church.  
It was in those days when the aged Justin  
reigned in utter piety,  
and Alexandria, a god-fearing city,  
wretched idolaters abhorred.



Byzantine column capital on the site of Sarapeion.

## IN THE MONTH OF ATHYR

With difficulty I read upon the ancient stone:  
'LO[R]D JESUS CHRIST.' I discern a 'SO[U]L'  
'IN THE MON[TH] OF ATHYR' 'LEUCIUS WAS LAID TO SL[EE]P'  
Where age is mentioned 'HE LI[VE]D TO THE AGE OF'  
the Kappa Zeta shows he was laid to sleep so young.  
In the abraded part I see 'HI[ ]M] ... ALEXANDRIAN.'  
There follow three lines quite mutilated;  
but I make out some words like 'OURT[ ]EA ]RS' and 'SUFFERING'  
and then once more 'TEARS', and 'TO [U]S HIS FRIENDS  
BREAVEMENT'  
It seems to me the love for Leucius was deep.  
During the month of Athyr Leucius was laid to sleep.



Plaster funerary slab from the Eastern Necropolis of a certain Joseph. He died in the month of Athyr, corresponding to October-November. Hellenistic period. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum.

## TOMB OF IGNATIUS

Here, I'm not that Cleon who was famous  
in Alexandria (where it's hard to boast)  
for my splendid houses, for my gardens,  
for my horses and my chariots,  
for the diamonds and the silken robes I wore.  
Be it far from me! Here, I'm not that Cleon;  
let his twenty-eight years be erased.  
I am Ignatius, lay-reader, who very late  
came to my senses; yet even so, I lived ten happy months  
in the serenity and the security of Christ.



Byzantine naiskos-form funerary stele. Alexandria, National Museum.

## FOR AMMONES, WHO DIED AGED 29, IN 610

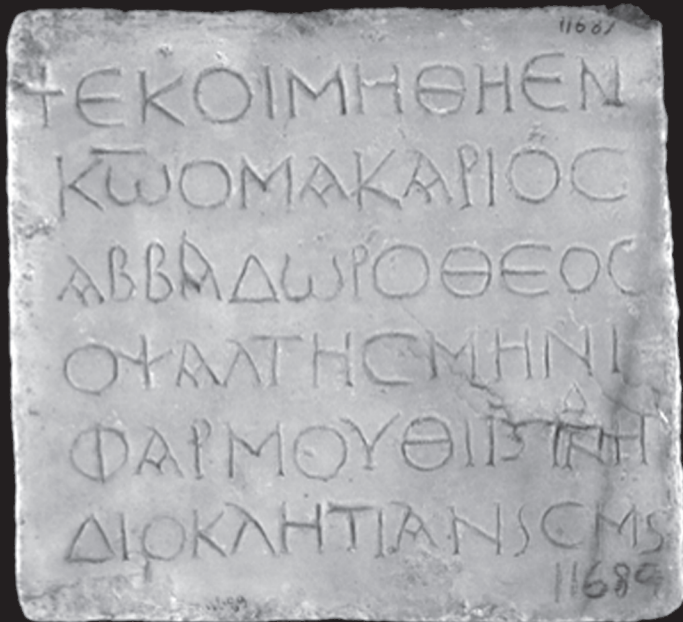
Raphael, they want you to compose a few verses  
as an epitaph for the poet Ammones.  
Something polished and in good taste. You  
can do it, you are the appropriate person to write  
as befits the poet Ammones, our very own.

You must, of course, mention his poems—  
but you should also speak about his beauty,  
his delicate beauty that we loved.

Your Greek has always been elegant and musical.  
But we're in need of your entire skill now.  
Our love and our sorrow pass into a foreign tongue.  
Pour your Egyptian feeling into the foreign tongue.

Raphael, your verses must be written in such a way  
that they contain, you know, something in them of our lives,  
that both cadence as well as every phrase denote,  
that an Alexandrian is writing about an Alexandrian.





