



ALEXANDREA AD AEGYPTVM

THE LEGACY OF MULTICULTURALISM IN ANTIQUITY

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INTRODUCTION

The project of a collective work on multiculturalism in Ancient Alexandria was born more than a decade ago when the new *Bibliotheca Alexandrina* was founded. The idea of recreating the spirit of a long lost mythical institution of knowledge was on itself attractive enough to justify such a study. However, political events gave to this idea more than a commemorative character: multiculturalism is on the very core of problems that affects our global contemporary world. Thus, to examine the conditions of multiculturalism in Ancient Alexandria seemed an excellent way to reflect on the historical processes that shape identity and culture.

The editorial board of this book, gathering scientists from Portugal and Egypt aimed to provide a publication that could reflect the heterogeneity and multiculturalism of Ancient Alexandria by means of a multitude of perspectives which could only take form through a multidisciplinary approach. Thus, the primordial goal of the editorial board was to drive the attention of scholars to the epistemological need of a multidisciplinary approach to grasp such a complex object of study as it is the Alexandrian culture, multidimensional and multicultural in nature.

The studies compiled in this volume are presented in four sections. In each of these sections we tried, as much as possible, to keep a multidisciplinary perspective thus avoiding the traditional arrangement of the subjects in classical, egyptological or literary studies which so often creates on going difficulties to the perception of the Alexandrian Hellenism's specificities.

The first section is dedicated to the several stages of Alexandria's History, from its very foundation to the Roman occupation. The second section is specifically concerned with the multicultural identity of Alexandria and with its consequences in Art and Society. The third section is dedicated to the scholarly tradition of Alexandria that included Literature and Science, both from ancient Greek and Egyptian authors. The fourth section includes studies on the processes of change and revision of ancient traditions in a multicultural context. A concluding chapter presents a broader and integrative approach of the essential features of Alexandrian Hellenism.

However heterogeneous the studies compiled in this volume may be, this selection is far from being exhaustive and certainly many other aspects of the Alexandrian culture could be included. This volume is therefore a first attempt to achieve this ambitious purpose and we would expect that it could be followed by many other studies and publications.

In fact, few places in the world seem to have been so much rooted on a multicultural ground as Alexandria always did. From its own beginning, multiculturalism performed a pivotal role on its vitality in such a manner that the dialogue between the cultures of the Ancient World always figured as its natural vocation. The geographic location of the city, on Egyptian ground, propelled its role as a cross-road of Africa, Asia and Europe. Here, Hellenistic civilization seemed to find the most suitable ground to give rise to an open multicultural society which relied on its Museum as much as on its harbour, in such a way that

health and knowledge always seemed as two sides of a coin. We may in fact recognize in Ancient Alexandria all the features of a globalized culture.

