

The Ancient City of Alexandria

“Alexandria’s unique location on the Mediterranean with its back to the Nile Valley, as well as the eastern and western deserts, has allowed it since the earliest of times to be distinguished among world cities. It saw the mingling of cultures from the east and the west, and has seen times when it prospered and times when it waned.

There is no doubt that its experiences have colored its people and their religion(s). There is no doubt too that the accumulated cultural, social, and economic reservoir has allowed its people to achieve what they have achieved and has made Alexandria the city of all ages.”

This text is quoted from the decision by UNESCO to make Alexandria the city of the year in 1999.

Twenty-four centuries ago, Alexander the Great founded the city of Alexandria, but he did not live to see his city which was completed by Ptolemy I upon his death. Alexander’s keen vision enabled him to grasp the importance of Alexandria’s location which would serve it for aeons. Alexandria would become the magnet that attracts the ambitious, the seeker of glory just as she would attract the seeker of knowledge and scholarship. Its library would become the beacon of light with all the treasures that it was able to amass from many parts of the world and its fora would witness the dialogue between the best minds, the interaction of civilizations, and the cultural diversity.

The ancient Egyptians had a settlement on the Mediterranean, well before Alexander ever named that city “Alexandria”. To them, it was Ra-aa-qedet (Rhacotis) which meant the city which Ra blesses or presides over, or “the place of building”. It was known by that name until the end of the Byzantine Era. It is said that Rhacotis was not a “small fishermen village” as some have described it. Instead, it is believed — based on radioactive carbon-dating— that it was founded about 700 years prior to Alexander’s city and was a rather large city comprising twelve villages. To the Greeks, Alexandria was referred to as the Fort of Alexander on the Ionian Sea.

Alexandria lies on a strip of land which is sandwiched between the Mediterranean to the north and Lake Mareotis to the south. The port is to the north of that stretch of land where stone jetties have been erected along that stretch. Alexandria’s topography is characterized by a series of elevations consisting of limestone hills that stretch along the sea coast.

Alexander the Great ordered the construction of a stone bridge joining the island of Pharos to the mainland. The Eastern and Western Harbors were created in this way. This bridge was later named the Heptastadium, i.e. seven stades; it was about one mile long. The Citadel of Qaitbay was built on what remained of the island of Pharos in 1480 CE.

The geographer and historian Strabo mentions that when Alexandria was being constructed, and during the planning of its streets, a huge amount of lime available there was used to mark the ground. However, when it ran out before the planning of the streets



was completed, the Greek architect Dinocrates—who was entrusted with the building of Alexandria—ordered the use of barley flour which was intended to be used by the soldiers to complete the street planning. Alexandria was built along a quadrilateral grid plan (called the Hippodomi plan), where two main streets cross at right angles, and side streets are parallel to these two streets. The impression is that it resembles a chessboard. This form of street and town planning was prevalent in Greek cities in the fifth century BCE.

Alexandria was divided into five quarters each carrying a letter from the Greek alphabet: alpha (A), beta (B), gamma (Γ), delta (Δ) and epsilon (E). These initials represent the first letters of Greek words which when translated mean: “Built by King Alexander, Son of God”.

Philo the Alexandrian concurs with Strabo that the ancient city of Alexandria was divided into five major quarters. These were the following:

1. The Bruchium or Royal Quarter
2. The Gymnasium Quarter
3. The Soma (Kom el-Dikka) Quarter
4. The Mouseion Quarter
5. Rhacotis

It would appear that the Gymnasium Quarter, which included the race course, would by nature be the largest of these quarters, though less densely populated. The Bruchium, being the royal quarter, would have overtaken it in time, as each ruler built his palace and gardens on a larger area over the centuries. Strabo writes that the city had many public buildings and gardens which occupied a quarter, perhaps even a third of the total surface of Alexandria, as each king was eager to add new palaces and public buildings. Plinius is also said to have remarked that the architect who planned the ancient city of Alexandria had planned a fifth of its surface to be dedicated to royal buildings.

According to Mahmoud Bey el-Falaki, a noted Egyptian geographer and engineer who lived in the nineteenth century and was frantically looking for Alexander’s tomb, the Bruchium was a quarter where the royal palaces were built, and it extended from the area near the sea and the Canopic Street to the Heptastadium and the Gymnasium Squares. It also had the marina and the Arsinium Temple, the theater, the library, along with temples and the royal cemetery.

It also housed the splendid mausoleum of Alexander the Great after his body was brought during the time of Ptolemy II Philadelphus from Memphis, according to one story. The Roman emperor venerated Alexander’s tomb and people visited it as a sacred site.

Strabo also recounts that when the Roman Emperor Augustus (Octavian) came to Alexandria, he naturally wished to see the body of Alexander. On asking whether he wanted to see the tombs of the Ptolemies, he is reputed to have said that he had not come to see dead people, but a king. On opening the sarcophagus and bending over the body, Augustus broke Alexander’s nose.



Based on the writing of Herodian, the last reported imperial Roman visit mentioned in ancient accounts is that of Caracalla during the third century CE.

According to Mahmoud Bey, citing ancient writers, he believed that an area of 2,300 meters between Cape Lochias and the Heptastadium (currently between Silsila and Manshia Square) housed the royal palaces and the naval buildings, and the royal palace known as the Outer Palace was built on the promontory of Lochias. As for the main palace and other inner palaces which were built on hills, they faced the island of Antirrhodos and the Timonium between two intersecting streets at the harbor. The Great Theater and the Poseidon, as well as the Caesareum temples were built on the beach. The latter was built by Cleopatra VII. Then come the agora, the pavements and the apostases (magazines) at the harbor. The royal quarter also housed the Mouseion and the Ancient Library, the court house, the gymnasium and the zoo.

The Great Lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the world, was built on the eastern point of the island of Pharos by Sostratos the Cnidian, to ensure safe passage of ships heading for Alexandria.