



ALEXANDREA AD AEGYPTVM

THE LEGACY OF MULTICULTURALISM IN ANTIQUITY

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MOVING FORWARD

The founding of Alexandria in 331 B.C.E. was a momentous event in the history of mankind. Alexander's dream was to create an international city, a space where people from all over the known world would live and work together for the development of the human mind. Alexandria therefore endures in our imagination as the first model of cultural interaction – of cosmopolitanism, to use both classical and contemporary terminology – and as the cultural and intellectual capital of the Ancient World.

The intermingling of races and beliefs, and the exchange of ideas, undoubtedly produced the knowledge that modern scholarship still celebrates. For centuries Alexandria ruled the Mediterranean not just through its wealth and military power, but also with its intellectual achievements which came to fruition at the ancient Library of Alexandria. It was there that scholars gathered from the four corners of the world to push the boundaries of human knowledge and unleash the human mind on myriad quests. To this day it symbolizes the noblest aspirations of the human mind, global ecumenism, and the greatest achievements of the intellect. In Science, Mathematics, Astronomy and the humanities, the mark of Alexandrian scholarship and discoveries is to be found everywhere.

The ancient Library of Alexandria was not just a repository of scrolls, valuable though those might have been. It was a centre of learning and of excellence, as we would today call it. It did not survive the turmoil of conflict and bigotry, or even the scars of time and natural disasters (for no physical remains exist), but its legacy lived on. Sixteen hundred years after its final collapse, the dream of its revival became a reality and it was resurrected, through international efforts, on the shores of the Mediterranean, just a stone's throw away from where its famed predecessor had stood. The new Library of Alexandria is a bold evocative building, but like its namesake, it is much more than a building and is not just a library. Born digital, it has risen to the challenges of the modern times and aspires to be a library for the new digital age. It is also, like the ancient Library, a centre of learning and dialogue, a space for intellectual debates (encouraging especially the youth), scholarship, and the arts, as well as a meeting place for North and South, East and West. Equipped with state-of-the-art technology and conference halls, it is a vast cultural complex with its own orchestra, museums, permanent as well as temporary exhibitions, research centres and publications. As it celebrates its tenth anniversary this October, the new Library of Alexandria can look back with pride upon the large strides it has taken towards promoting culture, dialogue and scholarship, reassuring its ancestor that ideas never die, and that though men may expire and buildings may perish, great minds are immortal.

This conference, and its proceedings, are a testimony that the values embodied by Alexandria and its Library continue to inspire noble minded scholars whose pursuit for knowledge transcends boundaries and time. The breadth and scope of the papers presented do credit to the spirit of Alexandria – its multiculturalism, and its passion for science and scholarship. All this would not have been possible without the enlightened leadership of the first Ptolemies, who translated Alexander's dream in ways that may have exceeded his

expectations. The genius of the site, Alexander's choice, allowed the city to accumulate immense wealth through maritime trade, and this in turn allowed the Ptolemies to channel funds towards culture. It was they who laid the foundations of enlightenment, symbolized by the Pharos, the Museion and the Library. Under their aegis, scholarship and science – the product of foreign and local minds working together – made immense leaps in all areas. Callimachus, especially revered in the new Library of Alexandria, not only revolutionized poetry but also classified books according to author, title and subject, thereby establishing library science. Euclid's book continues to be taught to this day, a record that has yet to be broken! And Philo's early attempt at reconciling philosophy with religion set a tradition that also continues to engage philosophers and theologians. Indeed, Alexandria's importance in philosophy, Judaism and Christianity is a matter for deep scholarship, but this conference pays attention to the especial role Alexandria played in spreading the cult of Isis throughout the world, making her the most popular deity of ancient times. Cleopatra herself often assumed the role of Isis (thus providing a marvelous example of cultural interaction) during festivals and religious ceremonies. She was the last of the Ptolemies and the Hellenistic age came to an end with the asp bite that ended her life. Yet her magic, like that of the city which she ruled, lives on. The Hellenistic age may have officially ended with Octavian's victory, but it never died.

The proceedings in our hands confirm that the multiculturalism of the Ancient World, rippling out from Alexandria to extend throughout the Hellenistic period and beyond, is as valid now as it was then – perhaps more so today, when globalization has given a new meaning to the internationalism envisioned by Alexander the Great centuries ago. Now, with the «clash of civilizations» dominating our discourse, it is pertinent to remember the lesson *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum* taught us: that the interaction between cultures can only lead to the betterment of the human condition and carry us to heights unimagined.

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