The Rise and Fall of the Library of Alexandria

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By

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Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing

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This book first published 2023

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN (10): 1-5275-1870-1
ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-1870-4

To Zsolt Kiss (1942-2023),
in memoriam

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PREFACE

Since the start of secondary education at the Lycée Montaigne, in Paris, I have been fascinated by the history of Antiquity. I shared this passion with Zsolt Kiss, a friend of mine who lived in the same building as me with his mother. They were Hungarian and had left their homeland after the head of their family was murdered by the Communists.

I remember when Zsolt and I used to go to the “bouquinistes” on the banks of the Seine, and to the bookshops in the Latin Quarter to find inexpensive books written by Greek or Latin authors, which we both collected. On my end, I managed to earn some money for this purpose by selling old newspapers to the local shopkeepers or by bringing back returnable bottles or jam jars. I can vividly recall the extreme pleasure I felt the day I was able to return home carrying, in a suitcase, the complete works of Cicero in 30 volumes.

I remember, above all, that having chosen to study Latin in year seven, then Greek from year nine on, I was able, on the occasion of doing my homework, to find in my books the author and the translation of the corresponding texts. I loved doing this kind of research and sometimes spent much more time on it than if I had tackled the corresponding translation directly.

I continued to study Latin and Greek when I went to high school moving from the Lycée Montaigne to the Lycée Louis Le Grand, in the framework of those marvelous A' classes where science and humanities benefited from the same quality of teaching and which generations of irresponsible people then let disappear...

It was at that time that Zsolt left France for Poland, his mother having remarried a diplomat from that country. We lost touch for more than 50 years until a mutual acquaintance gave me his email address. I then learned from him that he had become an archaeologist, that he had worked in Alexandria, Palmyra, and Apamea, and that he had participated in the catalog of the Paris exhibition “Sunken Treasures of Egypt”.

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Finally, life's circumstances and "the jubilation of hazards" meant that I became an engineer and not an archaeologist like Zsolt. Nevertheless, I continued to be fascinated by Antiquity and read as many books as possible on the subject, promising myself that when I retired, I would dive back into all the texts of Latin and Greek authors that I had kept at all costs, and despite a dozen successive relocations.

It was around ten years ago during a dinner in the Basque Country that the conversation turned to the Library of Alexandria. An American friend argued that it had been set on fire by Julius Caesar, to which I replied that I did not think so, but since there were no arguments on either side, we agreed to a bet to settle the dispute.

By the time coffee was served, I was able to search the Internet using my mobile. As soon as the first information about the Great Library appeared on the screen, I immediately recalled numerous details. How could I have forgotten that I had read—and even annotated—the works of Canfora and El-Abbadi on this very subject, that I had learned that not only Caesar, but also other Romans and even Arab conquerors, had been accused of destroying this library and that I had discovered that, today, there is a relative consensus on its ultimate fate? Shocked and offended by these oversights, I remedied them by announcing that I had lost the bet, even though, objectively, it was a draw. Nevertheless, I treated my friend to a drink the next morning on the terrace of one of the cafés surrounding the bandstand of Saint Jean de Luz.

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And then one day, it was time to retire. While much of my professional life had been spent designing bio-inspired robots, I then proceeded to devote eight years to writing a book on the historical foundations of this activity. Entitled *Dei ex Machinis*, this book deals with the lives and works of the automata and proto-robot designers that history has recorded.

Naturally, when I came to mention Archimedes, Ctesibius, Philo, or Hero, my passion for Antiquity, on the one hand, and my frustration about the Library of Alexandria, on the other, were reawakened...

So, after eight years dedicated to automata, I devoted four more to the Library. Toward the end of this work, I came across a reference to a collective book published by archaeologists from the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology regarding the excavations of the Kom el-Dikka district in Alexandria. Zsolt was the first author.

I could get back in contact with him and send him a copy of my manuscript.

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Writing this text proved to be much more difficult than expected and I had several choices to make.

First of all, I did not want to limit myself to the questions usually raised about the Library: where was it located, how many books did it contain, who used it, who destroyed it, etc.? On the contrary, I wanted to share with the reader the pleasure I had in discovering or rediscovering the historical and geographical context in which its rise and fall unfolded—which amounts to giving almost as much importance to Alexandria, its builders, its rulers, and its inhabitants as to its library and its readers. From then on, it became extremely difficult to present in a linear discourse the essentially multidimensional components—history, geography, architecture, sociology, sciences, and literature—of this history. I have chosen to arrange them into chapters that are as homogeneous as possible, but relatively independent of one another, at the risk of often reminding readers that this or that information has already been mentioned previously or that it will be developed further on.

