

Alexandria, Queen of the Mediterranean



There is no more impressive and majestic reflection of the achievement of the Greeks in Egypt than the great city which bore Alexander's name. It dominated the eastern Mediterranean world politically, culturally and economically for six-and-a-half centuries and rivalled the new eastern capital of the Byzantine empire, Constantinople, for another three. For the most part insulated from the political convulsions of the Hellenistic kingdoms, later protected by the penumbra of the Roman peace and far removed from the disturbances of barbarian invasion Alexandria had the freedom and the stimulus to develop into a spectacularly beautiful city. By the middle of the first century BC Diodorus of Sicily could describe it as 'the first city of the civilised world, certainly far ahead of all the rest in elegance and extent and riches and luxury.'¹ Materially enriched by the exploitation of its enormous potential for maritime trade and culturally unrivalled as the fountainhead of the Greek literary and intellectual tradition for more than a millennium, Alexandria was truly the queen of the Mediterranean.

It is hardly credible that this can literally have been part of the vision of its famous founder when he chose the site near the Egyptian village of Rhakotis, which was to remain the enclave of the native Egyptian inhabitants of the city. Alexander's motives and intentions are recorded only in sources which clearly benefit from hindsight. The traditional date for the foundation is April 7, 331 BC. Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* has the king visited by a venerable prophet in a dream, quoting a Homeric reference to the island of Pharos, enough to convince Alexander that he had found the right site:

'Since there was no chalk available, they used barley meal to describe a rounded area on the dark soil, to whose inner arc straight lines succeeded, starting from what might be called the skirts of the area and narrowing to the breadth uniformly, so as to produce the figure of a military cloak. The king was delighted with the plan, when suddenly a vast multitude of birds of every kind and size flew from the river and the lagoon on to the site like clouds; nothing was left of the barley meal and even Alexander was much troubled by the omen. But his seers advised him that there was nothing to fear (in their view the city he was founding would abound in resources and would sustain men from every nation); he therefore instructed his overseers to press on with the work.'²

After an initial sojourn at Memphis, Alexander's body found its last resting place in the greatest of the many cities he founded; our latest record of a visit to the site of the tomb, which has defied all subsequent attempts at identification, concerns the Roman emperor Caracalla in 215; he followed this act of homage to Alexander with a systematic massacre of the youth of the city.³

By about 320 BC Alexandria had displaced Memphis and become the new capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom of Egypt. But its position within Egypt was nevertheless always slightly anomalous. As a thoroughly Greek city, with an outlook and a culture alien to the native Egyptian tradition, it resembled an accretion rather than an integral part, even though it was endowed at first with a dependent territory in the surrounding delta lands; this was later assimilated to the rest of the delta and administered as an independent nome, except for properties owned by residents of

126 Alexandrian coin. The emperor Hadrian is shown in a chariot holding an aquila in his left hand. The personification of Alexandria meets him, her head covered in an elephant skin. The coin celebrates the visit of Hadrian to Egypt in AD 130.



Alexandria. The Bithynian orator Dio of Prusa, in a public speech made in Alexandria, probably in the reign of Vespasian (AD 69–79), went so far as to describe Egypt as a sort of ‘appendage’ of the city, presumably making some concession to his audience’s viewpoint, but this was not mere sophistry for the Roman prefect was regularly and officially described as ‘prefect of Alexandria and all Egypt’.⁴ However it was always the administrative hub of the country, first the nerve-centre of the Ptolemaic kingdom whose magnificent palace complex, later known as the Brucheion, was adorned and embellished by successive monarchs of the dynasty; the buildings subsequently became the headquarters of the Roman prefects until their destruction during the occupation by the Palmyrenes in the early 270s; but Alexandria remained the seat of Egypt’s government and administration throughout the Byzantine period.

The planning and layout of the city are associated with the name of the most famous architect of the day, Dinocrates of Rhodes, but the early stages of its physical growth cannot be traced with any certainty, apart from the construction of a few outstandingly imposing buildings. A vivid general impression of its splendours can be obtained from the long eye-witness description given by the geographer Strabo, who was a friend of the Roman prefect Aelius Gallus, and visited it during the first decade of Roman rule:



127 Alexandria, ‘Pompey’s Pillar’. David Roberts’ sketch of the misnamed monument, which still stands where it was erected in front of the Serapeum c. AD 299, just after the recapture of the city by the emperor Diocletian from the usurper Domitius Domitianus.

