

Alexandria revived: new realizations of an ancient city

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The city of Alexandria exerts a powerful hold on the Western imagination, as part of, but distinct from, the rest of Egypt. The recent undersea discovery of part of the Pharos (lighthouse) and Cleopatra's palace, and the resurrection on land of the ancient Mouseion-Library, are transforming perceptions of Alexandria's cultural heritage.

For those interested in discovering more about the history and culture of Alexandria, there has previously been a discrepancy between the wealth of literary images of the city and the relative poverty of its archaeological remains. A host of histories and mythologies are evoked by the city, which has acquired a particularly potent place in the Western imagination. Ancient Alexandria is characterized as the "New Athens", the meeting point of east and west, the birthplace of cosmopolitanism and universalism, and as the site of Hellenistic colonial creativity and intellectual enquiry. The city is also synonymous with the heroics of Alexander the Great (who founded it in 331 BC), the glamour and seductions of Cleopatra, the fame of the Pharos (the lighthouse that was one of the wonders of the ancient world) and the glory of the Mouseion-Library (the fascination here is usually with its destruction). Poets and writers of the modern colonial-cosmopolitan period, including Constantin Cavafy, E. M. Forster and Lawrence Durrell, have preserved in their work many of these images and mythologies of ancient Alexandria. By way of contrast, modern Alexandria, with its lack of ancient material culture, has been characterized by these authors as the "City of Memory" and as a site of loss and nostalgia. However, revival projects currently operating in Alexandria are transforming this situation. A series of excavations now under way are adding significantly to the city's material heritage. They include underwater projects off the Alexandrian coast at Fort Qait Bay (the site of the Pharos) and Operation Cleopatra '96 in the eastern harbour (the site of the royal palaces) (Fig. 1), as well as six land excavations (in particular the Necropolis site – Strabo's City of the Dead). Another key project, the New Alexandrina or Bibliotheca Alexandrina, is a scheme to reconstruct the Mouseion-Library. The new institution is to be built on what are believed to be the ruins of the original site.

Collectively these projects have provided more than a simple revival, and material illustration, of privileged images of Alexandrian culture. Contemporary revivalism has in fact provoked archaeologists and others to rethink and reformulate previous definitions of Alexandrian heritage.

A landscape emerging from the sea: the Qait Bay site

In the shadow of the Qait Bay citadel (a fifteenth-century AD Mamluk fortress built on the site on which the Pharos once stood) underwater excavations have successfully located thousands of architectural blocks, including columns, capitals, sphinxes and statues, scattered along the seabed.¹ Despite over 30 years of campaigning by archaeologists for work to be undertaken in this area, it was only when the project became one of rescue archaeology that the work was carried out. Archaeologists were asked to survey the site before the construction of a concrete breakwater, a structure that is needed to protect the citadel from winter storms. The exercise has included photographic and topological documentation of the 2.25 ha site. The survey, initiated by the Egyptian Antiquities Organization (now the Supreme Council of Antiquities) and undertaken by the Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale and the Centre d'Etudes Alexandrines is directed by the French archaeologist Jean-Yves Empereur.

The discovery, north of the citadel, of a series of gigantic blocks, some of which weigh approximately 75 tonnes, has eclipsed all the other finds. These structures attracted the attention of the world's media when they were authenticated as being part of the Pharos. Currently over 4,000 pieces of the famous lighthouse have been identified. These, and other finds discovered on the seabed, span a period that runs from the twelfth Pharaonic dynasty to the fifteenth century AD. Some of the most visually impressive pieces among the thousands of artefacts have been lifted from the sea (Fig. 2). The return of these larger objects to dry land was witnessed at the water's edge by the French President Jacques Chirac, representatives of the Egyptian government and Egyptian intellectuals. Some 30 objects were then placed on public display in the small garden museum at the city's Roman amphitheatre, and some of them were to feature subsequently in the "Glories of Alexandria", a travelling exhibition that opened at the Musée du Petit Palais, Paris, in May 1998.

Although the city was not entirely lacking in archaeological remains prior to the underwater projects – Pompey's Pillar, the Catacombs of Kom Ash Shuqqafa and the



Figure 1 Fort Qait Bay, showing the location of the underwater sites mentioned in the text and of the New Alexandrina project.

Roman amphitheatre are among such sites – the recent excavations have had a significant effect upon our understanding of Alexandrian cultural history. It is known that ancient Alexandria was home to cosmopolitan influences and that the Ptolemies' cultural and political policy was based on a synthesis of Hellenistic and Pharaonic traditions, which included, for example, their appropriation of monuments from Pharaonic sites (in particular from Heliopolis) and their borrowings of Pharaonic styles in new building projects. However, there has been a major shift towards an acknowledgement of how much more significant an influence Egyptian culture had than was hitherto believed. This shift is symbolized in the construction and design of the Pharos, which archaeologists have found to be "less Greek and more Egyptian" than previously supposed.²

The sunken palace sites: Operation Cleopatra '96

The focus of the second major underwater project, Operation Cleopatra '96, is, as the name suggests, the site of Cleopatra's palace, located in Alexandria's submerged eastern harbour (Fig. 1).³ The area (the city of the Ptolemies) was inundated following the earthquake and tidal wave of AD 365 and now lies 5–6 m below water. The underwater survey and excavation work here is directed by Frank Goddio, President of the European Institute of Marine Archaeology in Paris.

In searching for the ancient palaces, Goddio has used satellite technology (a differential global positioning system), the research vessel Oceanex (which is capable of taking photographs of the harbour floor), and Strabo's account of Alexandria.⁴ Over a thousand finds have been discovered, including stone quays, pavements and yet



Figure 2 Hoisting a colossal Ptolemaic statue from the seabed; downtown Alexandria in the background.

more columns, capitals, sphinxes and statues. Media attention centred upon this site when Cleopatra's residences were authenticated. Goddio's team has also located the remains of what is believed to be the temple of Poseidon on the peninsula of Poseidium, the island of Antirrhodos and a granite head of Mark Antony.

