

INSTITUT DES CULTURES MÉDITERRANÉENNES ET ORIENTALES  
DE L'ACADÉMIE POLONAISE DES SCIENCES

ÉTUDES et TRAVAUX

XXV

2012

ADAM ŁUKASZEWICZ

*Second Thoughts on the Beginnings of Alexandria*

In Plutarch's *Life of Alexander*, the Macedonian king sees in a dream a prophet who utters a quotation from Homer concerning the island of Pharos, and suggesting that the island is a perfect place for the foundation of a city.<sup>1</sup> A passage of Curtius Rufus seems to indicate that Alexander's original idea was to found a city on an island.<sup>2</sup>

The identity of the island of Pharos known from Homer's *Odyssey*<sup>3</sup> is a separate question. The present writer has even been inclined to suppose in that passage an interpolation by ancient Alexandrian philologists intended to embellish the story and make it compatible with the topography of Alexandria. However, that surprising passage may perhaps be genuine. The distance separating the island of Pharos from Egypt which a ship covers in one day may refer to a voyage along the coast of the Delta and not to the crossing of the open sea. Other islands did exist there as well, which is apparent in the light of the recent research in the area of the sunken cities of the coast of the Delta (Thonis/Herakleion, Menouthis).

The ultimate choice of the place for a future metropolis resulted from the geographic circumstances. The conqueror certainly took into consideration the existence of a port and of defensive installations built by the pharaohs.<sup>4</sup> The ancient sources inform us on the existence in the environs of Alexandria of Egyptian settlements earlier than the Greek *polis*.<sup>5</sup>

The relationship between Alexandria and Egypt has many times been discussed since antiquity. The well-known phrase *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* (ἡ πρὸς Αἴγυπτον Ἀλεξάνδρεια) is usually understood as evidence of a rift between the Mediterranean metropolis and the hinterland. However, it must be observed that πρὸς in that expression indicates rather a close vicinity. That statement accurately enhances the geographic realities and highlights the direct link uniting Alexandria and Egypt. Dio Chrysostom writing in the First/Second century AD states that Alexandria is the head of Egypt which is Alexandria's body (τὸ σῶμα τῆς πόλεως).<sup>6</sup> By the way, in Dio's expression ἡ Αἴγυπτος ὑμῶν ('your Egypt'), the possessive ὑμῶν has been quite arbitrarily and unduly deleted by Reiske! That expression is in my opinion absolutely genuine and should be restored in the editions of Dio. When Dio Chrysostom speaks to the Alexandrians of 'their Egypt', he implies the appartenance of the country (*chora*) to the city. That is exactly the ancient Greek way of thinking of a *polis* and the adjacent territory, without a suggestion of a split!

---

\* En souvenir des longs entretiens il y a trente ans.

<sup>1</sup> *Plut., Alex.* XXVI.

<sup>2</sup> *Curt. Ruf.* 4.8.1.

<sup>3</sup> *Hom., Odyssey* IV, 354-357:

Νῆσος ἔπειτά τις ἔστι πολυκλύστῳ ἐνὶ πόντῳ  
Αἰγύπτου προπάροιθε, Φάρον δέ ἐκικλήσκουσι,  
τόσσον ἄνευθ' ὅσον τε πανημερὴ γλαφυρὴ νηὺς  
ἦνυσεν, ἣ λιγὺς οὖρος ἐπιπνείησιν ὀπισθεν·

<sup>4</sup> Cf. *Strab.* XVII.6.

<sup>5</sup> On the sixteen villages see *Ps.-Callisth.* I.31.2: cf. P.M. FRASER, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford 1972, vol. II (Notes), n. 18, ch. 1 (p. 7) and a mention by J. MCKENZIE, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt 300 BC–AD 700*, New Haven and London 2007 [= *Architecture of Alexandria*], p. 32.

<sup>6</sup> *Dio Chrys., Or.* 32.36: ἢ τε γὰρ Αἴγυπτος ὑμῶν, τηλικούτων ἔθνος, σῶμα τῆς πόλεως ἔστι, μᾶλλον δὲ προσθήκη.

Anyway, in the view of the founder, Alexandria was certainly not a part of the Egyptian Delta. The city belonged to the western coastal zone adjacent to Egypt.

From the very beginning the city possessed a natural hinterland with a developed agriculture, especially in the zone extending to the West, toward Cyrenaica. Alexander's expedition to the oasis of Siwa, the foundation of Alexandria and the special role of Alexandria in the empire of the Ptolemies can be only understood in the same context. The foundation of Alexandria must therefore not be considered an expression of the courage and genius of Alexander. It was a reasonable choice conditioned by the economic realities.