The whole city is criss-crossed with streets suitable for the traffic of horses and of carriages, and by two that are very wide, being more than one plethrum (*c.* 30 metres) in breadth; these intersect each other at right-angles. The city has magnificent public precincts and the royal palaces which cover a fourth or even a third of the entire city. For just as each of the kings would for love of splendour add some ornament to the public monuments, so he would provide himself at his own expense with a residence in addition to those already standing so that now, to quote Homer "there is building after building". All however are connected with the Harbour, even those that lie outside it . . . The so-called Sema (tomb) is also part of the royal palaces; this was an enclosure in which were the tombs of the kings and of Alexander'.

After describing the harbour and its surrounding buildings – theatre, temple of Poseidon, Caesareum, Emporium, warehouses and ship-houses, he continues:

'Then there is the suburb Necropolis in which are many gardens and tombs and installations suitable for the embalming of corpses. Within the canal there is the Serapeum and other ancient precincts which have been virtually abandoned because of the construction of new buildings at Nicopolis; for example, there is an amphitheatre and a stadium and the quinquennial competitions are celebrated there, while the old buildings have fallen into neglect. In a word, the city is full of dedications and sanctuaries; the most beautiful building is the gymnasium which has porticoes over a stade (*c.* 175 metres) in length. In the middle (of the city) are the law courts and the groves. There is also the Paneum, an artificially made height, conical in shape and resembling a hill and ascended by a spiral stair. From the top one has a panoramic view of the whole city lying below.'

Alexandria long continued to excite the admiration of the ancients. When the Arab general 'Amr entered with his army in 642 the invading throng gazed in wonder at the width and grandeur of the intersecting streets and shielded their eyes from the dazzle of the marble. Apart from the magnificently decorated subterranean burial chambers of the Ptolemaic and Roman periods, little remains today of the splendours of this city. But they are perhaps not completely irrecoverable even now; excavations undertaken in recent years at Kom-el-Dik, near to the centre of the city, afford a glimpse of some of the grand buildings of the later Roman period, a theatre, a set of baths, and a school in an area which must have been a gymnasium complex, an important centre of leisure and cultural pursuits.

For knowledge of most of the major structures we have to rely upon our ancient witnesses. The great lighthouse designed in the early Ptolemaic period, dedicated by one Sostratus of Cnidus (perhaps more likely the sponsor of the project than its architect) and known as the Pharos was one of the wonders of the ancient world. It stood on the site now called Fort Qait Bey, at the end of a causeway which divided the two great harbours of Alexandria, and was built in three storeys, the first square, the second octagonal and the third cylindrical, reaching a height of about 120 metres. The fire which burned within it was magnified and projected by a reflecting mechanism and could be seen from an immense distance out to sea.

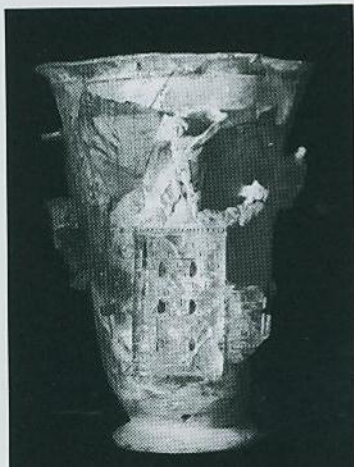
Another notable building of the Ptolemaic period, much embellished and reconstructed in the Roman era, was the great Serapeum, standing near the site of 'Pompey's Pillar', whose destruction in 391 has already been described. This grew eventually into a great complex of buildings set on a platform, a central shrine adorned

with marble columns and statuary, with outer colonnades linking it to a library which was an offshoot of the main library of Alexandria. It was certainly rivalled eventually in scale and splendour by the Caesareum begun by Cleopatra and completed in the reign of Augustus, as the description by the Alexandrian Jewish writer Philo makes clear:

'For there is elsewhere no precinct like that which is called the Sebasteum, a temple to Caesar-on-shipboard, situated on an elevation facing the harbours renowned for their excellent moorage. It is huge and conspicuous, decorated on an unparalleled scale with dedicated offerings, surrounded by a girdle of pictures and statues in silver and gold, forming a precinct of enormous breadth, embellished with porticoes, libraries, chambers, groves, gateways, broadwalks and courts and adorned with all the most extravagant fitments.'⁶

In front of it stood two great obelisks, which remained *in situ* until the late nineteenth century; one of them can now be seen on London's embankment, the other in Central Park, New York.

