



ALEXANDREA AD AEGYPTVM

THE LEGACY OF MULTICULTURALISM IN ANTIQUITY

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PREFACE

It is December 22nd of the year 640 A.D.: Alexandria is sieged and captured by Emir Amr Ibn al-As, who, having resisted two attempts by Emperor Heraclius of Constantinople to recapture the city, sends Califa Omar the following words: “we have conquered the great city of the West!” And he keeps a promise: to make the city “accessible from all sides, like the house of a prostitute”, thus destroying its walls and doors. This conquest marks the destruction of whatever was left from the collection of parchments and the end of an extraordinary cultural experience that deeply branded centuries of Mediterranean culture, vividly described by Timon of Phlius (3rd century A.D.), who referred to it ironically as a place inhabited by “well nourished bookworms scribbling endlessly and waging a constant war of words with each other in the Muses’ birdcage”.

But during its conquest and the destruction of its collections, Alexandria reveals itself yet again as a city of varied, crossing cultures. The sage Ibn al-Qifti mentions in his *Ta’rikh al-Hukama* (*history of the sages*) a lengthy dialogue that would have taken place after the conquest, between the Emir Amr Ibn al-As and a well-known Aristotelian commentator, in all likelihood the Christian John Philoponus, also called John the Grammarian. The Emir, a highly intelligent and cultured man, engaged in sophisticated logical-theological debates about the trinity with John. John’s monophysitism brought them closer, although even a *light* trinity such as John’s was virtually unacceptable to the Emir: the latter, fiercely loyal to Islamic monotheism, would not easily accept John’s rather undogmatic arguments in favour of a real trinity. Not surprisingly, unity and multiplicity, the one and the multiples would have been these two men’s topic of discussion: they are in Alexandria, the city of difference and unity. The debate on trinity is a discussion about the possibility of the co-existence of unity and multiplicity. Therefore, what we might view as a sterile conversation about almost nothing turns out to be a reflection on life itself and the survival of a political project such as the project of Alexandria, always endangered by accusations of excessive openness (what a prostitute!) and by attempts to reduce this radical diversity to the common denominator of only one culture and the souls that shaped it throughout the centuries.

No other city had its fate marked to such an extent by books as Alexandria. Again a single book promoted dialogue between the two men: the Pentateuch. The dialogue between the two intellectuals did not, of course, save the Library – otherwise, such a dialogue could not have taken place. As such, the story about the conversation between the Christian grammarian and the Muslim Emir, while the outside world watched the destruction, is the proof that Alexandria’s legacy survived its books. In spite of the destruction, the intercultural and erudite dialogue proceeded, as a form of resistance to barbarity and agendas other than those concerning truth and beauty.

The excellent contributions gathered in this book dedicated to the city of books, Alexandria, are undoubtedly traced along the lines of Amr and John's dialogue. Intolerance, which is borne almost always out of ignorance, threatens continuously the peaceful meeting and coexistence of peoples and cultures nowadays. Alexandria, its people and books remind us that the search for dialogue, the reflection on the forms of unity in diversity are at the same time our greatest heritage and the most dramatically pressing agenda.

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