I also wanted to share with the reader the pleasure I had in discovering certain details or anecdotes, sometimes unfamiliar, considering that they are often very revealing of the context in which apparently more important events took place. This has led me to multiply the footnotes—a characteristic found in many of the works cited in the bibliography, no doubt because the subject lends itself to it—and to feel uncomfortable when I have criticized the excess of erudition shown by certain Alexandrian authors. “Doctus cum libro”, as one of my professors often said to remind his pupils that it is easy to look well-read when one gets information from someone else's book. Then, “cum Internet”...

Following these same principles, I did not hesitate to reproduce many quotes from ancient or modern authors. For the latter, I have made sure to always

provide the corresponding references. For the former, on the other hand, when the quotes in question are taken from a modern work, I have also provided the reference. When that is not the case, I specify here that the quotes in question are taken from the excellent site of the late Philippe Remacle (remacle.org), quotes in French which I have translated into English. This is the solution I have chosen to avoid adding more notes and references to this text, which already contains many.

Such a choice becomes an issue, however, when a quote is supposed to clarify a tricky point, for example when it is a question determining whether or not the books in the Library were burned during the Alexandrian War. It is easy to see the impact of the translation on the interpretation of the quote in question and to realize that sometimes two translations of the same text lead to significantly different interpretations. This is why many of the scholars who have dealt with the topics discussed here accompany their quotes with the original text in Greek, Latin, or other possible languages. I have not followed this practice because this book is not intended for specialists. On the contrary, I considered that the book is well-laden as it is and that if a reader is curious or skeptical enough to want to refer to the original texts, he can do so easily, if only because some of these texts are directly available on the site mentioned above.

Finally, I hope that at the cost of a few drawbacks and conditionals—rather than hundreds of additional notes and references—I have made the reader aware of the fact that the reality of certain events or the relevance of certain analyses presented here are, even today, the subject of much debate among specialists. I have occasionally, but not always, restricted myself to presenting here only the majority opinion, as detailing opposite views would have taken me even further from the heart of my subject. Likewise, I have avoided as often as possible mentioning the numerous variants that have been associated with the main legends mentioned in this text.

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I should add that in writing this book, I have had the opportunity to communicate with several academic colleagues whom I am happy to acknowledge here. I particularly appreciated that Christian Jacob—whose remarkable analyses I have often quoted—encouraged me in my undertaking. I am also very grateful for Florent Jacques, the “papyrothécaire” of the Institut de Papyrologie de la Sorbonne, who allowed me to admire many of the documents entrusted to his care and expertise. He even helped

me to decipher some Greek keywords on one of those, creating, for a moment, the illusion that I was singlehandedly discovering a famous literary text—the one in which Homer describes the episode of Ulysses and the Cyclops in song IX of *The Odyssey*... I also appreciated the short discussions I had with Bernard Vitrac on the possible presence of Archimedes in Alexandria, with Victor Gysembergh on the *Climaci Rescriptus* palimpsest, and with Germaine Aujac on the map of Eratosthenes. I also want to express my gratitude to Francesca Schironi—who kindly answered my questions on Aristarchus's hypomnemata or Homer's pronominal forms—as well as to Maria Broggiato—who did the same about Crates of Mallus and the shield of Achilles. I do hope that what I have written on these and other subjects does not go against the profound thoughts of these distinguished colleagues.

* *
*

I cannot thank my friend Sanji Ramnarain enough for having taken advantage of a temporary immobilization to carefully proofread my text and bring it to a suitable standard for publication. I wish for her to resume her Pickleball game as soon as possible.

I'd like to express my sincere gratitude to Adam Rummens, the Commissioning Editor for Cambridge Scholar Publishing, for his consistent support throughout the whole publication process.

It is also with the deepest sincerity and affection that I sacrifice to the tradition that any author who is aware of having singularly complicated the life of those around him apologizes once his crime has been accomplished. Now that this book is completed, I will make every effort to go shopping or walk the dog more often…

* *
*

At the time of sending the English version of this text to the editor, I learned of Zsolt's death from a notice posted on the Internet by the Polish Center of Mediterranean Archaeology.

Rest in peace, my friend. I would have so loved to talk about the rise and fall of the Library of Alexandria with you...

INTRODUCTION

> "There is no more honest and sure way to acquire a great reputation among the people than to set up beautiful and magnificent libraries and to dedicate them to the use of the public". Gabriel Naudé—*Avis pour dresser une bibliothèque* (1627).

On 16 October 2002, the President of the Republic of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak, inaugurated the "Bibliotheca Alexandrina", the new library of Alexandria. This building is located on the Corniche at the Silsileh peninsula—formerly called Cape Lochias—close to the old Royal Palace and, presumably, to the site of the old Library.