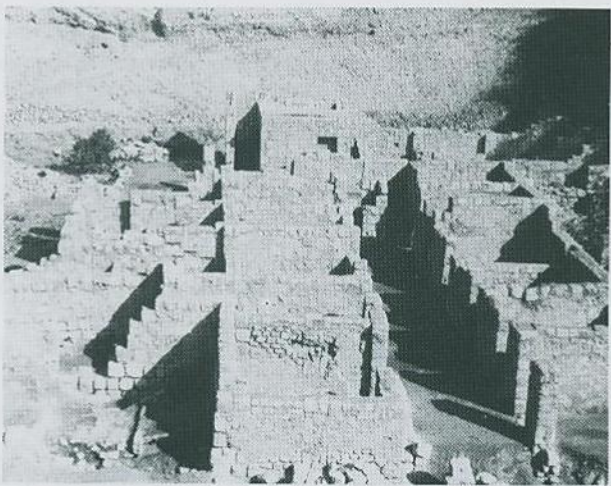
As in all the great cities of antiquity, some of the buildings of an earlier age were gradually adapted to changing circumstances. Strabo noted how the new constructions of the early Roman period in the area of the legionary barracks, known as Nicopolis, diminished the focal role of the Ptolemaic palace area. The eventual dominance of Christianity was to exert an even more striking effect on the face of the city. On the site of the old Serapeum, for instance, stood a Church of St John the Baptist. The Caesareum was one of the great buildings which survived long after its original function became obsolete (in fact, until the early tenth century). The emperor Constantine dedicated it as a Church of St Michael and in the middle of the fourth century it became the official seat of the Patriarch of Alexandria; it was damaged in riots between pagans and Christians in 366, restored in 368; in 415 it witnessed a brutal Christian attack on a female teacher of pagan philosophy named Hypatia who was stripped naked and dragged through the streets until she died; on



128 The Pharos beaker. This colourless glass vase, of Alexandrian manufacture, illustrates the famous lighthouse but the three stories are not shown in accurate detail. The Pharos is attached to a fortification wall and above its tower is a colossal male statue, probably representing Zeus Soter, with an oar or rudder resting in the crook of his left arm to signify maritime power.

September 14, 641 it was the destination of a great procession and the scene of a service of thanksgiving for the triumphant return of the Patriarch Cyrus. From the early fourth century onwards the city had accommodated the new buildings demanded by the Christian faith and by the time of the Arab conquest it was adorned with as many splendid churches as it had earlier had pagan temples; notably the Church of St Mark, the traditional founder of Christianity in Egypt, those of SS Theodore and Athanasius and many more. Of these virtually no trace remains today.

By the middle of the first century BC the population of this great city was reckoned by Diodorus of Sicily at 300,000 'free residents', a figure which should perhaps be extrapolated to an overall total of around half-a-million.⁷ Little is known of the physical conditions in which these people lived. The account of Caesar's war against Pompey refers to the elaborate labyrinth of cisterns which supplied the populace with fresh water and the crowding of the domestic buildings may be inferred from part of the 'city law', of the third century BC, which includes a regulation prescribing a space of one foot between houses!⁸ Dinocrates' original plan will certainly have been based on a rectilinear grid of intersecting streets and the inner city was girdled by an encircling wall on three sides. Although residential accommodation must soon have spread beyond the wall, the bulk of the population will have been compactly housed within it. Little is known about the domestic architecture. Wealthier residents might have owned more spacious houses of the peristyle or urban villa type. The one substantial archaeological relic of domestic building in the city lies in a small area close to the theatre and dates to the late Roman and Byzantine periods. It reveals relatively modest structures, composed of several stone-built units. One example consists of two ranges of residences separated by a central court, with commercial premises at street level and living quarters above linked by an external wooden gallery. How much of the city remains unrecovered can be



