

# *To combine reminiscences with history*

may seem a little odd. Whereas history deals with a common past with no time boundaries between its successive phases, reminiscences are limited to the life span of a single person.

However, I suppose, when it is a question of a civilisation which is still there, practised in a hundred subtle ways, knowingly or otherwise, the matter takes on a new perspective. Somehow it becomes acceptable to wander from the domain of history into the recesses of personal memory with nothing save a thin haze to bar the free passage from one terrain to the other. Could it be otherwise in the case of Alexandria, where the fragrance of two intermingling ancient civilisations still hangs in the air of the city in a subtle, yet persistent manner which only an old Alexandrian can sense and feel?

With these thoughts running through my mind, I reached my destination. It was getting on for mid-morning on Tuesday, October the 12th 1995, everything had been set in motion to continue the task, started a week earlier, of salvaging the sunken monuments around the Qaitbay on the border of the Anfoushy district, at the eastern tip of what had been the island of Pharos before Alexander the Great came to Egypt. The fort was built between 1477 and 1479 during the reign of the Mamluk Sultan Qaitbay on the foundations of the ancient lighthouse, which had

been completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1302 – the last of a series which started more than a century earlier. The lighthouse had been completed sometime in the third decade of the 3rd century B.C., early in the reign of Philadelphus, the second king of the Ptolemaic dynasty.

The efforts of the 11-man team of archaeologist-divers, headed by the French scholar Jean-Yves Empereur, head of the French Mission for Maritime Archaeology, had already succeeded during the previous week in bringing to the surface a few sizeable pieces, some Greek, the others Pharaonic. They had lain for thousands of years in their underwater captivity. That day three big pieces were salvaged; a huge statue of a Pharaonic king with part of the head and the crown, as well as the feet, missing (these, I was told, had been salvaged the day before) ; part of an obelisk and a headless sphinx with inscriptions in hieroglyphics.

The salvage work was fascinating. Those who had gathered clapped and cheered when the king was hauled up; then he was lowered carefully to rest on the moving quay that had been prepared for the occasion. I did not know whether the cheers were for the divers for their marvellous achievement, or for the great witness of the past who had, in a way, come back to life.

On my way home I could feel some questions gradually forming in my mind. What were these majestic monuments doing in this place, hundreds of kilometres away from more appropriate sites in Memphis, Thebes, Phylae, Dendera and similar places? What was the site of Alexandria like before Alexander the Great founded his magnificent city there? Was the Egyptian presence merely composed of a small, time-forgotten fishing village, a rugged island stretching lazily alongside the shore? And if this was the case after over a century of neglectful Persian rule, what about before that?

That evening I found myself unaccountably carried away by memory to much earlier days, back to the early thirties. At that time my family lived in a side street branching off Ragheb Pacha street near its northern end where it borders on the district of Attarin. It was an area, as I was to learn later, where the population was almost an even mixture of Egyptians and Greeks. In the street where we lived, a sprinkling of Greek families also lived in a number of flats in the opposite and neighbouring houses. At the end of the street there was a grocery owned by a

plump and, as I remember him now, middle-aged Greek by the name of Kosta. Much nearer home, there was a Greek bakery.

Every morning, as I set out on my way to primary school, the Greek children in our street, in their dark blue school caps and outfits, their brown leather book-cases strapped to their backs, would also be going to school. Their shrill voices filled the air. Somehow they had a great deal to say to each other in that early hour of the morning, and soon I could discern a few Greek terms and expressions such as *kale mera ela'do, ti theleis* and *de'xero*.

One day I asked my mother about those boys.  
Were they Alexandrian?

"Yes son."

"The same as we are?"

"The same as we are."

"But they don't speak Arabic properly!"

"Because they are Greeks and we are Egyptians."

"Why are we Egyptians, mother?"

"Because we speak Arabic."

"If they speak Arabic will they be Egyptians too?"

"You ask too many questions." The tone in my mother's voice was final.

