

## ***Late Antique Alexandria in the Byzantine and early Islamic Worlds***

Alexandria was the second city of the ancient Mediterranean alongside Rome, and later Constantinople. It had a unique role in the Late Antique East as the only major city there with a continuous development of classical art, architecture and scholarship going back unbroken to the Hellenistic period. Although not an imperial capital after the death of the last Ptolemaic monarch Cleopatra VII (in 30 B.C. when it became a part of the Roman empire), Alexandria retained its importance as a maritime trading port and intellectual centre until after the Arab conquest (A.D. 642). The city's architecture and art, their characteristics, and influence in a wider Mediterranean context are the foci of the Ancient Alexandria Project, directed by Judith McKenzie.

That Alexandria remained a centre of architectural innovation and artistic influence through the Byzantine and early Islamic periods is one of the central discoveries of the project (*The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, 300 B.C. to A.D. 700*, Pelican History of Art, Yale University Press, London 2007). Besides covering the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, this study includes church building in Late Antique Alexandria, the churches of Egypt, the role of Alexandria as a centre of architectural training and scholarship, its influence on Byzantine architecture, especially that of Constantinople (as on St Polyeuktos), and the continued development in Alexandria of architectural panoramas (which survive elsewhere depicted on pagan, Christian and Muslim buildings).

The artistic importance of Alexandria in Late Antiquity is evident from the wide geographic area of its influence which the study demonstrates: from buildings at sites such as Ravenna in Italy and Thessaloniki in Greece, to Gospel manuscripts from places ranging from western Europe to Ethiopia and Armenia. The extent of this influence in the East can be seen today in the major surviving religious buildings of the Holy Land (both Muslim and Christian – ranging from the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem and the Great Mosque in Damascus to the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem). This shows the continuity of the city's artistic role in the region for more than half a millennium. It is earlier observed on the Khasneh carved from the pink sandstone of Petra in Jordan, which gives a glimpse of the lost baroque architectural compositions of Ptolemaic Alexandria (J. McKenzie, *The Architecture of Petra*, repr. Oxford 2005).

From media coverage of recent discoveries in Alexandria, the impression is sometimes gained that the whole ancient city is now submerged underwater. However, it is not widely

appreciated that most of the area of the ancient city is still on dry land. It is the examination of that evidence which is central to this project, as well as information gleaned from detective work using written sources and archaeological evidence from other sites.

The current phase of the project concerns Late Antique Alexandrian art and its influence in the Byzantine and early Islamic worlds. Materials being examined in this new perspective include figured sculpture, textiles, ivories, wall-paintings, manuscript illuminations and mosaics. Just as the Khasneh provided the keys to the lost Ptolemaic architecture, so too the keys to other lost evidence from Alexandrian art are to be found throughout the Mediterranean; as well as elsewhere in Egypt and especially in Syro-Palestine.

Modern times, was not the only period of considerable western involvement in the Middle East. From the Hellenistic period to Late Antiquity features of a western mode of living are taken over while a distinctive cultural identity was kept by accommodating local customs and religions. In this Alexandria played a central role in the continuity and development of classical art in the East. This perspective differs from the old model of major cultural developments occurring only in Rome or Constantinople and then being introduced to the East. As comprehension of this interaction becomes more nuanced, it is particularly relevant to current efforts to increase understanding between the West and the Middle East.

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