

## **The global cosmopolis. Past, present and future of the city of Alexandria**

Public symposium - January 20-21, 2022

Leiden - Old Observatory (<https://www.universiteitleiden.nl/old-observatory>) room B 104 and online

Founded by Alexander the Great, Alexandria developed into the economic and cultural centre of the ancient world during the third century BCE. In the final two centuries BCE, Alexandria truly was a world city, a cosmopolis full of people and objects from all over Afro-Eurasia. As such it generated a remarkable amount of innovations. It seems that, throughout its long life and until the present day, Alexandria never completely lost its cosmopolitan character.

This public symposium presents a (selective) overview of the development of the city in these cosmopolitan terms. The first day will focus on the period of Antiquity; the second on the era after Antiquity and Alexandria's future.

This symposium is meant to present, for a general audience, some of the results of the Leiden VICI project 'Innovating objects' that was carried out in close cooperation with the *Centre d'Études Alexandrines* (<https://www.cealex.org/>). It also ties in with an ERC project entitled *Alexandria: (re)activating common urban imaginaries* that explores the relations between art, heritage and urban life for the city and aims at using Alexandria's cosmopolitan past to build a better (urban) future (<https://www.alexandria-urban-imaginaries.eu/>).

### **Thursday January 20 2022**

<https://universiteitleiden.zoom.us/j/63730188581?pwd=UUZDZGJ2ekYxRTcyaG82UC92M0FQZz09>

### **Alexandria in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt: urban image and cultural identity**

9.00-9.30 Alexandria: the global cosmopolis. Welcome and introduction (Miguel John Versluys - Leiden)

9.30-10.00 Egyptians and Greeks at Nelson Island, Aboukir: a contribution to the archaeology and history of the coast of Alexandria (lecture in French) (Paolo Gallo - Torino)

10.00-10.30 La crémation dans l'Alexandrie hellénistique et romaine : pratique élitiste ou marqueur socio-culturel d'une identité communautaire? (Cécile Harlaut - Alexandria & Leiden)

10.30-11.00 Coffee/tea

11.00-11.30 The tombs of Alexandria: cultural identity beyond ethnicity (Eleni Fragaki - Paris & Leiden)

11.30-12.00 The palace(s) of the Ptolemies - royal architecture as mirror of (elite) cosmopolitanism? (Stefan Riedel - Bochum, Münster & Leiden)

12.00-12.30 Current archaeological research in and around Alexandria (Marie Dominique Nenna - Paris & Alexandria)

12.30-13.00 Alexandria in Dakleh Oasis (Olaf Kaper - Leiden)

**Friday January 21 2022**

<https://universiteitleiden.zoom.us/j/67262820009?pwd=SmFzb2dxMDJWRWRYWFzeGNIZHovdz09>

**Alexandria after Antiquity: urban image and cultural identity**

9.00-9.30 Awaiting destruction? Alexandria in the Medieval Muslim imagination (Jelle Bruning - Leiden)

9.30-10.00 Kavafis and Alexandria: an idealized relationship (Frederick G. Naerebout – Delft & Leiden)

10.00-10.30 Alexandria: The far eastern capital of the Maghreb (Amro Ali – Cairo & Berlin)

10.30-11.00 Coffee/tea

**Alexandria now: Global heritage, art and development**

11.00-11.30 Building urban imaginaries and their discontents: cultural Globalisation and Heritage politics (Asma Mehan – Delft & Leiden)

11.30-12.00 Claiming Alexandria's past: imaginaries of Cleopatra's identity and race (Daniel Soliman – Leiden RMO)

12.00-12.30 Exhibition Alexandria "Past Future": brief presentation on the ongoing work by curators Edwin Nasr (Amsterdam & Beirut) and Arnaud Quertinmont (Mariemont)

## SUMMARIES

Miguel John Versluys

### **Alexandria: the global cosmopolis. Welcome and introduction**

Paolo Gallo

### **Egyptians and Greeks at Nelson Island, Aboukir: a contribution to the archaeology and history of the coast of Alexandria**

*(NB summary in English ; lecture will be in French)*

Nelson Island is an archaeological site located 4 km off Abuqir Cape and 18 km from the centre of Alexandria. It preserves the ruins of the sole necropolis of the Pharaonic period known nowadays on the coast of Alexandria; it also preserves the undisturbed remnants of a Greek colony founded over the necropolis during the early Ptolemaic period. This islet, now 400 metres long, was actually, in the time of Alexander the Great, the head of a long promontory connected with the mainland by a narrow isthmus. The ruins found on the islet, that are investigated by the University of Turin since 1997, represent only a small part of a large archaeological site now lost in the waters of the Mediterranean Sea.

The researches show that during the period of the last Pharaohs (Dynasties XXVI.-XXX.) this bare promontory was used as a necropolis by the inhabitants of Canopus and Heracleion, two large and rich cities situated only a few kilometres away from the islet and now sunk in the depths of Abuqir Bay.