Grave stone of Abba Dorotheos. Provenance unknown. Reign of Diocletian. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 11689.

AEMILIANUS MONAE,  
ALEXANDRIAN, A.D. 628-655

With words, appearance, and demeanour,  
an excellent suit of armour I shall fashion;  
and thus I'll face the wicked,  
having no fear or weakness.

They'll want to harm me, but none of those  
who approach me will ever know  
where my wounds lie, my vulnerable parts,  
under the falsehoods that will cloak me.—

Boastful dicta of Aemilianus Monae.  
I wonder, did he ever fashion that suit of armour?  
Be that as it may, he did not wear it long.  
At the age of twenty-seven, in Sicily, he died.



Byzantine funerary stele. Alexandria, Graeco-Roman Museum 11828.

## IN CHURCH

I love the church—its liturgical fans,  
the silver of the vessels, its candlesticks,  
the lights, the icons, the pulpit.

When I enter there, in a church of the Greeks,  
with its fragrances of incense,  
amid the liturgical voices and harmonies,  
the majestic presence of the priests  
and the stately rhythm of their every move most  
resplendent in the finery of their vestments—  
my mind travels to the great glories of our race,  
to our illustrious Byzantine past.



Alexandria, St Saba Monastery. The Patriarchal Throne between two Roman granite columns.

## MORNING SEA

Let me stand here. And let me, too, look at nature a while.  
The morning sea's and cloudless sky's  
radiant violet hues and yellow shore; all  
beautiful and brightly lit.

Let me stand here. And let me deceive myself that I see them  
(indeed, I saw them for a moment when I first paused);  
and that I don't see even here my fantasies,  
my memories, the ideal visions of sensual bliss.



Morning view of Megalos Limen (Eastern Harbor).





4

**Alexandria in Cavafy's Hidden  
and Unfinished Poems**



## A GREAT FEAST AT THE HOUSE OF SOSIBIUS

My afternoon has been lovely, quite  
lovely. The oar touching most gently,

caressing a sweetly calm Alexandrian sea.  
Such a respite is needed: our labours are heavy.

At times we ought to take an innocent and clement view of  
things.

Unfortunately though, the night has come. And, look, I've drunk  
all the wine,

not a single drop has been left in my bottle.  
Alas! T' is time to go back to other affairs.

A noble house (the eminent Sosibius and his good  
wife, let us say) has invited us to a feast.

Once more we must return to our intrigues—  
and take up again our tedious political fight.

## LAGID'S HOSPITALITY

Ptolemy Pholopater is offering a royal banquet in honour of the sophist Medon—a scholar who researches the powers of the human soul. The king delights in the presence of his host.

Some years ago, in the corruptive city of Rome the poverty-stricken sophist offered his work to an eminent potentate, who scoffed at him: “Take a mina coin and leave. This prattle bores me”.

“What an insult, what an insult! In studying infinity I wrote down all my fervent feelings, I put all my heart on that papyrus”.

But while deploring the dictator's conduct, Medon interrupted his fiery chatter. Honour to Ptolemy Philopater.

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## RETURN FROM GREECE

Well then, we are almost there, Hermippos.  
The day after tomorrow I believe; that's what the captain said.  
At any rate, we are sailing our own sea,  
the waters of Cyprus, Syria and Egypt,  
beloved waters of our native lands.  
Why so quiet? Ask your heart,  
when we were leaving Greece behind  
you were glad too, weren't you? Is it worth deceiving ourselves?  
That wouldn't be properly Greek, would it?

We can't refuse the truth anymore;  
we too are Greeks—what else could we be?—  
but with the affections and emotions of Asia'  
but with affections and emotions  
that sometimes are alien to Hellenism.

