

FAWZI EL FAKHARANI


THE KIBOTOS OF ALEXANDRIA

In his description of the plan of Alexandria and its ports, the ancient Greek geographer Strabo¹ mentioned the artificial harbour called «the Kibotos». Strabo stated that the port of Eunostos was situated in front of the Kibotos, west of the Heptastadion (plan I). For historians and archaeologists, the nature, shape, location and date of the construction of the Kibotos present an enigma that has not yet been solved².

In the conception of Strabo, the Kibotos meant «the chest or the box», because this is the meaning found in all Greek lexica³ as well as in the writings of the ancient Greek authors such as Hecataeus, Simonides, Euripides and others. Yet apart from Strabo, no author ever mentioned the word «Kibotos» in connection with ports. Thus it seems that for Strabo the sides of the Kibotos of Alexandria must have met at right angles forming a square or a rectangle resembling a box. And since Eunostos lay, as Strabo says, in front of the closed harbour (namely the Kibotos) which was dug by the hand of man⁴, the Kibotos must have been dug on the mainland which forms the southern side of Eunostos. The entrance of the Kibotos was thus on its northern side. This is the shape which the Kibotos took in all the plans of ancient Alexandria made by modern historians, geographers, archaeologists and cartographers such as Mahmoud Bey, Kiepert, Breccia, Adriani and others (plan I).

Yet one wonders why the Kibotos was located in the port of Eunostos and not in the Great Harbour (i.e. the East Port). I think that this must have certainly been due to the fact that the port of Eunostos was open to the west. This opening allowed the sea currents, which always move from west to east following the rotation of

the globe, to enter the port of Eunostos without any hindrance. Thus the ships in the port of Eunostos were exposed to the danger of these currents. But since the canal which connected the Mediterranean with the lake opened into the port of Eunostos, west of the Heptastadion, it was necessary, to safeguard its entrance for the ships passing through it. Therefore, I believe that the Kibotos was dug in the southern side of Eunostos around the entrance of the lake canal to give with its western side a safe entry for the ships into the canal. On the other hand, the location of the Heptastadion to the west of the East Port facing the sea currents furnished security for the ships which moored in the East Port.

Considering the plan of ancient Alexandria, as described by Strabo and laid down by modern scholars, we recognize a Phoenician plan for the port of Eunostos and the East Port. This plan was adopted by Alexander the Great for military purposes⁵ when he joined the island of Pharos with the opposite mainland by means of the Heptastadion, thus recalling the Phoenician ports of Sidon and Tyre. For the strip of land situated between the sea and the lake, Deinocrates the architect adopted the Greek Hippodamian town planning as seen in the towns of Miletus, Thurii, Piraeus and Priene. Yet the Kibotos with its rectangular or square form has no parallel in any ancient Greek, Roman or Phoenician ports. But since the Kibotos is found only in Alexandria which falls in the Egyptian territory, it is necessary to investigate if such a shape as that of the Kibotos has any origin in Pharaonic Egypt. Strangely enough, this rectangular shape of the Kibotos with its entrance in the north side resembles the sign P+r  which means «House»⁶ in the Hieroglyphic script. It is known

