

Ειδική Ενότητα

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Special Section

FUNERARY ART IN THE EASTERN MEDITERRANEAN:  
THE HELLENISTIC NECROPOLEIS OF ALEXANDRIA

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# Introduction

## Alexandrian Memoryscapes

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### ABSTRACT

*This introductory essay explores the concept of “memoryscapes” within the urban and cultural fabric of ancient Alexandria. By analysing texts, monuments, and funerary art, it considers how the city was perceived as a site of wonder, grandeur, and collective memory during the late Hellenistic and early Imperial periods. The chapter examines how Alexandria’s urban landscape functioned as a “landscape of memory,” continually shaped by and shaping its inhabitants’ historical consciousness and cultural identity. These memoryscapes, both tangible and intangible, interweave physical spaces with ritual and artistic expression, preserving shared memory while evolving alongside shifting cultural narratives.*

### ALEXANDRIA. AT LAST.<sup>1</sup>

“After three days’ sailing, we arrived at Alexandria. I entered the city by the Gate of the Sun, as it is called, and was instantly struck by the splendid beauty of the city, which filled my eyes with delight.” So recounts Kleitophon, a young Greek from Tyre, upon first glimpsing the city of Alexandria in Book V of *The Adventures of Leukippe and Kleitophon*, a fascinating romantic novel by Achilles Tatius (*Leukippe and Kleitophon* 5.1). Written sometime in the 2nd century CE, presumably in the city of Alexandria itself, the novel – a quintessential example of the Greek romantic genre, characterized by its emphasis on love, adventure, and the ultimate triumph of *eros* over adversity – centers on the passionate love affair between Leukippe, a beautiful maiden, and Kleitophon, her devoted suitor.

Their journey is fraught with trials and tribulations, including shipwrecks, kidnappings, pirates, bandits, and false deaths, weaving a complex tapestry of misfortunes and separations that test their love and fidelity (Reardon 1989, 170–75; Morales 2001). The narrative richly explores themes such as the power of fate, the endurance of love, and the interplay between reality and illusion. Tatius employs detailed descriptions, vivid imagery, and psychological depth to bring his characters’ experiences to life, immersing readers in the intensity of their trials and the sweetness of their eventual reunion (rewarding readers with the much-desired happy ending for their patience and endurance). The novel’s episodic structure, with its adventures and cliffhangers, keeps readers engaged while reflecting the unpredictability of life and love.

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<sup>1</sup> The opening line in Mahfouz 1993 [1967], 1.

At the same time, the book envisions life in the Eastern Mediterranean during the late Hellenistic and early Imperial periods as one of cultural polyphony and religious syncretism, driven by an open economy reliant on maritime trade and its associated perils. It portrays a multi-ethnic community compelled to coexist yet not necessarily inclined toward tolerance.

In the quoted passage, the young protagonist, having endured a cascade of adventures that carried him from his native Tyre to Alexandria's outskirts, finally enters the fabled city for the first time – a city he has long heard about but never before seen.

Let us linger on his description:

“From the Gate of the Sun to the Gate of the Moon –for these are the guardians of the entrances– led a straight double row of columns, about the middle of which lies the open part of the town, and in it so many streets that walking in them you would fancy yourself abroad while still at home. Going a few hundred yards further, I came to the quarter named after Alexander, “Alexander’s place”, where I saw a second town; the splendor of this was cut into squares, for there was a row of columns intersected by another as long, at right angles. I tried to cast my eyes down every street, but my gaze was still unsatisfied, and I could not grasp all the beauty of the spot at once; some parts I saw, some I was on the point of seeing, some I earnestly desired to see, some I could not pass by; that which I actually saw kept my gaze fixed, while that which I expected to see would drag it on to the next. I explored therefore every street, and at last, my vision unsatisfied, exclaimed in weariness, ‘Ah, my eyes, we are beaten’” (*Leukippe and Kleitophon* 5.1; transl. S. Gaselee).

While for Kleitophon this marks his first time beholding the miraculous city at the height of its splendor, this was certainly not the case for the novel’s author or, one assumes, the majority of his readers. Tatius lived and wrote in Alexandria, and he was intimately familiar with the glories he describes as they present themselves to his astonished protagonist for the first time. His Alexandrian readership would have been equally well-acquainted with these marvels. For, throughout antiquity and pretty much to the present day, Alexandria was imagined as a city of unparalleled splendor, a beacon of cultural and intellectual achievement: renowned for its monumental architecture, including the towering Pharos lighthouse and the legendary Library, it was a cosmopolitan hub where Greek, Egyptian, and Eastern traditions converged, creating a vibrant, polyphonic society steeped in myth and wonder (Fig. 1).