It doesn't befit us, Hermippos, us philosophers  
to resemble some of our minor kings  
(do you recall how we poked fun at them  
when they used to visit our reading rooms?)  
who under their ostentatiously Hellenized  
and (what a word!) Macedonian exterior  
let a bit of Arabia peep out now and then,  
a bit of Media that cannot be contained,  
and with what comic devices these poor fellows  
did their best to have it go unnoticed.

Ah, no, these things do not befit us.  
Such petty behavior does not suit Greeks like us.  
Of the Syrian and Egyptian blood  
that runs in our veins we shouldn't be ashamed,  
we should honor it and it should make us proud.

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## THE END OF ANTONY

But when he heard the women crying  
and bewailing his wretched state—  
the mistress with her oriental gestures  
and the slaves with their barbarized Greek—  
his pride rose up within his soul,  
his Italian blood felt repugnance  
and everything he'd loved blindly until then—  
all of his fervent Alexandrian life—  
appeared to him alien and indifferent, and he  
told them that “they shouldn't cry for him. It's unbecoming;  
but they should rather praise him,  
for he had been a great ruler  
and had come to possess so many things.  
And now that he has fallen, he has not fallen humbly,  
but as a Roman defeated by a Roman”.

## FUGITIVES

Always and ever the same Alexandria; all you have to do  
is walk a bit along the straight road ending at the Hippodrome  
and you will see palaces and monuments that will have you marvel.  
No matter how much damage it suffered in the wars,  
no matter how much it shrunk in size, it is always a wondrous place.  
And then, with excursions and books  
and diverse literary pursuits, time goes by.  
In the evenings we get together at the strand,  
the five of us (all using, of course, fictitious  
names), in the company of some other Greeks  
from those few who've remained in the city.  
At times we talk about church affairs (they seem  
to be leaning towards Rome here), at times about literature.  
The other day we recited verses of the poet Nonnos.  
What images, what rhythm, what language, what harmony?  
We admired his verse with enthusiasm.  
That's how the days go by and our sojourn here  
is not unpleasant since, it goes without saying,  
that I won't last forever.  
We have received good tidings; and whether  
something will soon come off in Smyrna, or our friends  
from Epirus will make a move in April, at any rate  
our plans will be successful and we can easily overthrow  
Basil. And then, at last, it will be our turn.



---

## EPITAPH

O stranger, I, a man of Samos, lie here,  
on the shores of the river Ganges. Upon this  
thrice-barbarous land I lived a life of pain  
toil, and lament. This riverside grave

encloses many a suffering. Pure lust  
for gold it was, that drove me to this  
accursed trade; cast on an Indian shore  
I was sold as a slave. To an advanced age

I worked hard, toiling without respite—deprived  
of the sounds of Greek, and from the shores of Samos  
far away. Thus my present pains are not that dreadful,

and I'm not mourning on the way to Hades.  
There, I'll find myself among my compatriots.  
And I will be speaking hereafter in Greek.

The above is one of the poems referring  
to a time before the Persian Wars,  
composed by Cleonymos son of Timandros,  
In Seleucia, a poet under the patronage  
Of the king Antiochos Epiphanes.

The latter was amused by the rhetorical contradiction:  
“neither hearing or speaking the Greek tongue.”

## ALEXANDRIAN MERCHANT

I sold rotten barley at a high price.  
This Rome here is the kingdom of  
prompt paying. And I arrived in April,  
I am departing within April. I lost no time.

The sea appears to me somewhat disturbed;  
heavy clouds cover the sun.  
So what? I see each rock as a seashell,  
an open sea as a flat and even field.

I'm not afraid of sidelong gusts of wind.  
I laugh at storms and shipwrecks.  
Alexandria with its wide roads

will welcome me safely... Careful there, friends!  
Away from the jar! Who is the impudent, revelling fellow?  
After the voyage the soul thirsts for Samian wine.

