Alexandria and the Sea

MARITIME ORIGINS
AND
UNDERWATER EXPLORATIONS

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Introduction

This is the story of the rise, fall, and rediscovery of Alexandria, Egypt — an influential trade center that had great impact on the Hellenistic World. Molded by some of the most famous personalities of ancient history, this city is associated with major contributions to science, medicine, astronomy, and economics — not to mention the opening of maritime trade routes between the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. The vast wealth drawn from her extensive trade connections permitted the early Greek rulers of Alexandria to create a shining jewel of the Mediterranean filled with palaces, magnificent centers of learning, and the Pharos Lighthouse, one of the seven ancient wonders of the world. In addition, early trade provided the means for Alexandrian shipwrights to build an impressive fleet of supergalleys, including the largest vessel known to ancient history. Alexandria was a spectacular city by the sea, capturing the attention of all who have seen or visited her through the ages.

After 2,000 years, Alexandria is once again in the world spotlight with the discovery of a sunken city. Remnants of the old city's splendor rest below the surface of the Mediterranean and are being brought to light by the careful research of underwater explorers and archaeologists. The story of the city's rediscovery and the role played by archaeology present two equally interesting chronicles.

One revolves around the fact that the coastal regions of the Mediterranean constitute a long-inaccessible reservoir of archaeological remains. Over the past two millennia, a wealth of material has collected on the sea floor, awaiting recent developments in underwater exploration. The young science of underwater archaeology faces unique challenges in preserving and understanding artifacts recovered from the underwater realm. In addition, these new archaeological processes themselves have become a fascinating subject for an audience with disparate interests and specialties.

Second, these new developments in archaeology are having a profound impact on our perception of Alexandrian history and on the modern city itself. Egypt has long attracted archaeologists and treasure hunters through the centuries, all of whom have filtered or contributed to our image of the past. Their discoveries often led to the removal of artifacts and the introduction of foreign interpretations or inappropriate scientific processes. The new archaeological discoveries, and the accompanying international attention, have revitalized interest in the affairs of this Mediterranean port city. As people flock to Alexandria once again, they contribute to the reawakening of its glorious past and prosperous future. The

underwater discoveries also provoke countless questions as artifacts are pulled from the sea. How do historians and archaeologist decipher secrets buried in thousands of underwater ruins? What role do ancient texts play and how do we verify their conclusions?

Interpretation of the facts and attempts to conjure the intentions of rulers play an important part in understanding Alexandria's past and present condition. However, trying to do so through the study of written sources is rather problematic. Much like our own era, the Hellenistic Age was extremely political. When writing about ancient cities, classical authors often had agendas that best served the Roman authority. Their surviving words may be riddled with hidden biases that do not always present a fair and accurate picture of past events. In other words, the textual record is vulnerable to subjectivity that is the result of influences of people in the past, an influence of ideas and values we do not completely understand.[1] Ancient and modern historians have long attempted to recreate Alexandria's early foundation and romantic upbringing under the Ptolemies. Contemporary writers such as Plutarch, Diodorus, and Strabo list important place names and other vital information, but they also incorporate personal prejudices and conflicting information. Strabo studied Alexandria as a guest of an important Roman official and therefore depicts a Greek city in a manner flattering to the new administration. Likewise, significant portions of ancient history can only be reconstructed with Diodorus Siculus's *Biblioteke* as a guide.

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[1] Peter Kosso, *Knowing the Past: Philosophical Issues of History and Archaeology,* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 2001), 30.

Yet his statements regarding important insights into Alexandrian history are conflicting in nature. Plutarch also offers important details pertaining to naval engagements and political relations. However, they were not based on first-hand observations but rather on secondary reports. And in all cases we are presented with exactly what the author chose to describe, not the hard direct evidence that archaeologists seek.