After the conquest of Alexander the Great, Hellenic colonists built a new settlement on the old necropolis: a departure from the custom of the ancient Greeks, who did not build settlements on cemetery sites. The strategic position of the site explains this choice: the top of the promontory was certainly the best place in the bay from which control the maritime traffic of Heracleion, Egypt's largest harbour before the foundation of Alexandria.

The Greek settlement on Nelson Island became especially important under the reign of the king Ptolemy I. Its ancient name is still unknown, but the high level of interest shown by the new-born Ptolemaic Kingdom in this site is demonstrated by the construction of large public monuments. Huge stone walls 5 metres thick were built to protect the eastern part of the settlement, while on the western side a great Doric monument was constructed – probably a temple - whose columns were 7-8 meters high. Nearby, a massive public cistern was also built to provide the settlement with water. The structure is 26 metres long and 13 metres wide. With its four communicating basins and a full capacity of 1000 cubic-metres, this is probably the largest early Hellenistic cistern for the collection of rainwater known anywhere in the Mediterranean region.

Despite these governmental investments, the Greek settlement on Nelson Island had a very short life. For reasons still unknown, the site was abandoned at the end of the first quarter of the 3rd Century BC. Leaving their houses, the dwellers left many objects of daily life in their rooms where archaeologists found them undisturbed. The site shows no significant traces of occupation or burials dating to the Late Ptolemaic and Roman periods.

Cécile Harlaut

### **La crémation dans l'Alexandrie hellénistique et romaine : pratique élitiste ou marqueur socio-culturel d'une identité communautaire?**

Au sein de la sphère funéraire alexandrine, les urnes cinéraires, et en particulier les hydries de Hadra, sont l'une des images qui s'imposent à l'esprit lorsque l'on évoque une pratique emblématique de la capitale lagide comme l'est celle de la crémation. Cependant, les circonstances très particulières qui ont entouré les premières découvertes de ces urnes à la fin du XIXe siècle, et les inscriptions très spécifiques que portaient certaines d'entre elles, ont amené la communauté savante à donner de la crémation à Alexandrie l'image d'une pratique tendanciellement élitiste, réservée à un nombre restreint d'individus.

Néanmoins, dans le cadre de nos recherches dont on synthétise ici les derniers résultats, on a pu reconsidérer les divers contextes de découverte de ces urnes et la variété de leur typologie au cours de cinq siècles d'histoire alexandrine. L'examen anthropologique récent du contenu de plusieurs urnes a en outre livré des informations fondamentales sur l'identité des défunts et des indices permettant de reconstruire un schéma possible de la cérémonie funèbre. En rassemblant ces multiples données, on parvient ainsi à un tableau sensiblement différent, où la pratique de la crémation, plutôt qu'exclusive, semble avoir fonctionné au contraire comme un élément inclusif, participant à la formation d'une identité communautaire au sein de cette capitale cosmopolite.

Eleni Fragaki

### **The Tombs of Alexandria: Cultural Identity beyond Ethnicity**

Monumental funerary architecture is part of the best-preserved remains of Ptolemaic Alexandria. For this reason, it has often been used in modern scholarship as an indication of the cultural identity of the city's population. The layout, architectural articulation and painted decoration of the tombs was usually regarded as a reflection of the ethnicity of the owners and of their Greek or Egyptian background. Although the coexistence of elements from both cultures was sometimes admitted, it aroused some perplexity and was accordingly attributed to phenomena of Hellenization or Egyptianization. However, a closer analysis of these monuments reveals that the provenance of their structural and ornamental components is far more complex and wide-ranging. Moreover, ethnic labels in the context of Hellenistic Egypt tend to be disconnected from the origins of the inhabitants. Consequently, cultural identity, as expressed by the Alexandrian sepulchral constructions, turns out to be a more elaborate notion, which is related to the appropriation of forms and images from different horizons, that merged in the cosmopolitan environment of this global capital.

Stefan Riedel

### **The Palace(s) of the Ptolemies – Royal Architecture as Mirror of (Elite) Cosmopolitanism?**

In the Hellenistic period, the royal quarter was the political, administrative, and societal focal point of Alexandria. As a place of encounter between the royal and urban/civic sphere as well as of royal self-presentation, it is a suitable subject to illuminate aspects of cosmopolitanism from the beginnings of the city's foundation.

In this contribution, the exploration of the royal quarter's cosmopolitan character is pursued successively in two steps. Firstly, the written accounts and the archaeological record will briefly be summarized and combined to reconstruct the general layout of the royal quarter. Subsequently, specific concepts and elements of the royal quarter will be considered in order to highlight different interconnections of the Ptolemies and to address aspects of communication between the rulers and the Alexandrians (and others) which added to the cosmopolitan character of their residence city.