Valerius Maximus tells us the notorious story of an omen being a forecast of the role of Alexandria as a metropolis nourishing numerous foreigners.<sup>7</sup> That is an excellent example of propaganda and a real presage of the imminent Ptolemaic boastful and biased information about the advantages of the city.

As for the foundation date, we share the view of Roger Bagnall<sup>8</sup> who, together with earlier researchers, agrees with the date of Tybi 25, given by Pseudo-Callisthenes (I 32.10), calculated by Pierre Jouguet<sup>9</sup> as the 7th of April 331 BC, although in the Roman period the date of the Tybi 25 was obviously equal to the 20th of January and in Roman Alexandria the anniversary was no doubt celebrated in January. Arrian puts the foundation of Alexandria before the expedition to the Ammonium, but Bagnall may be right, when interpreting the event described by Arrian as a preliminary visit to the place, and not the formal foundation. Arrian's (3.6.1) description of the period when Alexander departed from Memphis to Phoenicia as ἅμα τῷ ἡρι ὑποφαίνοντι, is in my opinion compatible with the 7th of April as the date of the foundation of Alexandria, and may mean that Alexander first founded the city and then left for Syria in late April.

Even more convincing than Arrian's concise report is the narrative of Curtius Rufus, our invaluable, though often unduly underestimated source. Curtius mentions Alexander's trip to Memphis and his further expedition to Middle Egypt. From there he decided to go to the oracle of Ammon in the Western Desert.<sup>10</sup> On his way back he founded Alexandria.<sup>11</sup>

These details are often discussed by modern historians of Alexander's expedition. The actual order of Alexander's activities in Egypt is irrelevant to the present remarks. It matters that Alexander indeed founded Alexandria and was no doubt personally present at the foundation ceremony. We may also credit Arrian's statement that Alexander himself approved the plan of the city and the list of temples with their respective location, including the temple of Isis.<sup>12</sup> By the way, no mention is made of the god Sarapis. That seems to agree with the story connecting Sarapis with Ptolemy I. Obviously enough, that legend is also an invention which, by the way, belongs to masterpieces of the Lagid propaganda.

<sup>7</sup> *Val.Max.* 1.4, ext.1: cf. W. HACKEL, J.C. YARDLEY, *Alexander the Great. Historical Texts in Translation*, Oxford 2004, pp. 30, 307.

<sup>8</sup> R.S. BAGNALL, *The date of the foundation of Alexandria*, *AJAH* 4, 1979, pp. 46–49 (reprinted in: Id. (Ed), *Hellenistic and Roman Egypt. Sources and Approaches*, Padstow 2006.

<sup>9</sup> P. JOUGUET, *La date alexandrine de la fondation d'Alexandria*, *REA* 42, 1940, pp. 192–197.

<sup>10</sup> *Curt. Ruf.* IV 7.29–32.

<sup>11</sup> *Curt. Ruf.* IV 8.33.

<sup>12</sup> *Arr., Anabasis* III 1.

According to Arrian, after Hephaestion's death, Alexander ordered Cleomenes to build a temple of Hephaestion in Alexandria and also on the island of Pharos.<sup>13</sup> During the nine years of Cleomenes' activity, the Alexandrian urbanism took a definite shape. Probably at that time the ports were extended and the construction of the Heptastadion was initiated in order to connect the island of Pharos with the Alexandrian coast. The building scheme, including canals, cisterns, the street grid and public buildings was financed from the royal purse which the satrap filled in a contestable way. The plans of the city were drawn by the Rhodian architect Deinocrates.<sup>14</sup>

Arrian states that after Alexander's death Cleomenes as the satrap of Egypt was placed under the authority of Ptolemy son of Lagos as governor of Egypt, Libya and the Arab countries.<sup>15</sup> According to Pausanias, Ptolemy considered Cleomenes a man of Perdiccas<sup>16</sup> and got rid of him in a brutal manner.<sup>17</sup> Those statements leave an impression that it was Cleomenes who was the real maker of Alexandria. The derogatory stories on Cleomenes may be entirely an invention of the propaganda department of his enemy and successor, Ptolemy I.

The *Stele of the Satrap* (Egyptian Museum in Cairo, inv. no. 22182) of 9 november 311 (year 7 of Alexander IV) is considered an important evidence of the role of Ptolemy I in the transformation of Alexandria into a capital of Egypt.<sup>18</sup> That text mentions the 'royal' residence at *Raqote* on the Ionian Sea, where Ptolemy resides as a satrap. The meaning of *Raqote* ('building place') has been much discussed.<sup>19</sup>

However, the precise date of the beginning of Alexandria as a capital of Egypt is unknown. It is not probable that the satrap moved from Memphis to Alexandria before 319 BC. Plutarch in his narrative in the *Life of Pyrrhus* shows that in Alexandria around 300 BC there was a royal court with a flourishing royal family engaged in a dynastic policy.<sup>20</sup> That setting could not come to existence in a very short period. All that shows that the true builder of the early Alexandria was rather Cleomenes than Ptolemy.