Although the story itself is entirely fictional, however, employing a fantastical narrative to captivate a readership that delighted in the romance genre’s ability to enchant through make-believe, the description of Alexandria in *Leukippe and Kleitophon* is anything but imaginary. What we read here is precisely what Tatius himself would have experienced during his walks through the city’s central quarters. It is reasonable to assume that Alexandrian readers would have nodded in agreement as they read these passages, affirming, “yes, this is how it is”.

Kleitophon continues:

“Two things struck me as especially strange and extraordinary – it was impossible to decide which was the greatest, the size of the place or its beauty, the city itself or its inhabitants; for the former was larger than a continent, the latter outnumbered a whole nation. Looking at the city, I doubted whether any race of men could ever fill it; looking at the inhabitants, I wondered whether any city



Fig. 1. Map of Alexandria; etching, hand-colored. From Georg Braun and Frans Hogenberg, *Civitates Orbis Terrarum* (1575). © Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. no. 2013.642). Gift of Elaine and Lewis Dubroff, 2013.

could ever be found large enough to hold them all. The balance seemed exactly even. [...] It was the greatest spectacle I ever beheld, for it was late evening and the sun had gone down; but there was no sign of night – it was as though another sun had arisen, but distributed into small parts in every direction; I thought that on that occasion the city vied with the sky for beauty” (*Leukippe and Kleitophon* 5.1; transl. S. Gaselee).

Alexandria, therefore, is in this text described as a sight to behold, a city of splendor and amazement – a distinction it was going to retain (Fig. 2). A site of wonder and memory: for the central spot, “a few hundred yards” further from the Gate of the Sun at the city’s easternmost edge, where the visitor would arrive on foot, along the city’s main thoroughfare, lined with “a straight double row of columns”, “and in it so many streets, that walking in them you would fancy yourself abroad while still at home”, where a “second town” would be seen, presumably with its streets running north to south, that is from the seafront to the banks of lake Mareotis, where “there was a row of columns intersected by another as long, at right angles”, presumably coming down from the palace quarter. The crossroads, we imagine, would look nothing less majestic than any *tetrapylon* known from the ancient world, from Apamea in Syria to Jerash in present-day Jordan, and beyond.



Fig. 2. The City of Alexandria (18th century); copper engraving. © Private Collection.

## SOME CITIES REFUSE TO REPEAT THEMSELVES<sup>2</sup>

“It was in this area, among gardens and colonnades, that the culture of Alexandria came into being”, wrote E.M. Forster in 1922, in his emblematic *Alexandria*, his “history” of and “guide” to, as he called it, the “immense ghost city”, according to the book’s blurb: a site in the presumed vicinity of the Palaces of the Ptolemies and their Mouseion, a place of learning equipped with “imagination and knowledge”, also according to the same text (Forster 1986 [1922], 31). Conceived by the early Ptolemies as an active repository of global scientific knowledge and cultural memory, the Library of Alexandria stood as the monumental realization of a social as well as political ideal, a dynamic landscape encapsulating the ways societies remember and commemorate their pasts: through monuments, memorials, museums, literature, and nowadays media, that help shape collective memory and cultural identity (Stephens 2010). Think of how the Library’s modern reincarnation, the *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, reflects modern Egypt’s values and ideologies through its allusion to the country’s antiquity as well as its dedication to the pursuit of knowledge through scholarship and science, as well as a commitment to education at all levels. Serving as a site of both commemoration and contestation (with regard to modernity and its discontents), the *Bibliotheca* constructs itself as a dynamic entity, a cultural landscape evolving in a scenery of shifting perspectives and societal needs, continually shaping and reshaping the ways in which we understand and engage with history.

2 O’ Grady 2006, 124 [“Cities”].

But let us return to Tattius: according to him, Alexandria's *tetrapylon* was the spot that was "named after Alexander", an "Alexander's place" assumed by some to be the site where Alexander's tomb actually lay. It is not my intention here to discuss the oftentimes revisited question of "the tomb", one that seems to fascinate Greeks and Egyptians alike, as well as so many others globally. It is of course quite likely (indeed *most* likely) that the Ptolemaic *Sema*, where all members of the dynasty were laid to rest, including their mythologized first leader, Alexander of Macedon, was to be found nearer the city's Eastern Gate, closer to an important thoroughfare leading from Akra Lochias and the palace quarter southwards, rather than the city center; even though other suggestions have been proposed with a higher or lower degree of plausibility (Kordosis 2023).