Marie Dominique Nenna

### **Current archaeological research in and around Alexandria**

See for field activities in 2019 and 2020 as well as recent publications:

<https://doi.org/10.4000/baefe.1094>

<https://doi.org/10.4000/baefe.2885>

<https://www.cealex.org/publications/>

Olaf Kaper

### **Alexandria in Dakhla Oasis**

The significance of Alexandria as Egypt's administrative capital and principal port city ensured that regular contacts with other parts of the country were maintained. It is of interest to look at one of the most remote parts of the country, the Dakhla Oasis, where the recent excavations, mainly at Amheida and Kellis, have uncovered some relevant evidence from the Roman period. Apart from the influence of the Alexandrian cults of Serapis and Isis on the local religious landscape in Dakhla, there is evidence of direct trade contacts in both directions. This illustrates the long arm of Alexandrian influence and control over its periphery, but also the contributions made by other regions to the life in the city.

Jelle Bruning

### **Awaiting Destruction? Alexandria in the Medieval Muslim Imagination**

Medieval Muslims, especially Egyptians, held the city of Alexandria in great esteem. They considered some of Alexandria's architecture as precious remnants of the age of prophets; they believed that the city was the ultimate place to defend the Muslim polity against enemies of Islam; and they held that the first signs of the Apocalypse would appear in Alexandria. This presentation discusses these images of Alexandria in medieval Muslim literature, especially in books written in the ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries CE, centuries in which Alexandria had lost its political, legal and intellectual centrality in Egypt. The presentation focuses on a theme that is particularly popular in that literature: Alexandria's destruction. We will see how medieval Muslim authors argued for the city's unique place in Islamic sacred geography and, by doing so, contributed to the development of an Egyptian-Muslim identity.

Frederick G. Naerebout

### **Kavafis and Alexandria: an idealized relationship**

Kavafis is generally seen as "the poet of the city", the poet who creates a mental image of Alexandria, who chronicles Alexandria's history. When one takes a proper look at Kavafis' biography and writings, there is, however, no close link between Kavafis and

Alexandria, except for the fact that it was his place of residence. "The poet of the city" is the result of myth-making -- but the myth is by now deeply ingrained in our collective memory, and Kavafis and Alexandria have become intertwined in a way they never were in real life.

Amro Ali

### **Alexandria: The far eastern capital of the Maghreb**

The late Moroccan philosopher Mohammed Abed Al-Jabri notes a tradition in which the borders of the Maghreb "end where couscous ends, and couscous ends in the east in Alexandria and Upper Egypt." Of course, Egypt historically has rarely been considered part of the Maghreb, which commonly ends at Libya at most. Yet the obscure tradition is quite interesting as it signals that distant Alexandria must have formed some reference point in the Maghrebi worldview. This talk will attempt to understand Alexandria's overlooked connection to the Maghreb and how the port city developed through centuries of migration and influence from the western side of the Mediterranean, up until the colonial era and the building of self-centered nation-states.

Asma Mehan

### **Building urban imaginaries and their discontents: cultural Globalisation and Heritage politics**

This presentation focuses on historical exchanges, urban developments, and Globalisation that originated in the West but transported into other contexts. The formation of new urban imaginaries and collective identity through the international exchanges, capitalist economic models, cultural exchanges, heritage representations, modernization paradigms, and their discontents will be analyzed.

Daniel Soliman

### **Claiming Alexandria's past: imaginaries of Cleopatra's identity and race**

Imaginaries of Cleopatra's identity and race are a source of both inspiration and controversy. The announcement of another Hollywood motion picture about the queen enraged people on social media for casting Israeli actress Gal Gadot as Cleopatra, instead of someone of African, more specifically Egyptian, descent. Egyptian actresses like the famous Youssra have played the role of Cleopatra in Egyptian productions. She stars in Youssef Chahine's *Alexandria Again and Forever* (1989), which presents vignettes of Alexander the Great and Cleopatra. Employing a clever story-telling device, the playful imaginaries of Alexandria's past encapsulate commentaries on contemporary Egyptian society and how it relates to the ancients. Chahine's Cleopatra is, however, explicitly rooted in European interpretations of the queen. The only black person in the film is Cleopatra's servant Eiras, who is depicted as a Sub-Saharan slave in the tradition of Renaissance and Neoclassical paintings. In contrast, it is Cleopatra who is imagined as a black African queen in the African diaspora. These imaginaries, perhaps first articulated in African-American communities, are part of long artistic tradition, mostly oral and musical, that is often omitted from studies of the memory of the Egyptian past. In this rich tradition, Cleopatra is not only a quintessential feminine beauty and an intelligent ruler, she is also emphatically African. Numerous jazz, funk,

rap and reggae songs are dedicated to this image of Cleopatra, demonstrating that, to this day, Alexandria's past is claimed in many different ways.

Edwin Nasr & Arnaud Quertinmont

**Exhibition Alexandria "Past Future": brief presentation on the ongoing work**

<https://www.alexandria-urban-imaginaries.eu/>