The Alexandrina is shaped like a truncated solar disk 160 m in diameter, tilted toward the Mediterranean Sea (Figure 1). This disc symbolizes both the rising sun and the incompleteness of human knowledge. Including 11 floors, four of which are underground, the Alexandrina was designed by a Norwegian firm, and its cost—of approximately 220 million dollars—was supported by Egypt, UNESCO, and several foreign countries. France financed the study of the computer system, Japan took care of the audiovisual equipment, and Norway provided the wood for the reading rooms. Many Western libraries donated books and copies of manuscripts. Its initial collection of 200 000 books has steadily grown and may eventually reach 8 million. Approximately 1.5 million people visit it each year and are greeted by a colossal statue supposedly representing Ptolemy I Soter.

The outer wall of the Alexandrina is covered in granite, in which 6 300 letters from the alphabet of 120 languages are engraved as symbols of the scriptures of the past and present. The 56 modular openings in its roof evoke the layout of a computer chip and allow light to enter the "Hall of the Ptolemies", the largest reading room in the world. This hall, which visitors can admire from a balcony called "The Triangle of Callimachus", is shaped like a bubble and offers 2 000 reading places distributed over seven levels. It was designed to give the impression of being suspended in an extraterrestrial space where only knowledge connects to reality. It contains

a forest of lotus-shaped pillars that give the concrete a particular nobility [307].

Figure 1. The New Library of Alexandria © Bibliotheca Alexandrina. Photo Gallery

The vocation of this new library is largely inspired by that of its illustrious predecessor—*the* Library of Alexandria—to which the following pages are dedicated. However, rather than seeking to house all the books in the world—a "dream of universality" [169] that would be absurd and completely unattainable today—the designers of the Alexandrina have taken care to connect it to as much of the relevant knowledge as possible. This entails, on the one hand, promoting all forms of exchange with other libraries in the world, and on the other, facilitating access to Internet resources, while engaging in the international project of archiving said resources. Furthermore, for the Alexandrina to contribute to this knowledge and to continue to spread the sense of universalism so characteristic of the old Library, it has been attached to a vast cultural center likely to attract numerous communities of scholars, artists, and researchers. In addition to a celestial dome and three museums, this complex includes five research institutes, a planetarium, six art galleries, and a conference center that can accommodate up to 3 000 participants [271].

Thus, even if this superb modern achievement does not erase in any way the regret of the disappearance of its predecessor, at least it evokes its splendor [252]. May these pages also contribute to reviving this past, to show how the Egyptian cultural heritage was assimilated and sublimated by the Greek genius, and to recall which literary and scientific treasures demonstrate that the Library of Alexandria—that the ancients called "the Mirror of the Universe"—was at the heart of one of the most exhilarating and turbulent intellectual adventures that humanity has ever known.

The story of the rise and fall of this extraordinary institution is distributed here in six parts.

The first one recalls how Alexander the Great arrived in Egypt, how he founded Alexandria and how he ended up being buried there.

The second evokes the social organization and economic development of Alexandria under the Lagid dynasty.

The third describes the main monuments of Alexandria, considered the most beautiful city in the world during the Hellenistic period. It is on this occasion that the location, organization, and vocation of the Museum and Library are discussed.

The fourth part is devoted to the activities that took place in these two institutions to preserve, perpetuate, and purify the knowledge that accumulated there, but also to classify, discuss, and develop it.

The result of these activities is presented in the fifth part, in which the extraordinary contribution of Alexandrian scholars to the literature and science of their time is summarized.

The last part describes the long decline of Alexandria, from Roman domination to the Arab conquest, from Cleopatra to Omar. A final reminder on the loss or preservation of ancient writings aims to put the disappearance of the Library into perspective.

All in all, this book illustrates the relevance of Christian Jacob's remark: "The true myth of the Library of Alexandria does not lie in the circumstances of its destruction, but in the paradox that such an influential institution has left so few traces, not only material but also documentary, on its configuration, its functioning, and its staff. We can only observe the shock waves of this foundation in space and time, while the epicenter itself has vanished" [167].

PART I—THE FOUNDING OF ALEXANDRIA

ALEXANDER IN EGYPT

In the early spring of 334 BC, Alexander (Figure 2) took over his father, Philip II, King of Macedonia's endeavor. It was about avenging Greeks and Macedonians for the expedition of Xerxes on Greek soil, which occurred nearly 150 years earlier[1], and bringing the war to the land of Great Kings, which had been passed on from father to son, up to Darius III.