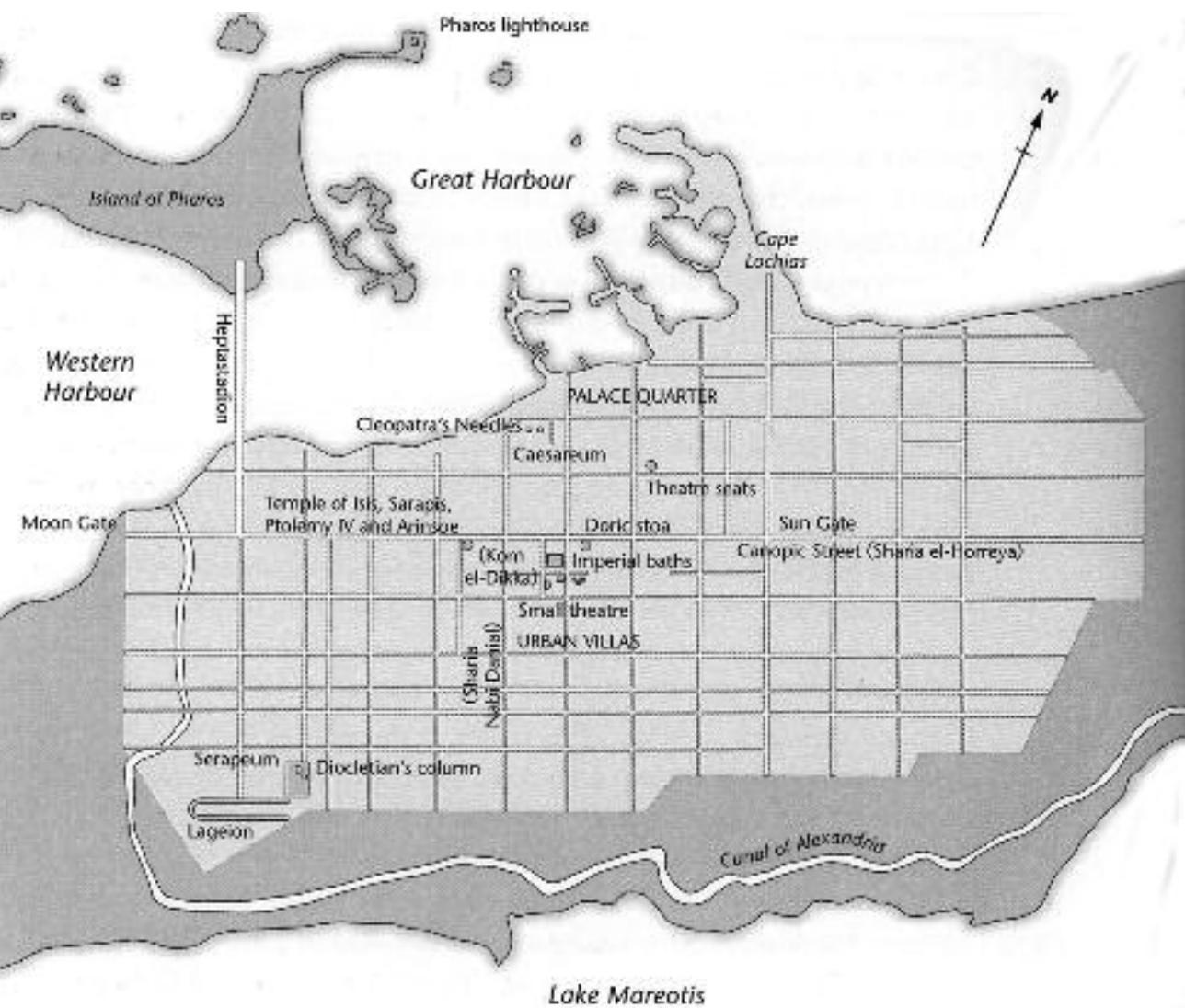
In spite of its tremendous success, Alexandrian multicultural civilization was short lived. Obviously it depended upon political factors that could not last under the highly centralized Roman domination. From then on, identity and citizenship became rigidly codified according to Roman one-sided rules which rapidly led to the transformation of Alexandria from a major cross-road of Antiquity to a dangerous melting pot of cultures imprisoned within its walls. Minorities were thus condemned to live their culture not within the open possibilities of the *politeuma* but within the rigid walls of the *ghetto*. From then on, the agony of Alexandria superbly reflects the decline of the multicultural Hellenistic civilization.

After a long period of decline, the rise of modern Alexandria reflected again the revitalization of the Mediterranean which prospered with the Suez Canal. More than two thousand years after its foundation by Alexander, in the beginning of the 20th century, the city found itself before its natural vocation as a cross-road of cultures: Egyptians, Turks, Jews, English and French rebuilt the city's long lost multicultural character. Although it succeeded to face two world wars, multiculturalism would be deeply challenged with the scars left by the effects of the Cold War in the political map of the Middle East. Furthermore, the cosmopolitan role of the city as a turntable between the three continents that border the Mediterranean, could not prosper in the context of a strangled sea that became a wall to divide the European Community from its African neighbours.

In the global world where we live in, we can recognize many of the cultural features that sprung in Ancient Alexandria. The primordial role performed by Science in the shape of a global community is one of the most striking features of our times. Equipped with the resources provided by contemporary technology, scientists meet at a global forum and share common humanistic and universal values, regardless of their nationality or religion. In a very concrete way, scientists of our times can see themselves as heirs of the Alexandrian universal spirit.

In our times it is true that the impact and acceptance of the global culture in local communities was frequently balanced with the growing of importance of religious traditions. As happened in Ancient Alexandria, religion performs an important role in the strengthening of local identity, especially when the meeting of civilizations becomes maculated by military operations. Now that a decade is completed after the foundation of the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, we present this book as the reminder of the extraordinary relevance of the perennial multicultural civilization of Ancient Alexandria for the understanding our global heritage. In a way, with all its contradictions, our global world is perhaps the fully expression of the Universalist multicultural vision that rose in *Alexandrea ad Aegyptum*. Only today the challenges that arose in Alexandria become truly universal.

The Editors



The city of Alexandria (BAGNALL, RATHBONE, 2004:52)