Archaeology does not know any datable traces from the period of the foundation of the city by Alexander.

Pseudo-Callisthenes apparently mentions the expulsion of the original inhabitants of the Egyptian settlement to make place for the new dwellers of Alexandria.<sup>21</sup> However,

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.* VII 23.6sq.

<sup>14</sup> See, e.g., G. GRIMM, *Alexandria. Die erste Königsstadt der hellenistischen Welt*, Mainz am. Rhein 1998, p. 32.

<sup>15</sup> *Arrian*, in: *Fragmente der griechischen Historiker*, 156 F 1,5: cf. F.W. WALBANK, *The Hellenistic World*, Cambridge (Mass.) 1982, p. 100.

<sup>16</sup> *Paus.*, I. 6.3.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, p. 40: *Ptolemy killed Kleomenes*.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40, ill. 41.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40, note.

<sup>20</sup> *Plut.*, *Pyrrh.* 4.4: cf. J. ROWLANDSON *et al.*, *Women and Society in Greek and Roman Egypt. A Source Book*, Cambridge 1998, n. 1, p. 26.

<sup>21</sup> *Ps-Callisth.* I.31: καὶ κελεύει Ἀλέξανδρος μεταβῆναι τοὺς κατοικοῦντας ἐν τοῖς τόποις τούτοις καὶ εἰς τὰς κόμας ἀπιέναι πρὸς τριάκοντα μιλίων τῆς πόλεως ἔξω, χωρήματα αὐτοῖς χαρισάμενος προσαγορεύσας αὐτοῖς Ἀλεξανδρεῖς. Cf. MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, p. 383, n. 31.

Curtius Rufus mentions the first population of Alexandria being recruited by Alexander from the inhabitants of the neighbouring villages.<sup>22</sup> Also the actual sense of the passage of Pseudo-Callisthenes may be interpreted as compatible with the text of Curtius Rufus.<sup>23</sup>

At the beginning, even under the first Ptolemy the interest of the Greeks to settle in Alexandria was probably rather scarce in spite of the alleged advantages of the site.<sup>24</sup> Among the attractions of Alexandria mentioned by Strabo<sup>25</sup> only the climate could be shared by everybody: ὥστε κάλλιστα τοῦ θέρους Ἀλεξανδρεῖς διάγουσιν.<sup>26</sup> That is an appropriate quality of a summer resort! However, who would like of his own free will to settle down permanently on a humid and salty beach between the sea and a lake? A comparison with other artificial settlements which became great agglomerations and capitals of vast empires (like St. Petersburg) is not entirely appropriate. Anyhow, all the literary praises of Alexandria belong to the sphere of Ptolemaic propaganda.

From the very beginning the humid soil of Alexandria did not encourage the building activity. The underground water was a serious hindrance. M.L. Bernhard wrote that the first Lagid builders of the city used the traditional Egyptian building methods and that the mud brick prevailed.<sup>27</sup> Later, more sophisticated building methods were in use, making possible the erection of very solid structures.

If indeed the population of the Ptolemaic Egypt in the Third century BC amounted to no more than 1.5 million inhabitants,<sup>28</sup> was it thinkable that such a country assured the prosperity of both the kings and the metropolis on the Mediterranean?

The archaeological map of the early Ptolemaic Alexandria<sup>29</sup> is indeed frustrating. From the early Ptolemaic period there are very few traces.

Ptolemy Soter (together with his predecessor Cleomenes) is probably responsible for the street grid, the water system, the city walls, the agora, and the palaces, as well as for some structures at the entrance to the harbour discovered in the 1911–1915. The original Lageion near the hill of the Sarapeum may also belong to the reign of Ptolemy I.<sup>30</sup> The Sarapeum of Rhacotis is attributed by Tacitus to Ptolemy I (as the founder of the cult of

<sup>22</sup> *Curt. Ruf.* IV.8,5: *Ex finitimis urbibus commigrare Alexandream iussis novam urbem magna multitudine implevit.*

<sup>23</sup> Cf. MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, p. 383, n. 31.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. W. CLARYSSE, D.J. THOMPSON, *Counting the People in Hellenistic Egypt. Vol. 2. Historical Studies*, Cambridge 2006 [= *Counting the People*], p. 102, n. 51–52: *500. 000 ... in the First century BC. Earlier it will have been much less.*

<sup>25</sup> *Strab.* 17.1.7: Ἡ δ' εὐκαιρία πολύτροπος ...

<sup>26</sup> *Strab.* 17.1.7.

<sup>27</sup> M.L. BERNHARD, *Sztuka hellenistyczna w Aleksandrii*, [in:] EAD. (Ed.), *Starożytna Aleksandria w badaniach polskich*, Warszawa 1977, p. 16.