## 5

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# 6

## Rulers of Alexandria

### 331 BCE - 641 CE

**Alexander the Great** (331–323 BCE)

**Ptolemy, son of Lagos** (322–306) as Satrap

#### PTOLEMAIC RULERS

**Ptolemy I Soter** (306–285 BCE) married Thais, Artakama, Eurydike and finally Berenike I

**Ptolemy II Philadelphus** (285–246 BCE) married Arsinoe I, then Arsinoe II

**Ptolemy III Evergetes** (246–221 BCE) married Berenike II

**Ptolemy IV Philopator** (221–203 BCE) married Arsinoe III

**Ptolemy V Epiphanes** (203–181 BCE) married Cleopatra I

**Ptolemy VI Philometor** (181–164 BCE, 163–145 BCE) married Cleopatra II

**Ptolemy VII Neos Philopator** (never ruled)

**Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II** (170–163 BCE, 145–116 BCE) married Cleopatra II then Cleopatra III

**Cleopatra II Philometora Soteira** (131–127 BCE), in opposition to Ptolemy VIII Evergetes II

**Cleopatra III Philometora Soteira Dykaiosyne Nikephoros** (116–101 BCE) ruled jointly with Ptolemy IX Soter II (116–107 BCE) and Ptolemy X Alexander I (107–101 BCE)

**Ptolemy IX Soter II (Lathyros)** (116–107 BCE, 88–81 BCE as Soter II) married

**Cleopatra IV** then **Cleopatra Selene** ruled jointly with Cleopatra III in his first reign

**Ptolemy X Alexander I** (107–88 BCE) married Cleopatra Selene then Berenike III; ruled jointly with Cleopatra III till 101 BCE

**Berenike III Philopator** (81–80 BCE)

**Ptolemy XI Alexander II** (80 BCE) married and ruled jointly with Berenike III Philopator before murdering her; ruled alone for 19 days after that.

**Ptolemy XII Neos Dionysos, Auletes** (80–58 BCE, 55–51 BCE) married Cleopatra V Tryphaena

**Cleopatra V Tryphaena** (58–57 BCE) ruled jointly with Berenike IV Epiphaneia (58–55 BCE) and Cleopatra VI Tryphaena (58 BCE)

**Cleopatra VII Philopator** (51–30 BCE) ruled jointly with Ptolemy XIII Theos Philopator (51–47 BCE), Ptolemy XIV (47–44 BCE) and Ptolemy XV Caesarion (44–30 BCE).

