

Alexandria – lost capital of the Ptolemies

Summary

The city of Alexandria was founded by Alexander during his conquest of Egypt in 332/31 BCE. The new city was first occupied in 320 by Ptolemy son of Lagus, the then governor of Egypt. It was this Ptolemy and his successor who set out to make the city the cultural capital of the Mediterranean world. To this end, they built magnificent monuments and invited scholars from all over the Greek diaspora to settle in the city and conduct research. Modern development has covered the ancient city and in the late 19th century archaeologists decided that the ancient remains were irretrievably lost. Maps drawn up during the Arab and Ottoman periods, together with descriptions of the extant ruins by the savants accompanying Napoleon's expedition, however, enabled the grid plan of the early city to be reconstructed. The reconstruction was undertaken by Mahmoud Bey using the above sources, descriptions of the city by ancient sources such as Strabo, and select test excavations. Bey's plan of the city is still used by researchers today. Modern technology, such as geophysical soundings and submarine excavation, has expanded our knowledge of Ptolemaic Alexandria.

The first part of the lecture gives a brief overview of the city as known from the ancient sources and then explores the methodology used by Bey for producing his plan. The second part focuses on the modern excavations, particularly the underwater archaeology carried out in the harbour by Jean-Yves Empereur of the Centre d'Études Alexandrines, and Franck Goddio, of the Oxford Centre for Maritime Archaeology. The areas considered are the Pharos lighthouse, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, and the palace area. We conclude with an overview of the problems entailed in rescue excavation in the fast-growing city; the test case is the Gabbari necropolis, which was discovered by contractors building a modern road.

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