129 Alexandria (Kom-el-Dik), the town-houses. The block of houses consists of two ranges of modest units facing each other across a central axis. It was built in the third century and shows some affinities with the apartment-blocks at Ostia in Italy, but differs in being built of local limestone rather than brick.

gauged from a chronicle written by a Patriarch of Antioch in the twelfth century, but probably referring to the fourth century, which describes Alexandria as the greatest of the cities of the inhabited world and enumerates within it 2,478 temples, 6,152 courts, 24,296 houses (this figure may reckon multiple residences as single units), 1,561 baths, 845 taverns and 456 porticoes.⁹

Social Life

The city was divided into five 'quarters' designated by the first five letters of the Greek alphabet. One of these (Delta) and a substantial part of another (Beta) was monopolised in the early Roman period by the very large and important Jewish community of Alexandria. Native Egyptians were concentrated in the west, around the site of the old village of Rhakotis. The other residential areas will have contained the majority of the Greek or hellenised population of the city. The immigrants attracted to the new city in the early Ptolemaic period were drawn from many areas of the Mediterranean world; from Thrace, Macedonia and mainland Greece, from the Aegean islands, the coastal cities of Asia Minor, from Persia, Syria and Judaea. Even Sicilians were represented if we can take literally the vivid scene in an *Idyll* of Theocritus, probably written in the 270s BC, in which two loquacious women attend a festival of Adonis: a bystander complains at them, 'My good women, do stop that ceaseless chattering – perfect turtle-doves – they'll bore one to death with all their broad vowels' and one of them replies, 'It's Syracusans you're ordering about and let me tell you we're Corinthians by descent like Bellerephon. We talk Peloponnesian and I suppose Dorians may talk Dorian.'¹⁰ The flow of immigrants probably never dried up completely. Later on Romans or Italians were perhaps attracted by trade or stayed on after completing military or administrative service; in addition to all these, Dio of Prusa catalogues Libyans, Cilicians, Ethiopians, Arabs, Bactrians, Scythians and Indians.¹¹ And there was also, of course, a steady influx of Egyptians from up-country, ready to seize the opportunities offered by trade, commerce or, after several decades of Ptolemaic rule, by the gradual opening up of official positions to non-Greeks.

By no means of all of these residents were entitled to claim the privileges of free citizens of Alexandria. The model of the Greek city dictated that such privileges and status would be quite severely restricted. How the original composition of the citizen body was determined we do not know, but the designation of the citizen by enrolment in a tribe and a deme, with distinctively Greek names, is commonly found on documents and inscriptions. From this citizen body almost all Egyptians would be excluded in the early period, though it later became increasingly possible for individuals to attain entry and subsequently, in some cases, Roman citizenship. The Jews were also systematically excluded, although they possessed their own particular (though lesser) privileges which, amongst other distinctions, marked them off from other sections of the populace. Clearly, some were attracted to hellenisation by the Greek institutions around them. A famous letter of the emperor Claudius to the Alexandrians contains an admonition that:

'the Alexandrians show themselves forbearing and kindly towards the Jews, who for many

years have dwelt in the same city, and dishonour none of the rights observed by them in the worship of their god but allow them to observe their customs as in the time of the deified Augustus, which customs I also, after hearing both sides, have confirmed. And, on the other hand, I explicitly order the Jews not to agitate for more privileges than they formerly possessed . . . and not to force their way into the games of the gymnasiarchs or *kosmētai*, while enjoying their own privileges and sharing a great abundance of privileges in a city not their own and not to bring in or admit Jews from Syria or those who sail down from Egypt.⁷¹²

The privileges enjoyed by the members of the Greek citizen body were clearly substantial and jealously guarded. Not merely the right to participate in Greek games, but official recognition of superior status to Egyptians and others, certain reductions in tax liability, guarantees of better treatment under a judicial structure which systematically linked social status and legal privilege, the possibility of a share in the largesse which might be offered to the citizens by a monarch or an emperor. Roman emperors judged it politic, especially when they were new to the throne, to protect them:



130 Alexandria (Kom-el-Shuqafa), the catacombs. This extensive complex of underground burial chambers dates from the second century AD and shows a combination of Egyptian and Greek elements. In the foreground is the exit from the shaft down which the corpse would be lowered to its destination in the burial chamber. At the higher level there was a rotunda entrance and a banqueting hall for relatives and friends of the deceased. Behind the pillared vestibule lies the burial chamber in which there are three rock-cut niches with false sarcophagi and bas-relief wall-decorations showing traditional Egyptian deities attending the corpse.