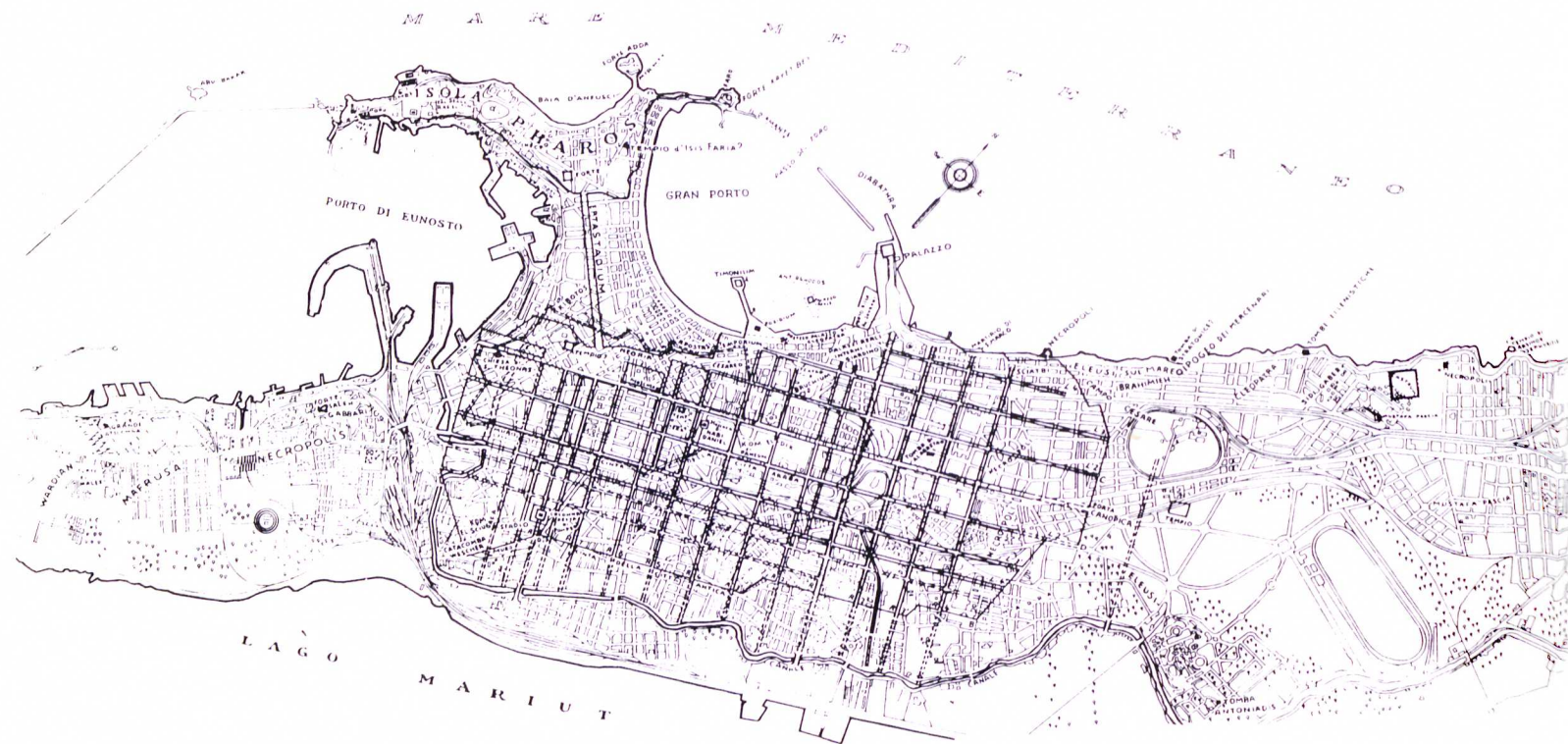
¹ STRABO, XVII, 792, 795.

² H.L. JONES, *The Geography of Strabo*, vol. VIII, Loeb 1949, pp. 26, 27 and note 2.

³ LIDDEL SCOTT, *Lexicon*, cf. «Kibotos».

⁴ STRABO, XVII, 792; Jones, *op. cit.*, p. 26, note 2.

⁵ STRABO, XVII, 1, 6, 792.



Plan I - Alexandria and its ports.

that in pictographic writings such as the Hieroglyphs, the picture often embodies the meaning. Thus as the house encloses within its walls the inhabitants and their belongings to give them security, it seems that the Egyptian mentality also saw in the Kibotos, being a port, the same security to ships from the danger of the sea currents which the ships in the port of Eunostos encounter. This similarity in function and security between the house and the port was certainly in the mind of the ancient Egyptians since they called « the port of Memphis » « prw-nfr » meaning « the beautiful house »⁷.

Moreover, several rectangular ports belonging to the Pharaonic period were discovered in Egypt on the Mediterranean and on the lake, not far from the site of the Kibotos of Alexandria.

They also resemble in their shape the Hieroglyphic sign « p+r » and recall the shape of the Kibotos.

The engineer Jondet, during his survey of the western port of Alexandria (formerly the port of Eunostos) in the second decade of this century, came upon a submerged port extending between the western end of the island of Pharos to the east and the submerged rock of Abu bakkar to the west. This submerged port of Pharos, as it is called, is rectangular in shape, and has an entrance in its southern side. Thus its western side safeguarded the ships which moored inside this port from the sea currents. Jondet assigned it to the New Pharaonic Kingdom during the Ramesside period⁸, a date which was accepted

de Pharos, in *Mémoires présentés à l'Institut Egyptienne*, Tome IX (Le Caire 1916), pp. 13 ff.: 71-74; pl. IV; Ev. BRECCIA, *Cenni storici sui porti d'Alessandria dalle origini ai nostri giorni*, in *Bull. Soc. Roy. d'archéol. d'Alexandrie*, 21, 1925, p. 6.

⁶ A. GARDINER, *Egyptian Grammar*, 2nd ed., London 1950, pp. 8, 9.

⁷ GAUTHIER, in *Annales de Services des Antiquités Egyptiennes*, 1911, vol. 35.

⁸ M.G. JONDET, *Les Ports Submergés de l'Ancienne Ile*



Fig. 1 - Marea. The Pharaonic Port.



Fig. 2 - Marea. The construction of the Pharaonic port, detail.



Fig. 3 - Marea. Remains of the port of Psammaticus.

by Weil, who believed that it was built by the Cretans⁹.