**Arsinoe IV** (48 BC–47 BCE) in opposition to Cleopatra VII



**ROMAN RULERS**

**Julius Caesar** (49–44 BCE, as dictator)

***Julio-Claudian Dynasty***

**Augustus** (27 BCE–14 CE)

**Tiberius** (14–37 CE)

**Caligula** (37–41 CE)

**Claudius** (41–54 CE)

**Nero** (54–68 CE)

**Claudius Macer** (68 CE)

**Galba** (68–69 CE)

**Otho** (69 CE)

***Flavian Dynasty***

**Vitellius** (69 CE)

**Vespasian** (69–79 CE)

**Titus** (79–81 CE)

**Domitian** (81–96 CE)

***The Five Good Emperors***

**Nerva** (96–98 CE)

**Trajan** (98–117 CE)

**Hadrian** (117–138 CE)

**Antoninus Pius** (138–161 CE)

**Marcus Aurelius** (161–180 CE)

***Antonine Dynasty***

**Antoninus Pius** (138–161 CE)

**Marcus Aurelius** (161–180 CE)

**Lucius Verus** (161–169 CE)

**Commodus** (177–192 CE)

**Pertinax** (193 CE)

**Didius Julianus** (193 CE)

**Pescennius Niger** (193–194 CE)

**Claudius Albinus** (195–197 CE)

***Severan Dynasty***

**Septimius Severus** (193–211 CE)

**Caracalla** (198–217 CE)

**Geta** (209–212 CE)

**Macrinus** (217–218 CE)

**Diadumenian** (218 CE)

**Elagabalus** (218–222 CE)

**Severus Alexander** (222–235CE )

***The Soldier Emperors***

**From Maximinus I to Julian I** of Pannonia (235–285 CE)

***Eastern Roman Empire (Period of Division)***

**Diocletian** (284–305 CE)

**Galerius** (305–311)

**Maximinus II** (309–313)

**Maxentius** (306–312)

**Licinius I** (308–324)

**BYZANTINE RULERS**

***Constantinian dynasty (306–363 CE)***

**Constantine I the Great**(306–337 CE)

**Constantius II** (337–361 CE)

**Julian** (361–363 CE)

***Non-dynasty***

**Jovan** (363–364 CE)

***Valentinian-Theodosian dynasty (364-457 CE)*****Valentinian** (364 CE)**Valens** (364–378 CE)**Gratian** (378–379 CE)**Theodosius I the Great** (379 – 395 CE)**Arcadius** (395–408 CE)**Theodosius II** (408–450 CE)**Pulcheria** (408–441, 450 CE)**Marcian**(450–457 CE)***Leonid dynasty (457-518)*****Leo I the Thracian** (457–474 CE)**Leo II** (474 CE)**Zeno** (474–475, 476–491 CE)**Basiliscus**(475–476 CE)**Anastasius I** (491–518 CE)***Justinian dynasty (518-602 CE)*****Justin I** (518–527 CE)**Justinian I the Great** (527 – 565 CE)**Justin II** (565–578 CE)**Tiberius II Constantine**(574, 578 - 582 CE)**Mauricius** (582–602 CE)***Non-dynasty*****Phocas** (602–610 CE)***Heraclian dynasty (610-695 CE)*****Heraclius** (Ἡράκλειος) 610–641 CE



## 7

# Key Dates in Alexandria's Ancient History

- 331 BCE. Foundation of Alexandria by Alexander the Great.
- 217 BCE. Battle of Raphia. Ptolemy IV Philopator defeated Antiochus III the Great of the Seleucid Empire.
- 168 BCE. The Day of Eleusis.
- 48 BCE. Julius Caesar in Alexandria.
- 48 BCE. The Library of Alexandria on fire.
- 34 BCE. The Donations of Alexandria take place in Alexandria's Gymnasium in the presence of Cleopatra, Caesarion and Mark Antony.
- 30 BCE. Naval battle of Actium. Octavian defeats Mark Antony.
- 30 BCE. Egypt under the Romans. Cleopatra VII commits suicide.
- 25 BCE. Strabo, the Greek geographer and philosopher, visits Alexandria.
- 115 CE. City sacked during Jewish-Greek conflict.
- 122 CE. Hadrian renovates Alexandria.
- 325 CE. Council of Nicaea. Official recognition of the Alexandrian Patriarchate.
- 365 CE. Tsunami causes destructions in city's coastline.
- 391 CE. Destruction of the Sarapeion.
- 619 CE. City besieged by Sassanid Persians.
- 641 CE. City conquered by Arabs.