'(Being well aware of) your city's outstanding loyalty towards the emperors, and having in mind the benefits which my deified father conferred on you . . . and for my own part also . . . having a personal feeling of benevolence towards you, I have commended you first of all to myself, then in addition to my friend and prefect Pompeius Planta, so that he can take every care in providing for your undisturbed tranquillity and your food supply and your communal and individual rights.'

wrote the emperor Trajan in AD 98.¹³

All this was the model – ultimately derived from the character of the free cities of old Greece and Asia Minor – for the groups of Greek settlers in the other towns of Egypt and the other so-called Greek cities, Naukratis, Ptolemais and, later Antinoopolis. It carried with it, too, certain distinctive features of civic governmental structure, peculiar to Alexandria and the Greek cities. Thus the constitution of Alexandria established at its foundation will have made provision for the existence of a town council and colleges of elected magistrates (gymnasiarchs, *kosmētai*, *exēgētai*) who were responsible for the limited degree of civic autonomy which the monarchs allowed – supervision of the citizen roll, presentation of a limited range of business to the citizen assembly, administration of local revenues, festivals, games, public facilities and so on,

The council, above all, was the focus of prestige through which the elite satisfied local political ambitions but at some point during the Ptolemaic period (perhaps in the mid-second century BC) Alexandria lost its civic council, possibly in reprisal for public disorderliness or vociferous opposition to the monarch. The Alexandrians petitioned the emperor Augustus for its restoration on the grounds that it would safeguard the imperial revenues and protect the purity of the Alexandrian citizen body against contamination by 'uncultured and uneducated' infiltrators (probably a veiled reference to the Jews).¹⁴ The attempt clearly failed for although the letter of



131 Alexandria (Kom-el-Shuqafa), male statue.

The wall-niches on either side of the vestibule contain statues, one male and one female, presumably representing the principal members of the family or group to whom the catacomb belonged. The stance and clothing are traditionally Egyptian in style; the modelling of the head is clearly Greek.

the emperor Claudius promised to look into the matter again after reiterated requests, it was not until 200 that Alexandria was given permission to reinstitute its council; and the privilege was considerably diluted by the fact that at the same time it was extended to the nome-capitals in the delta and the valley.

Whatever small degree of independence and prestige the restoration offered was fairly shortlived; by the end of the third century effective control of civic affairs devolved more and more upon officials appointed by and responsible to the central imperial authority. The weight of monarchical or imperial authority must always have been evident in the presence of the machinery of the Ptolemaic bureaucracy and the city-garrison, then the retinue of the Roman prefect, the legionary camp and the Alexandrian arm of the Roman imperial navy, but the civic authority had retained some degree of immunity and independence from it. In the Byzantine period control was exercised by the prefect and his staff and there was scarcely even lip-service to the fiction of freedom. If the descendants of the civic aristocrats of earlier centuries had ambition for public position they now satisfied it by obtaining lucrative posts in government service, where they had plenty of opportunity to oppress their less fortunate fellow-citizens.

Throughout almost the whole of our period the methods and instruments of control were of the utmost importance for the Alexandrian mob was notoriously volatile and violent. Early in the period, Theocritus' Syracusan ladies can compliment Ptolemy II Philadelphus for having made the streets safe: 'Nowadays no ruffian slips up to you in the street Egyptian fashion and does you a mischief — the tricks those packets of rascality used to play.'¹⁵ This, however, is literature not fact and the factual record from the end of the third century BC onwards is horrific.