Goddio's Alexandrian investigations have taken him from ancient history to the modern period. His team has discovered wreckage from the French flagship, the *Orion*, which was sunk off the coast at Aboukir during the Battle of the Nile in 1798. Items recovered from the ship include coins, buckles, canon, uniforms and human remains. The team was catapulted even further into the modern age by the discovery of a Second World War Royal Air Force bomber, believed to have been involved in the El-Alamein campaign. It was found lying on top of the palace site. Perhaps this modern addition to the ancient site should be regarded as signifying a shift in perceptions and definitions of Alexandrian culture: from an exclusive focus upon antiquity towards an acknowledgement also of Alexandria's modern history and heritage.

Phoenix from the flames: the New Alexandria

New Alexandria is the third of the revival projects. It merges the ancient with the modern, and also pursues future aspirations for Alexandrian heritage in the new millennium. This phoenix-like project is to revive the great Alexandrian Mouseion-Library, which is believed to have been lost to a fire, the date of which is contested.⁵ The ancient institution is currently being resurrected as the New Alexandria or *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, and is expected to open in late 1999 (Fig. 3). Claimed to be located on the site of the original (although this too is subject to debate),⁶ it is to be a composite of international library, high-tech information centre, conference facilities, planetarium, science museum, calligraphy museum, exhibition areas (including a "hall of fame" displaying busts of the ancient scholars and featuring an exhibition of archaeological finds relating to the site), and a restoration and conservation laboratory.

The New Alexandria is a joint initiative between the Egyptian government (President Hosni Mubarak and Mrs Mubarak have strongly supported the project) and UNESCO, with financial support from the United Nations Development Programme. New political gestures and alliances have been pursued through the medium of this

project. Gestures are made that reaffirm links with Mediterranean culture, and project Alexandria as meeting place or crossroads, with specific reference to ties between the West and the Middle East. The project stresses agendas for the rejuvenation of Egypt and Alexandrian culture, as well as international collaboration.

The most important statement regarding the New Alexandria complex is to be found in the Aswan Declaration of February 1990. The Aswan meeting, from which the declaration emerged, was the official launch of the project to the international community and it was held in the presence of royalty and various celebrities from the world of cultural politics. The Declaration called for "all governments [and] public and private institutions . . . to participate, by means of voluntary contributions of all kinds, in the efforts initiated by the Egyptian Government to revive the Library of Alexandria".⁷ Perhaps this should be read as a positive transformation – in that it is an inversion of tales of the Ptolemies' attempts to seize texts from ships entering Alexandria harbour in order to fill their library – as well as a movement towards concepts of international reciprocity and cooperation.



Figure 3 Model of the New Alexandria project, showing the library building and exhibition space in the foreground and the conference centre beyond.

Rethinking Alexandrian and Egyptian heritages

The support by Egyptian intellectuals for the current revivalism is indicative of some of the aspirations associated with these projects. Among those involved in the projects are Mustafa El Abaddi, historian, archaeologist and author of the UNESCO-sponsored history of the Alexandrian library;⁵ Mohammed Awad, architect and preservationist of Alexandria's nineteenth- and twentieth-century architecture (the facades of the second wave of modern colonialism-cosmopolitanism); Asma el-Bakri, "the cultural conscience of Egypt", who filmed the underwater excavations; and Hala Halim, a journalist and writer who wrote weekly diary articles on the revival projects for the Egyptian newspaper *Al Ahram*.

The support of these intellectuals is part of a wider awareness of the need to acknowledge the various Egyptian pasts, including Pharaonic, Hellenistic, Coptic, Jewish and Islamic heritages, and not to favour certain of these to the exclusion of others. In the context of the recent increase of attacks on tourists, this agenda is ever more resonant. The current revival-projects promise to inscribe Alexandria fully on the tourist map. The city has previously functioned as a site of mainly domestic tourism – the consequence of its previous lack of ancient sites when compared with Giza and Luxor. Plans have been mooted for underwater museums and parks to be built in Alexandria around the excavation sites, with the aim of both conserving the submerged heritage and attracting tourists to the city.

The opposition currently being witnessed between Alexandria as literary landscape and Alexandria as material landscape emerging from the sea encourages a wider consideration of hybrid heritages. The New Alexandria can provide the means for constructing and disseminating future possibilities for Alexandrian culture. Rather than see Alexandria as the privileged domain of a Western genealogy and imagery, contem-

porary revivalism offers the possibility not only of a reworking of Alexandria as "meeting point", in order to acknowledge non-Western heritages, but also of generating a more subtle understanding of ancient and modern cultural influences. In the new millennium there is the potential for Alexandrian culture to find new connections within the global community, and also to do so within Egypt, and thus to challenge the ancient separation of Egypt and Alexandria.

Notes

1. See J-Y. Empereur, *Alexandria rediscovered* (London: British Museum Press, 1998) and W. La Riche, *Alexandria: the sunken city* (London: Weidenfield & Nicholson, 1998).
2. Empereur, quoted in La Riche 1998: 52.
3. F. Goddio, *Alexandria: the submerged royal quarters* (Paris: Periplus, 1998).
4. Strabo, *Geography*, book 17: 1–8 (London: Heinemann, 1930).
5. M. El-Abaddi, *Life and fate of the Library of Alexandria* (Paris: UNESCO, 1990).
6. La Riche (1998: 74).
7. *The Aswan Declaration: International Commission for the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria* (Paris: UNESCO, 1990).