## 8

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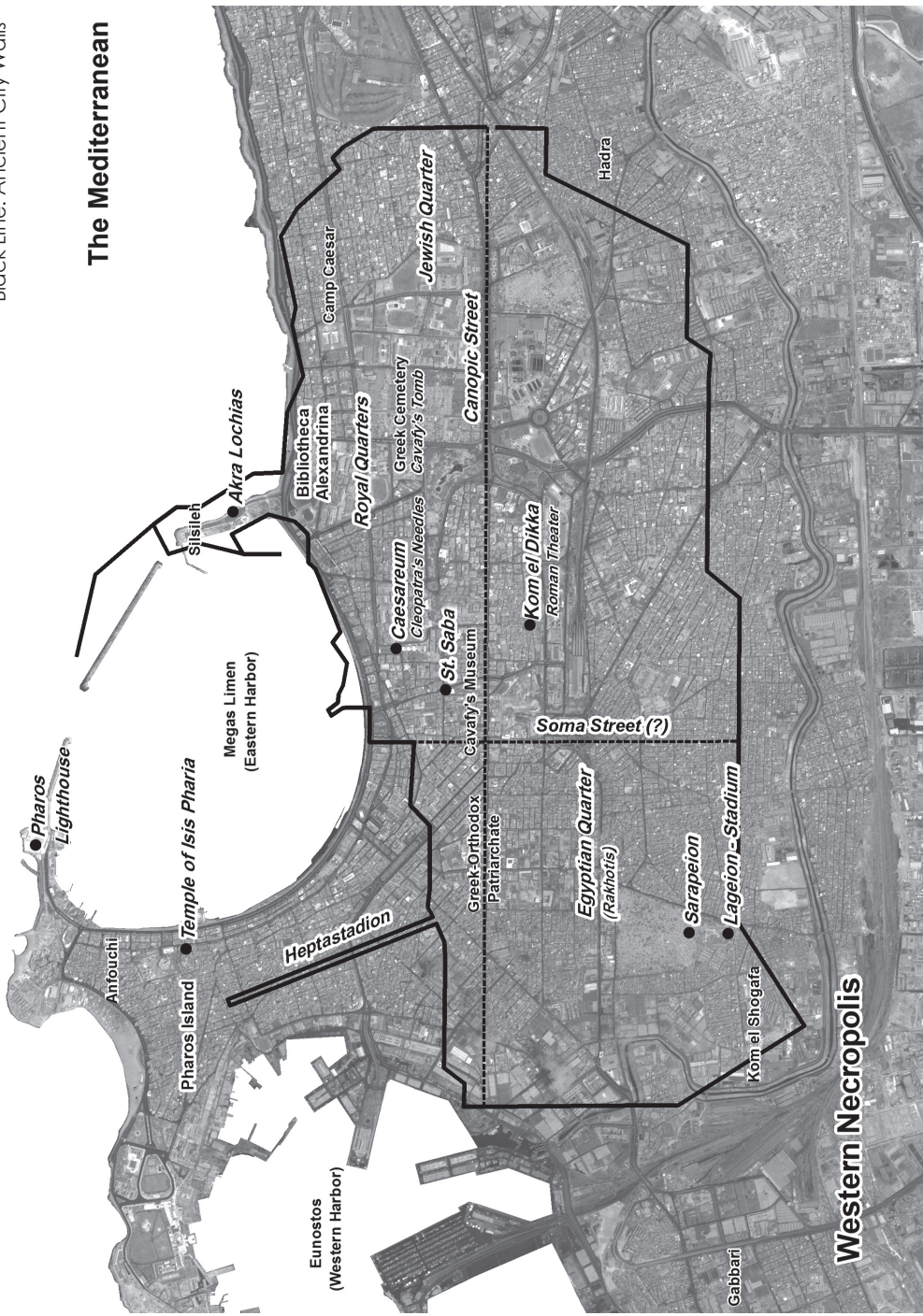
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# Cavafy's Alexandria (331 BCE - 641 CE) in the Present Day City

Black Line: Ancient City Walls



## The Mediterranean

Pharos Island

Pharos Lighthouse

Temple of Isis Pharia

Megas Limen  
(Eastern Harbor)

Akra Lochias

Heptastadion

Eunostos  
(Western Harbor)

Bibliotheca  
Alexandrina

Royal Quarters

Caesareum

Cleopatra's Needles

Greek Cemetery  
Cavafy's Tomb

St. Saba

Cavafy's Museum

Greek-Orthodox  
Patriarchate

Jewish Quarter

Canopic Street

Soma Street (?)

Egyptian Quarter  
(Rakhotis)

Kom el Dikka  
Roman Theater

Hadra

Sarapeion

Lageion-Stadium

Gabbari

Kom el Shogafa

Western Necropolis