Some of the incidents reported appear trivial in themselves, for instance the stoning of the Roman prefect Petronius in the reign of Augustus or the vengeance wrought in about 59 BC on a member of a Roman embassy who accidentally killed a cat, witnessed by the historian Diodorus of Sicily.¹⁶ But the not infrequent failure to control the mob could and did have far-reaching political consequences. The root of troubles changed in the course of time. During the last two centuries of the Ptolemaic period the Alexandrian mob played an important part in dynastic intrigue within the ruling house. It ensured the accession of Ptolemy V Epiphanes against a palace clique led by the courtier Agathocles and his sister. In the early 160s BC it was incited by a certain Dionysius Petosarapis to attempt the murder of Ptolemy VI Philometor on the grounds that he was planning to murder his brother Euergetes, the people's favourite. In 80 BC it dragged Ptolemy XI Alexander II out of the palace to the gymnasium and assassinated him, having been enraged by the murder of his wife after only nineteen days of a joint reign; and during the reign of Ptolemy XII Auletes it displayed violent and implacable hostility to his pro-Roman sympathies and manoeuvres.

Little wonder, then, that the Roman emperors were at pains to appear conciliatory, albeit that the velvet glove concealed the iron hand in the form of a strong legionary force stationed virtually within the city at Nicopolis. But in the early Roman period there were still notable examples of violence, most of them internal and occasioned by the hostility of the Alexandrian Greeks, aided by the Egyptian rabble, to the large Jewish population of Alexandria, perhaps particularly in reaction to the tend-



132 Alexandria (Kom-el-Dik), the baths. The large and impressive brick built baths of the third century AD lay close to the theatre and were supplied by an adjacent complex of water cisterns. On the highest of the three levels is the cold bath; beneath it is the warm bath and at the base is the steam-bath. The excavation reveals the underground columns of the hypocaust.

ency amongst the Jews to hellenise. Philo gives a graphic description of the violence perpetrated in the reigns of Tiberius and Gaius against the Jews and their synagogues by groups of Alexandrian Greeks organised in guilds and cult associations: houses were overrun and looted, victims were dragged out and burned or torn limb from limb in the market-place.¹⁷ Rival delegations went to Rome to plead their respective cases. Philo, who was himself a member of the Jewish embassy, describes how his party pursued the deranged emperor Gaius from Rome to the Bay of Naples and waited for a hearing whilst the emperor enjoyed himself in his seaside villas.¹⁸ Predictably, no coherent reaction was forthcoming until his successor Claudius attempted to pour oil on the waters.¹⁹

More generalised dissidence on the part of the Alexandrian Jews is evident in the riots which occurred in sympathy with the outbreak of revolt in Judaea in AD 66 and necessitated punitive action by two Roman legions and extra drafts of troops from Libya. Fifty years later, the much more serious and widespread Jewish revolt led to the massive depletion of the Alexandrian Jewish community, an event from which it took a very long time to recover.

The attitudes of the hostile Alexandrian Greeks appear in a vivid and curious form. In the late second and early third centuries Alexandrian nationalism is expressed in a literary compilation of fictional 'Martyr-acts' which purport to record encounters, in a form which is evidently based on genuine documentary reports of such proceedings, between Alexandrian dissidents and Roman emperors.²⁰ The historical dates of these episodes range from the reign of Tiberius (14–37) to that of Commodus (180–192); the earlier examples are pervaded by expressions of anti-Jewish feeling on the part of the Alexandrian Greeks and involve real persons known to have been involved in the disturbances against the Jews. Thus one Isidorus before the emperor Claudius:

'My lord Caesar, what do you care for a twopenny-halfpenny Jew like Agrippa? . . . I accuse them (i.e. the Jews) of wishing to stir up the entire world . . . They are not of the same nature

as the Alexandrians, but live rather after the fashion of the Egyptians . . . I am neither a slave nor a girl-musician's son but gymnasiarch of the glorious city of Alexandria, but you are the cast-off son of the Jewess Salome!²¹

Isolated incidents such as Caracalla's massacre of the Alexandrian populace in 215 might partly explain the hostility, but apart from this it is difficult to see what underlay such an upsurge of nationalistic feeling, reflected generally in the abusive tone adopted towards the emperors – Commodus, for example, is described by an Alexandrian as tyrannical, boorish and uncultured in a text which makes no reference at all to the Jews.²² But, from the point of view of the literary genre, it is interesting to note how close these compositions are in form and style to the records of Christian Martyr-acts.