<sup>28</sup> CLARYSSE, THOMPSON, *Counting the People*, p. 102, n. 53; Cf. *Diod.* I.31.8: τοῦ δὲ σύμπαντος λαοῦ τὸ μὲν παλαιὸν φασὶ γεγενῆσθαι περὶ ἑπτακοσίας μυριάδας, καὶ κατ' ἡμᾶς δὲ οὐκ ἐλάττους εἶναι τριακοσίων; most *ms* have τριακοσίων that Ed. Meyer and U. Wilcken wanted to correct into τούτων which is accepted in the *Loeb Classical Library* edition. Clarysse and Thompson, following Rathbone, consider 3 000 000 a total at the end of the Ptolemaic period.

<sup>29</sup> Cf. MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, p. 38, ill.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. illustrations in MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, pp. 22, 195.

Sarapis),<sup>31</sup> although the temple on the hill called today *Hamud as-Sawari* is dated by the texts of the foundation deposit to Ptolemy III Euergetes I.<sup>32</sup>

Ptolemy II built or finished the Pharos lighthouse, the Heptastadion, the great theatre, the Lageion, the Museion, the Library, the agora and the temples.<sup>33</sup> According to J. McKenzie the important discoveries in the Eastern harbour date to about 250 BC.<sup>34</sup>

The Tomb of Alexander is a separate topic of discussion, which in actual fact avails to nothing since there is no certain trace of that sepulchre, especially in the area of Kom el-Dikka. The Alabaster Tomb, being probably an early Ptolemaic structure, remains anonymous.

Pseudo-Callisthenes mentions the existence in the middle of Alexandria of a μέσον πεδίων, which was the nucleus of the city in the construction period.<sup>35</sup> Julius Valerius calls that space *meditullium*, or *mesopedium*.<sup>36</sup>

In the text of Achilles Tatius of the Roman period, πεδίων may refer to the main street of Alexandria. At the crossing of that street with a transverse avenue there was reportedly a ‘place’ (τόπος) of Alexander.<sup>37</sup> The word *topos* (= *locus*) means – among others – a tomb,<sup>38</sup> but the ἐπόνυμος Ἀλεξάνδρου τόπος, might possibly be an *agora*, a temple or a monument in honour of Alexander, otherwise not confirmed. Another possibility is an altar of Alexander, although the Armenian version of the *Roman d’Alexandre* locates the altar near the Sarapeum, if we follow McKenzie.<sup>39</sup>

The early Ptolemaic city of palaces, harbours and temples was also a city of private buildings and courtyards. It was an agglomeration of houses, workshops and porticoes with roofing of palm trunks, probably with walls and terraces painted white with lime, like a modern village on a Greek island. Alexandria has undergone a real transformation at the end of the early Ptolemaic period. Under the later Ptolemies Alexandria developed into a cosmopolite metropolis with many new residential structures which, however, did not entirely replace the small houses. The density of population grew enormously. That buoyant city, inhabited by people endowed with a characteristic sense of humour, a sense of dignity in the elite and a specific way of life, met an ominous fate in the Roman period. In spite of the devastating invasion of Julius Caesar, the siege by Octavian and the riots under Caligula and Claudius, the architecture continued to flourish in the First and Second centuries AD. At the side of opulent urban villas there were in Alexandria even seven storey apartment buildings.

<sup>31</sup> Tacitus, *Hist.* 4.83: cf. MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, pp. 56 and 383, n. 40.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 53ff.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 33.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>35</sup> *Ps.-Callisth.* I 32 A.

<sup>36</sup> *Jul. Val.* 1.28.

<sup>37</sup> *Achill. Tatius* 5,1.1-4.

<sup>38</sup> E.g. a *locus sanctorum* (sic!) at Carthage known from a late mosaic, is not necessarily a tomb, but rather a place of veneration of saints. However *topos* in numerous funerary inscriptions means ‘a tomb’.

<sup>39</sup> *Ps.-Callisth.* 1.31: cf. MCKENZIE, *Architecture of Alexandria*, p. 383, n. 22 to chapter 3.

The disappearance of the late Ptolemaic and Roman city was a result of a series of successive destructions, starting from the damages during the wars at the end of the Ptolemaic period and numerous street riots in the Roman time, through the ravaging visit of Caracalla in AD 215/216, till the combats, wars and sieges of the late Third century, including the disaster brought about by Diocletian. The old Alexandria was later entirely replaced by the Late Roman city, which is now excavated by archaeologists, including the Polish team at Kom el-Dikka, without much hope to find many remnants of the earlier period.

Adam Łukaszewicz  
Instytut Archeologii UW  
Warszawa  
*adlukasz@adm.uw.edu.pl*