My purpose in this paper, however, is different: using the passage by Tattius I just quoted as my starting point, I would like to discuss briefly, and by means of an introduction to the papers that follow, the idea of cultural memory as a historical process, embedded in the urban fabric of an ancient city like Alexandria, as well as a form of social identity practiced and performed in close association with it. Think how, in the text, the sublime architecture and the enchanting surroundings –including the moving masses of people– inscribe to the amazed first-time viewer the magnificence of the place and the spatiality of its memory: as an ethnic Greek from Syria, as a boy from one historic Eastern-Mediterranean town visiting another, Kleitophon was able to recognize and appreciate a site named after a legendary ruler who lived more or less five hundred years before his own time. Modern historians identify such places, central to a city's urban grid as well as its history, as "memoryscapes"; that is intricate terrains where collective memories are mapped, narrated, and commemorated within the context of culture and history (e.g., Butler 2008; Phillips and Mitchell Reyes 2011; Árvay and Foote 2020; De Nardi and High 2020). This concept has emerged as a vital area of research in history and cultural studies, encompassing the ways societies remember and interpret their pasts, as well as engage with them. Through the analysis of memoryscapes, scholars seek to understand how historical events are memorialized and how these commemorations influence collective identity and cultural continuity.

### THE SITUATION OF ALEXANDRIA IS MOST CURIOUS<sup>3</sup>

Memoryscapes are born at the intersection of memory and the cultural reenactment of social identities. They constitute the spatial and temporal dimensions of memory, including physical landscapes like monuments, memorials, and museums, as well as more abstract representations such as literature, oral histories, and media. Memoryscapes are both tangible and intangible, incorporating physical spaces and cultural practices that perpetuate memories of the past. These landscapes are not static; they evolve as societies reassess their histories and cultural narratives.

"Alexandria. At last. Alexandria, Lady of the Dew. Bloom of white nimbus. Bosom of radiance, wet with sky water. Core of nostalgia steeped in honey and tears." In the deeply emotional, heartbreaking opening lines of Naguib Mahfouz's *Miramar*, written in 1967, and as far as I know the only of his novels set entirely in Alexandria, as opposed to his native Cairo, Amer Wagdi, one of the story's multiple narrators, a retired journalist now well into his eighties, a man who lived through the glory days of the Egyptian national press, and the 1919 revolution led by Saad Zaghloul, returns –in body as well as in spirit– to the city (and the people) he loved in his youth (Mahfouz 1993 [1967], 1). His enthused gaze reminds us of the wide-opened eye description that Achilles Tattius put in the mouth of his own protagonist, eighteen or so centuries earlier. "The massive old building confronts me once again", says Amer. "How could I fail to recognize it? I have always known it. And yet it regards me as if we had shared no past. Walls paintless from the damp, it commands and dominates the tongue of land, planted with palms and leafy acacias, that protrudes out into the Mediterranean to a point where in season you can hear shotguns cracking incessantly" (Mahfouz 1993 [1967], 1). Wagdi's nostalgia is triggered by the sudden

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3 Forster 1922 [1986], 5.



Fig. 3. Alexandria, the Corniche in the 1960s. © Private Collection.



Fig. 4. Terracotta lamp showing the waterfront of Alexandria (detail; 1st century CE). © The Trustees of the British Museum (inv. no. 1814.0704.179).

view of the Corniche, well familiar and strange at the same time (Fig. 3). Here, geography sides with urban planning to generate memory and recollection: for when, today, we behold the breathtaking waterfront view of the city from the promontory of Qaitbay and its vicinity, we seem to repeat, even unconsciously, an ancient *topos* going back to the Hellenistic and Roman years, one reflected, among others, in a series of oil lamps from the early Imperial period, reproducing Alexandria's majestic waterfront as a three-century old palimpsest, with its domed buildings, its arches, and its porticoes (cf. Fig. 4; see Bernhard 1956).

As memoryscapes, cities as old as Alexandria serve as physical embodiments of personal or collective memories, offering a way to examine how societies construct and maintain their historical consciousness. Think of how, later in *Miramar*, Amer will confess: “I have paid a nostalgic visit to the Athenaeus, Pastroudis, and the Antoniadis, and sat for some time in the lobbies of the Cecil and the Windsor, the places where pashas and foreign politicians used to meet in the old days, the best places to pick up news. I saw no one I knew, only a few foreigners, Westerners and Orientals, and made my way home (i.e., the novel’s title guesthouse, ‘Miramar’) [...]” (Mahfouz 1993 [1967], 12). So we are able to appreciate how monuments and landmarks are key components of memoryscapes, serving as physical representations of collective memory. What for ancient Alexandria was a place named after its founder, perhaps even housing his tomb, for a post-revolutionary Alexandria still retaining some fond memories of its colonial past, were the by then decolonized vestiges of its erstwhile cosmopolitan grandeur, the smoke-stained lobbies of its imperial hotels. Such structures are often imbued with symbolic meanings that reflect the values and ideologies of the societies that create them (or their transformations in the eras to come).