Reports of violence continue throughout the later centuries of our period. A visitor in the third century writes to his parents at home in Oxyrhynchus: 'things have happened the like of which hasn't happened through all the ages. Now it's cannibalism, not war . . . So . . . rejoice the more, my lady mother, that I am outside the city.'²³ In the Byzantine period, with the decline of the gymnasia as focal points of Greek culture, the emphasis shifted to the amphitheatre, the Roman-style chariot races and the potentially violent factions of supporters whose muscle could be mobilised for political purposes, threatening the city's food supply from up-river and imperilling the position of the civil or ecclesiastical authorities in the city; there is no doubt, for instance, that the factions of Alexandria played an important role in the revolt of Heraclius against the tyrant Phocas in 609.

But the most common theme of the urban violence in this era is linked with the struggles between pagans and Christians, as in the events which led to the destruction of the Serapeum in 391. In the disturbances of 412–5, which culminated in the murder of the pagan teacher of philosophy, Hypatia, the hostility of the Christian mob was directed at her because she was suspected of having undue influence with the civil prefect. In these episodes the revived Jewish community makes an interest-



133 Alexandria (Kom-el-Shuqafa), burial niches. In the corridors leading off the main burial chamber were scores of *loculi* built to hold the humbler members of the family or group to which the catacomb belonged. The names and ages of the deceased were marked in red paint on the stone slabs which sealed the niches.

ing re-appearance; the violence began when the Alexandrian Christians attacked the Jews in the theatre on the Jewish Sabbath and was escalated by the influx of monks from the surrounding areas.²⁴ The catalogue of atrocities could easily be extended. Alexandria remained a place where the mobilisation of mass violence was relatively easy and effective, whatever was the issue, real or imaginary, at stake. 'Egyptian' Christians could be incited to violence against 'Greek' pagans just as easily as Alexandrian 'Greeks' against Jews.

The most obvious feature of Alexandrian social life which contributed to this ugly characteristic was the vibrant interest in public entertainment and spectacles. The theatre and the hippodrome frequently figure in such events and the Alexandrian populace was, in fact, notorious for its addiction to such pastimes. In the speech which he delivered at Alexandria Dio of Prusa devoted a good deal of attention to



134 Alexandria (Kom-el-Dik), the theatre.

The magnificent auditorium of the theatre was adorned with columns of Italian marble at the rear. It was probably originally constructed in the third century AD and later modified. Sixth-century graffiti carved on the seats reveal a connection with the Blue and Green factions associated with the popular rival teams of charioteers in the hippodrome.

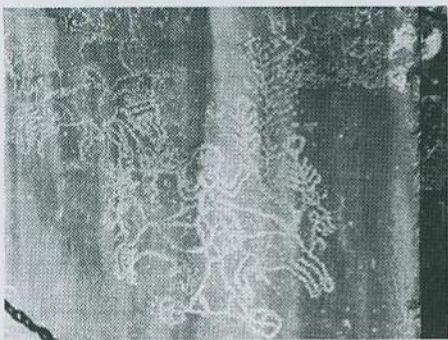
this unseemly frivolity and his remarks find curiously striking contemporary parallels. Particularly popular were the citharodes, who played the harp and sang: 'a potpourri of effeminate songs and music-hall strummings of the lyre and the drunken excesses of monsters which, like villainous and ingenious cooks, they mash together in their own recipes to excite their greedy audiences.'²⁵ As for the audiences: 'you sit dumbfounded, you leap up more violently than the hired dancers, you are made tense with excitement by the songs . . . song is the occasion of drunkenness and frenzy . . . if you merely hear the twang of a harp-string, as if you had heard the call of a bugle, you can no longer keep the peace.'²⁶ The Alexandrian theatre clagues had their own trademarks too – the emperor Nero is said to have been so captivated by the rhythmic applause of some Alexandrian sailors from the fleet which had just put into Italy that he sent for some more.²⁷ Hardly more elevated in tone and content than the performance of the singers, dancers, acrobats and jugglers were the vulgar dramatic pieces known as mimes. The mimes of Herodas, composed early in the Ptolemaic period and containing references to contemporary Alexandria, survive on papyrus and are excellent examples of the genre; sketches and dialogues populated by jealous, adulterous or unsatisfied wives, pimps and prostitutes, tradesmen and truant schoolboys.²⁸