As I grew older I learnt more about Alexandrian Greeks. By then the Second World War was almost over and I was nearing the end of my undergraduate years doing history at the Faculty of Arts which was still then in its younger years. The Greeks whom I met or knew then, unlike those of my childhood, could speak Arabic easily, sometimes fluently and with an Alexandrian accent. They were mostly neighbours, or fellow students.

Apart from those, however, I realised that there was a great deal more to know about the Alexandrian Greeks. They were not confined to our district, but lived in greater numbers in the neighbouring district of Attarin and in the more sophisticated districts in the Ramleh suburb to the east of the old city. They had a Greek Community Centre which went back to about 1830, to the time of Muhammad Ali, the founder of modern Egypt.

They owned quite a few trade companies, industrial firms, financial concerns, hotels, a number of schools, bookshops and newspapers, both dailies and weeklies. These were scattered about in the various districts of Alexandria and embedded in the daily life of the city. Those Greeks were real Alexandrians.

Almost Egyptian. Yes, almost Egyptian.

On that note I gradually woke from my reverie. The sight of the surfaced king, obelisk and sphinx came back into my mind and the cheering of the spectators was ringing in my ears.

The salvage work continued until the end of October. It was a successful season. The team was able to bring up 34 sizeable pieces altogether. These contained some Greek pieces of the greatest value, one of them perhaps a part of the main body of the lighthouse, and more monuments from the Pharaonic period with inscriptions engraved in hieroglyphic script.

A few weeks later Dr. Empereur gave a revealing lecture, complete with slides, on the salvage work of the season in the small, but cosy and time-honoured lecture hall of the Archaeological Society of Alexandria. The hieroglyphic inscriptions belonged to three Pharaohs: Seti I, his son Rameses II, both from the 19th dynasty, and Psemmatic II, of the 26th. The names of the Pharaohs struck me: all three of them had had Mediterranean interests for various reasons. Thus, it was probable that there might have been a naval base on the north coast, and monuments of their presence there.

At the end of the lecture I asked about the significance of the inscribed pieces. Dr. Empereur mentioned that they had been brought to Alexandria from Heliopolis.

"Was that attested to?"

"Yes, two ancient sources mentioned that the Ptolemaic kings were in the habit of bringing Egyptian monuments from all over the country to Alexandria."

"For any particular reason?"

"It must have been 'in vogue' at the time!"

A clever answer, no doubt. Perhaps even a possibility. But I felt there was something missing – a sort of a missing link.

That evening my thoughts went back to the late fifties, when I succeeded in getting the Faculty of Arts, where I was then teaching, to introduce a new course on Ancient Alexandrian Civilisation. I had started to look for all the Greek achievements in Alexander's glorious city: its institutions, its library, the *mouseion* or the ancient school of Alexandria with all it offered in the fields of thought, science, mathematics, medicine, philosophy and literature, the great Emporium and the Lighthouse, the Phare. The job was fascinating and rewarding.

One day, as I was leafing through the Odyssey, two or three lines stopped me. Odysseus had reached the island of Pharos by the Egyptian coast and he was describing what he saw:

"In that island there is a harbour with good anchorage, from which shapely ships are launched into the sea..."

The lines were revealing: Pharos, after all, had not been a lazy island stretching by the coast and populated by fishermen's boats. And that was some five hundred years before Alexander!

Then I read Gaston Jondet, the French Engineer-in-Chief of the Ports and Lighthouses of Egypt in the teens of the present century. He had discovered the remains of large harbour works, moles and quays, built with massive stones, in the Pharaonic fashion, lying under water off the western tip of what was once the island of Pharos.

Could this harbour be linked to Odysseus' harbour – with the three Pharaohs and their Mediterranean policy? Was that the missing link?

The sight of the Egyptian king, the obelisk and the sphinx was there, once more, before my eyes as I gradually came back from my journey through the years.

**LUFTI**

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*Alexandrian Reminiscences  
of an Old Historian*



Photo, Ahmed Hatiz

*Underwater archeological excavation on the site of the lighthouse, 1995.*

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