With so many doubts plaguing written sources, the physical evidence in ancient sites plays an even greater role in historical research. Therefore, it is important to delineate the many differences between history and archaeology. Even though both disciplines work toward the same end, archaeological evidence is less prone to the complicating influence of written texts.[2] However, a perfectly preserved set of artifacts does not necessarily answer all of history's questions. Usually, the physical evidence is far from perfect, amounting to but a few pieces left from the objects of interest, and they become useful knowledge only at the end of a careful, well-informed reconstruction.[3] Scattered archaeological remains are also subject to the ravages of time, particularly those submerged below the sea. And individual pieces are often discovered without any literal meaning. Spectacular sites, such as the one at Alexandria, can create opportunities for archaeologists to force their findings to fit theoretical constructs built on the basis of written sources without

[2] With the exception of honorary buildings and statues. Much of Alexandria's material remains were largely unattended remains and therefore less likely to carry such a particular intended message.
[3] Ibid, 31.

attempting to interpret their function within Alexandria's landscape.[4] Looking to history to validate material findings is a complicated business. Fortunately, new approaches to interpreting coastal sites challenge historical findings and offer added insight into our ancient past. Lastly, Alexandria's topography has undergone drastic changes owing to natural disasters and urban development. Soil redistribution has, therefore, led to a restratification of many artifacts, mixing Byzantine, Roman, and Greek layers. As a result, Alexandria houses a rather large collection of objects without provenience and in some instances we are left with rather vague dates to work from. To compensate, historians rely on a variety of specialists who incorporate comparative artifact studies that can tell us a great deal about obscure findings.

Ideally, the textual and archaeological remains will complement one another and allow us to create a theoretical model of the past. A wide assortment of disciplines must come together in order to piece together an ancient puzzle in an accurate way. However, even with historical and material evidence cooperating, historians and archeologists know that findings are still subject to our own limited perceptions of the past and to our own arguments and prejudices. In examining this topic, the author considered the biases and perspectives of each source while acknowledging she may also be introducing other limitations and misunderstood notions. Nevertheless, I hope that you, the general reader, conclude that

[4] Barbara Takackow, *Topography of Ancient Alexandria: An Archaeological Map* (Warsaw: Archeologii Srodziemnomorskiej, 1993), 21.

Alexandria and the Sea is a useful and detailed account of Alexandrian affairs.

Many articles and books detail the history of Alexandria and the archaeological investigations off her shores. Trouble is, these chronicles concentrate mostly on the same events. But once off these well-trodden paths, searchers for information must make their way through a plethora of scholarly publications and obscure journals, in a variety of languages — yet some topics have never been covered at all.[5] What is needed is a comprehensive work with a dedicated maritime perspective. *Alexandria and the Sea* endeavors to incorporate current archaeological reports with primary and secondary sources to create a unique understanding of Alexandria's maritime past, particularly as it relates to modern discoveries. Specifically, the first section of this book will include an assessment of ship construction, trade, Hellenistic warfare, ancient economies, and harbor development. The analysis of maritime trade and naval affairs confirm that ancient Egypt's economic interests and military pursuits were interwoven, meaning that sea power was an important foundation of Alexandria's economic prosperity.

The second segment is assigned to recent developments in maritime archaeology, which have taken place in Alexandria and in related sites around the Mediterranean.[6] This portion of the text will

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[5] Casson, Lionel. *The Ancient Mariners* (Princeton University Press, 1991) Preface. Casson is actually addressing ancient maritime history in general, which is certainly applicable here.

[6] Maritime archaeology is a sub field of underwater archaeology and is not limited to underwater research. Therefore, the studies are extended to include submerged

explain archaeological processes as they were carried out in Alexandria and their impact on a modern Egyptian city. The final chapter of the book will also document some of the challenges and advancements within the science of underwater archaeology as the world attempts to create an acceptable formula of culturally appropriate methods for protecting our archaeological treasures.

Before beginning in earnest, I would like to acknowledge several persons and institutions that have greatly aided my efforts. In particular, I would like to acknowledge Professor Anthony Papalas of East Carolina University, Emad Khalil of Southampton University, and Mohamed Abd El-Maguid of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities. This book has greatly benefited from their thoughtful remarks. Also, I should also like to thank members of the Graeco-Roman Museum, the Archaeological Society, the Center for Alexandrian Studies, the Franck Goddio Society, and the Institute of Nautical Archeology. But my greatest debt of gratitude goes to my parents, Ron and Dea Williams, my family, and Randy Stowell. I am extraordinarily grateful for their never-ending encouragement and support.

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artifacts, harbors, or maritime trade. It can also include the study of shipyards, boat burials, etc.