The grisly connection between such diversions and public violence is made explicit by Philo in a description of a show in the Alexandrian theatre:

'The first spectacle, lasting from dawn till the third or fourth hour consisted of Jews being scourged, hung up, bound to the wheel, brutally mauled and haled for their death march through the middle of the orchestra. After this splendid exhibition came dancers and mimes and flute-players and all the other amusements of theatrical contests.'²⁹

As for the hippodrome and its chariot-races, Dio of Prusa thought this perhaps a necessary evil because of the 'moral feebleness and idleness of the masses,' but disapproved heartily of the drunken excesses of the spectators: 'not a man keeps his seat at the games; on the contrary you fly faster than the horses and their drivers, and it is comical to see the way you drive and play the charioteer, urging the horses on and taking the lead and falling off.'³⁰ It is hard to overemphasise the importance of the hippodrome in the Byzantine period, when the leading charioteers were public celebrities, those who bred horses for racing were granted privileges of tax exemption and the clagues of rival supporters could make or break a prefect, a Patriarch or even an emperor.

No less important in its own way was the public ritual, including games and processions, associated with the many and varied Alexandrian religious cults. From the beginning of the Ptolemaic period innumerable temples, shrines and priesthoods developed, celebrating some of the traditional gods of old Greece, Zeus, Dionysus, Aphrodite, the Egyptian or Graeco-egyptian deities, Isis, Sarapis and Anubis, as well as the deified members of the ruling house and Alexander in particular, whose priesthoods carried great prestige. The importance of the public spectacles associated with such cults is illustrated by the extravagance of the great procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus described by Callixenus of Rhodes; here cult of Dionysus is the focal point and the floats exhibited extravagant scenarios of the god and his cult-



135 Alexandria (Kom-el-Dik), inscription from the theatre. The block of stone discovered in the theatre carries two incised drawings of charioteers belonging to the Green team. The inscriptions read 'Long live Doros' and 'Long live Kalotychos'. The schematic representations, which were cut at different times, show the victorious drivers in their chariots each drawn by a pair of horses. The lower charioteer is represented in full face, whilst the horses are in profile. His right hand holds a whip, the left a palm and crown as well as the rein.

followers, the grape harvest, an enormous golden phallus fifty metres long with a gold star three metres in circumference at the end, to emphasise the priapic aspect of his worship.³¹ Contemporary Alexandrian literature gives us the excited reaction of Theocritus' two Syracusan ladies, who escape from their humdrum world of shopping, clothes and baby-minding, to the visual delights of a festival of Adonis in the royal palace, as they admire the intricately woven tapestries depicting the god: 'the figures stand and turn so naturally, they're alive. not woven . . . how marvellous he is lying in his silver chair with the first down spreading from the temples, thrice loved Adonis, loved even in death.'³²

The advent of Roman emperor-worship brought no fundamental change here – Augustus might appear as Zeus Eleutherios Sebastos, an Augustan guild of imperial slaves might be found, Germanicus might issue an edict forbidding the Alexandrians to worship him as a god, but these are differences of detail, not kind. The impact of Christianity was a different matter. Apart from anything else, it broke the importance of priesthoods and cult-associations connected with pagan religion, and with them an important network of social structures. It could neither tolerate nor accommodate emperor-worship or any other pagan cult from a theological standpoint, though it might promiscuously adapt pagan literary or artistic motifs. Paganism maintained its precarious survival in intellectual and literary circles where its adherents were easily identified and often persecuted after the mid-fourth century. The social importance of these groups is clear, but limited. The Alexandrian mob of the Byzantine period found its opiate not only in chariot-races but in popular Christianity and it would pack the great churches to be inspired by the sermons of its ecclesiastical leaders. When the powerful and charismatic fourth-century Patriarch Athanasius returned from one of his several periods of exile, the scene was likened by Gregory of Nazianzus to the entry of Christ into Jerusalem. The citizens of Alexandria poured out to welcome him,