Memoryscapes therefore are dynamic fields of communal activity, reflecting changes in societal values, historical interpretations, and cultural practices. As new generations confront and reinterpret the past, memoryscapes evolve to accommodate these shifting perspectives. This process is evident in the ongoing efforts to address historical injustices and provide more inclusive and accurate representations of history. The process of remembering and commemorating the past through memoryscapes can as a result evolve into a form of cultural resistance. For marginalized groups, creating and maintaining memoryscapes can serve as an assertion of their place in history and society. Monuments and memorials in particular are prominent features in urban memoryscapes, as they are strategically placed in cityscapes to commemorate significant events, individuals, or movements, offering a focal point for collective remembrance.

Think, for example, of the way the colossal statue of Egyptian statesman Saad Zaghloul, created on a state commission by Egypt’s leading sculptor Mahmoud Mokhtar in the early 1930s, and erected on 27 August 1938 in the center of Alexandria, facing the Mediterranean and the city’s historic eastern harbor, stands to this day as an ideological powerhouse for modern Egypt and the Egyptian nation at large (Fig. 5): made from Aswan granite, and accompanied by imageries alluding to the country’s Pharaonic heritage and Alexandria’s Ptolemaic origins, the statue occupies the space habitually associated with the Caesareum, the temple Cleopatra meant to dedicate to her lover Anthony (which may however have been started by one of her predecessors: cf. Goddio and Grataloup 2021). Completed by Augustus, the temple was replaced by a church in the 4th century CE, with its two obelisks still standing till the 1870s, when they were taken to London and New York respectively.

Hence, city areas and landmarks, such as Saad Zaghloul’s memorial park I just mentioned, serve as powerful memoryscapes, where the physical environment intersects with collective memory to shape communal identities and historical narratives. These urban spaces are more than mere locations; they are imbued with cultural, historical, and emotional significance, acting as tangible embodiments of a community’s shared past. Memoryscapes, as a result, are deeply intertwined with cultural identity. They provide a sense of continuity and belonging, connecting individuals and communities to their past. By engaging with memoryscapes, people can affirm their identities and values, reinforcing a shared sense of history and purpose.

For a city like Alexandria, built from scratch, though at the intersection of two powerful historical and cultural trajectories, this sense of “history and purpose” was present from day one, and the need for its people to “affirm their identities and values” appeared quite formidable early on. This was already evident in one of Alexandria’s most important foundational texts known to us, the so-called “Satrap Stela”, the granite hieroglyphic slab dating from the seventh year of Alexander IV, that is, 311 BCE (Simpson 2003, 392–97). Although well studied by several generations of scholars, some aspects of its text remain rather obscure; it does, however, clearly refer to Alexandria’s settlement by Ptolemy Soter making his residence, “named the Fortress of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, the Beloved of the ka-spirit of Amon, the Chosen of Re, the Son of Re, Alexander, whose former name was Rakotis, on the shore of the great green sea of the Greeks”, having assembled “many



Fig. 5. Alexandria, Saad Zaghloul Memorial Park (May 2023). © Author.

Greeks with their horses and many ships with their troops” just about that time it seems. Crucially, the stela states that it was Ptolemy who “brought back the sacred images of the gods which were found within Asia, together with all the ritual implements and all the sacred scrolls of the temples of Upper and Lower Egypt”, and that “he restored them in their proper places” (transl. R.K. Ritner).

One of the best examples of Ptolemy’s ideology put into action, the stela presents Alexander’s former general and Egypt’s future king as pious and munificent, as opposed to the irreverent and barbaric Persians, an ideology Ptolemy seems to have inherited from Alexander himself. The whole idea behind the narrative regarding the restoration of abducted statues and sacred images to their temples, is one of reverence to tradition and a solemn promise that cultural traditions are to be respected. At the same time, the text makes sure to commemorate the city’s long-dead founder and his connection to Egyptian cultic tradition: in a sense, Alexandria is here framed as a *lieu de memoire*, a site of memory dedicated to its own historical trajectory (Nora 1989).