Similarly in the excavations which I carried out at Marea, on the southern coast of Lake Mareotis 40 kms S/W. of Alexandria, I came upon a rectangular port with an entrance on its north side (Fig. 1). This port belongs, as it seems, to the late Pharaonic period, (i.e. the Saitic period) on account of the method of construction (Fig. 2) and its location next to the fort erected by Psammaticus of the 26th Dynasty to

the west¹⁰ (Fig. 3) and the Pharaonic necropolis to the south (Fig. 4)¹¹.

In addition to these ports, I found another rectangular port totally dug in the rock on the southern coast of lake Mareotis (Figg. 5, 6) next to the modern village of Ikingi Mariut 20 kms S/W. of Alexandria. Its entrance is also on its north side. This port belongs most probably to the late Pharaonic period, just like the port of Marea.

It is interesting to point out the similarities

⁹ WEIL, *Bull. Inst. Franc. Arch. Orient.*, XVI, 1919.

¹⁰ J.H. BREASTED, *A History of Egypt from the Earliest Times to the Persian Conquest*, London 1920, 2nd ed., p. 569.

¹¹ F. FAKHARANI, *Recent Excavations at Marea in Egypt, Röm. Byz. Aegypten, Aegyptiaca Treverensia*, II (Mainz am Rhein, 1983), p. 176.



Fig. 4 — Marea. The Pharaonic Necropolis.



Fig. 5 — Ikingi Mariut. The port: the entrance.

between all these ports and the port of Kibotos, all of which are not far from one another. All of them are rectangular in shape with an entrance on one side. In the Kibotos as well as in the ports of Marea and Ikingi Mariut the entrance is on the north side. In addition, while the port of Marea is totally constructed with huge blocks either polygonal or rectangular with no mortar joining the blocks, the port of Ikingi Mariut is

hollowed out of the rock. The Kibotos is partly hollowed out of the rock like the port of Ikingi Mariut and partly constructed like the port of Marea. Thus it seems clear that the Kibotos adopted in its plan the rectangular Pharaonic type of ports which was used for Mediterranean ports and lake/ports.

The date of the construction of the Kibotos presents another problem since there is no re-

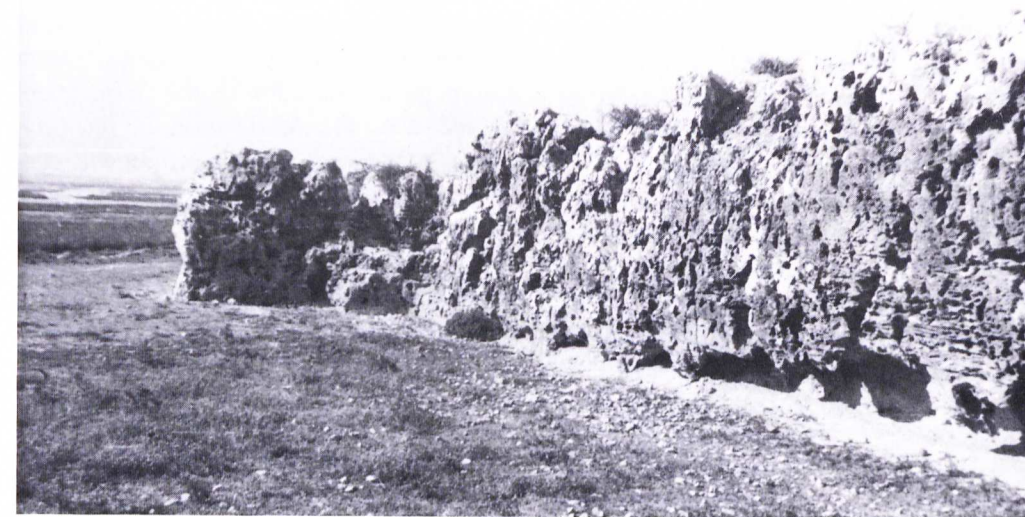


Fig. 6 — Ikingi Mariut. The port: lateral view.

cord whatsoever giving the date of its construction. Yet since Strabo visited Alexandria in 25/24 B.C., the Kibotos must have been built before that date. Was it constructed by Alexander the Great when he laid the foundation of Alexandria? Or was it built under the Ptolemies or the Romans before 25 B.C.? Or was it built during the Pharaonic period sometime before Alexander the Great?

Even if the Kibotos was constructed by Alexander the Great or during the Ptolemaic or Roman rule of Egypt, there is no doubt that Egyptian brains or experience were behind it. Even if it was not executed by an Egyptian architect, its form is Pharaonic and the Greek or Roman architects did not have any prior experience in building such ports. This conclusion is further corroborated by the location of the Kibotos, for it was constructed in the western district of Alexandria, a district which was always inhabited by the native Egyptians before and after the foundation of the city¹².