Yet, as the recent reopening and final completion of the Shatby necropolis excavation showed us (see Shatby 2024), Alexandria structured itself around active memoryscapes –its cemeteries– ostensibly dedicated to commemorating the dead, in fact however acting as focal points for the community of the living. Directed by Mona Haggag and Kyriakos Savvopoulos, under the auspices of the Archaeological Society of Alexandria and the State Archaeological Service of Egypt, the recent excavation at Shatby encouraged a rethinking of the ways Alexandrian society imagined itself through the commemoration of their dead. Necropoleis in Ptolemaic Alexandria carried a strong memory of its population’s Greco-Macedonian heritage, primarily encapsulated in the morphology of their architecture: colonnades, architraves and façades, posts, pillars and pylons, all seemed to reconnect the newly fashioned cities of the dead with the homelands the new Alexandrians have left behind. In that, Alexandria was familiar to its new inhabitants and its visitors even when they had never seen it before – exactly in manner Kleitophon’s first visit to the fabulous city is recounted by Achilles Tatius.



Fig. 6. Alexandria, Shatby necropolis; Hypogeum A, the courtyard (May 2023). © Archaeological Society of Alexandria & Egyptian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities.

In many ways, the burial complexes such as those in Shatby, or Mustafa Kamel, mirror the life of the living, imagining the afterlife as a slightly improved version of Alexandria as they experienced it during their lifetime (Venit 2002). In that, burial practices in Alexandria, and in Ptolemaic Egypt in general, seem to depart from what we understand as standard Greek or Macedonian custom. For in Pella, Aigai, or Thessaloniki, the tomb or the burial complexes seemed solely to signify the dominion of death and the dead, an outwardly palace ruled by Hades and Persephone, peopled by the souls of the righteous. This was standard Orphic doctrine, well represented in Greek literature and art of the late classical and the early Hellenistic periods. In Macedonia and the rest of Greece, the tomb was permanently sealed, never to be re-entered by the living, unless new burials had to be made in the case of family tombs of the Macedonian or the cist types.

As it has been well illustrated, however, by many scholars working on Alexandrian burial practices, in Alexandria these practices are patently different: the well laid-out, open-air courtyards in Shatby, Mustafa Kamel and elsewhere were most certainly designed in order to accommodate the living rather than the dead (Fig. 6); they were meant to set the stage, as it were, for the performance of a series of important funerary rites, both during and immediately after the funeral proper, as well as in due intervals after that, in terms of the memorial services many contemporary religions practice today (Savvopoulos 2014; Tricoche 2014). Such memorial services are meant to confirm, enhance, and promote a sense of family, community, and identity through the commemoration of a social group's dearly departed (who are thus idolized or heroized even in immaculate, thoroughly idealized versions of what the community in question is all about: "de mortuis nil nisi bonum", goes the Latin aphoristic recommendation, perhaps going back to Chilon of Sparta, urging the living never to speak ill of the dead, as this would most certainly tarnish the community's reputation, and affect all its members, dead and alive).

Funerary art, furthermore, and most notably the plethora of painted stelae guarding the individual burial niches, and providing an interface of sorts between the realm of the dead and the world of the living, had its role in turning cemeteries into dynamic memoryscapes: as a physical space where collective and individual



Fig. 7. Alexandria, Greek Community Cemetery (January 2022). © Nikolas Dimakis.

memories are preserved, expressed, and experienced cemeteries are memoryscapes par excellence, both in the days of the Ptolemies and our own (and here please allow me to use the cemetery of the Greek Community of Alexandria to illustrate my point; Fig. 7): filled with gravestones, monuments, and other markers that bear the names, dates, and often personal inscriptions or symbols that commemorate the lives of the deceased, cemeteries serve as tangible representations of memory, allowing the living to remember and honor those who have passed away. More than that, the type and form of the monuments are designed to reflect the cultural, religious, and historical contexts in which they were created – or, as in the case of the neoclassical mausoleums adorning the Greek cemetery in Alexandria, connect the present community with its heritage, often eclectic or even imagined. The design, layout, and iconography of cemeteries and monuments adorning them can speak to us about the values, beliefs, and social structures of their particular time and place. As such, cemeteries act as repositories of collective memory, preserving the legacy of communities and societies. As designed landscapes intended to evoke certain emotions and reflections through the arrangement of graves, pathways, trees, and monuments, cemeteries create a space where memory is not just preserved but also experienced and felt by those who visit; in this, they may be seen as “Landscape of Memory”, that is environments shaped by memory itself.

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