Yet, in addition to its Pharaonic form and the similarities in its method of construction

with the neighbouring Pharaonic ports, there are other elements which confirm, in my view, the Pharaonic dating of the Kibotos. In the first place we have a statement by Strabo in the 17th book of his *Geography* which throws much light on the date of the Kibotos. In his own words Strabo wrote: « ἐπελθὼν δὲ Ἀλέξανδρος ἰδὼν τὴν εὐκαιρίαν, ἔγνω τευχίζειν ἐπὶ λυμένοι τὴν πόλιν », meaning that: « when Alexander visited the place and saw the advantages of the site, he resolved to fortify the city on the harbour ». This statement needs an explanation for three of its elements, namely, the harbour that existed on the site of Alexandria before Alexander, i.e., in the Pharaonic period, the city next to it, and the reason which made Alexander fortify it. It is known that on the site of Alexandria stood in the Pharaonic period several villages (16 in number according to some ancient authors)¹³ including Pharos and the village of Rhakotis¹⁴. They must have extended over a considerable area so as to be called « πόλιν » by Strabo. They were located certainly next to the port and were inhabited by the native Egyptians during the late Pharaonic

¹² EV. BRECCIA, *Alexandria ad Aegyptum*, English ed., Bergamo 1922, p. 33.

¹³ PSEUDO-CALLISTHENES, I, 32.

¹⁴ A. NIBBI, *Rakotis on the Shore of the Great Green of the Haunebut*, in *Göttinger Miszellen. Beiträge zur ägyptologischen Diskussion*, 69, 1983, pp. 69 ff.

times. But since these Egyptian inhabitants were not transferred from their district after the foundation of Alexandria, we have to conclude that the Pharaonic port which existed before the arrival of Alexander in Egypt is the same port as that which existed in their district in the Ptolemaic and Roman times, i.e., the Kibotos¹⁵.

The last element in our investigation is the resolution of Alexander to fortify the city on the harbour. It is interesting to notice the use of the word « fortify » instead of « found, erect » which is commonly used in connection with new towns such as Alexandria at Issus (Alexandretta). Why did Alexander not decide to fortify Canopus, Pelusium or Paraetonium, in face of any ship left of the Persian fleet in the Mediterranean, since these towns were ports on the Mediterranean? It is known that Egypt exported corn to Greece during the late Pharaonic period¹⁶. If the Egyptian corn was exported then from the ports of Canopus or Pelusium, one would have expected Alexander to fortify them since one of the most important reasons for his conquest of Egypt was to secure for Greece the supply of provisions¹⁷, because Egypt was considered one of the outstanding granaries of the ancient world. The fact that Alexander fortified the site where he saw the Pharaonic port shows clearly that this port was known to Greece before Alexander as the commercial port from which the corn of Egypt was exported. He thus meant to develop this site to

become his new city in Egypt and the important commercial center in the Mediterranean¹⁸. This certainly must have been in the mind of Alexander and also of Cleomenes of Naucratis whom he entrusted with the finance and the supervision of the foundation of the city. Thus it seems that Cleomenes continued to use the Kibotos for the export of corn which he monopolised. This is confirmed by the fact that the Kibotos was the center of all the maritime activities which took place in the port of Eunostos after the construction of the Heptastadion¹⁹. After all, the port of Eunostos bore its name after the deity of the millers of corn²⁰. Thus the Kibotos was considered a port for the export of corn since the Pharaonic epoch in the same manner as we have nowadays a port for phosphate at Akaba in Jordan and a port of oil at Zahran in Saudi Arabia.

To sum up, the Kibotos was a closed port rectangular in shape following the Pharaonic type of sea and lake ports. It was built in the Pharaonic period at the entrance of the navigable canal which connected the Mediterranean with Lake Mareotis to secure a safe entry from sea currents for ships passing into the canal and *vice versa*. It was used since the Pharaonic period and during the Ptolemaic and Roman epochs mostly for the export of corn to Greece and Rome.

PATRIZIO PENSABENE

ELEMENTI DI ARCHITETTURA ALESSANDRINA

¹⁵ BRECCIA, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

¹⁶ PLUTARCH, *Pericles*, 37; PHILOCHORUS, fr. 90, ed. Müller, I, 399; THUCYDIDES, IV, 53; VIII, 35.

¹⁷ M. ROSTOVITZ, *Geschichte der alten Welt*, I (Der Orient und Griechenland), Leipzig 1941, p. 385.

¹⁸ J.B. BURY, *A History of Greece to the death of Ale-*

xander the Great, 2nd ed., Macmillan, London 1914, pp. 772, 773.

¹⁹ P.M. FRASER, *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, Oxford 1972, vol. I, p. 26.

²⁰ FRASER, *op. cit.*, vol. II, note 181, pp. 77, 78.