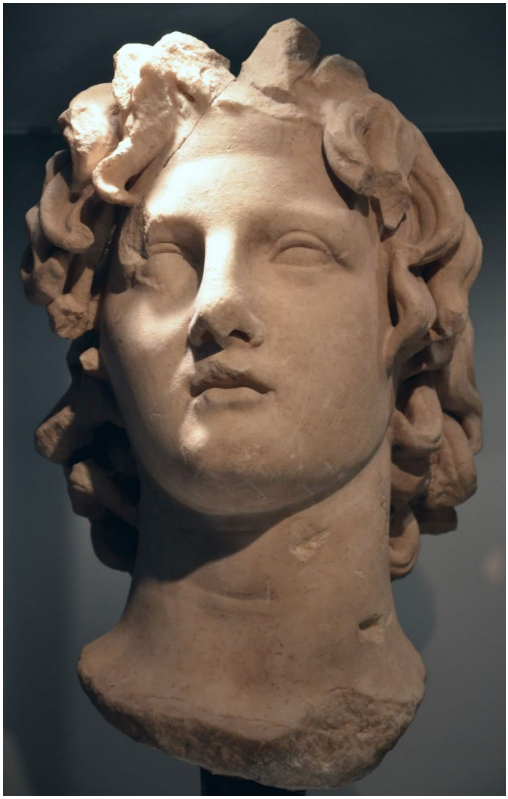

Figure 2. Bust of Alexander the Great. Roman copy of an original by Lysippos of Sicyon Copenhagen Glyptothek © Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike2.0

Having left the government of Macedonia and 13 500 soldiers to his General Antipater, Alexander brought 180 war triers and 400 barges transporting the remainder of his army across the Hellespont—the Dardanelles Strait. This included 1 500 noble horsemen (the *heteroi,* companions), 9 000 infantrymen (the *pezheteroi,* foot companions), and 3 000 elite warriors (the *hypaspists*, shield carriers) who served both as royal guards and as links between the cavalry and the infantry.

This Macedonian core was completed by contingents coming from the peoples to whom Alexander had imposed his alliance: notably the Thracians—brilliant horsemen and experts in rapid reconnaissance—the Thessalians—also horsemen—and the Greeks—coming from all cities. Strong siege artillery—catapults and rams in particular—completed the army's equipment. It is thus at the head of some 40 000 men, to whom various geographers and scientists had joined, that Alexander invaded an almost boundless territory, dominated by Darius III, a monarch with unlimited resources, to face an army said to be over one million soldiers strong. This was a clear exaggeration and the enemy army would prove to be as disparate as poorly led.

After having twice defeated the Persian army, at the Granicus River[2] in May 334 BC and at Issus in November 333 BC, Alexander postponed the pursuit of Darius and, thinking first of watching his back, set out to conquer Phoenicia. After a siege of seven months, he seized the city of Tyre in August 332 BC.

Continuing his road toward the south, Alexander entered Egypt unopposed, the satrap Mazaces having no army to oppose him. Insofar as he cleared the country of Persian domination, he was even perceived by many as a liberator. In Pelusium, he found his fleet, sent it up the Nile, and reached Memphis himself by land. There he found a treasure that conveniently set him back on track.

Avoiding mistreating the Egyptians, he showed their gods the superstitious veneration which he granted liberally to all the divinities and had two sanctuaries rebuilt. Without neglecting the Hellenic culture, he also organized an athletic and musical festival in the Greek style, in which some of the most renowned musicians and actors of that time took part [31]. After leaving Memphis, he went down the Nile and, near Canopus (current Abukir), he decided to found a city, Alexandria.

Pharos and Rhacotis

In his description of Alexander's life, Plutarch describes the episode of the founding of Alexandria which occurred in January 331 BC:

> *Alexander, after conquering Egypt, planned to build a large and populous Greek city that would bear his name. Already, on the advice of the architects, he had measured and traced the enclosure, when at night, while he was sleeping, he had a wonderful vision. It seemed to him that an old man with white hair and a venerable figure stopped near him and said these words:*
>
> *"Then there is a small island, in the sea with tumultuous waves,*
> *On the coast of Egypt: it is called Pharos"*[3].
>
> *Immediately he gets up, and goes to see Pharos, which was still an island at that time, a little above the canopic mouth; but today it is connected to the mainland by a causeway. He was struck by the admirable layout of the place; for this island is a rather narrow strip of land, placed like an isthmus between the sea and a considerable pond, and which ends in a large port.*
>
> *"Homer", he said, "this marvelous poet, is also the most skilled of architects", and he ordered that a plan of the new city be drawn up, in accordance with the position of the place. As there was no chalk to hand, flour was used and a rounded enclosure in the shape of a chlamys was drawn, in a blackish color, on the ground. The shape was closed at the base by two straight lines of equal size, which were like two fringes. The king was considering this plan with delight when, all of a sudden, an infinite number of great birds of all kinds came swooping down, like clouds, on the place where the enclosure had been drawn, leaving no traces of flour whatsoever. Alexander was troubled by this surprise, but the soothsayers reassured him that the city he would build would have an abundance of all kinds of goods and would feed a great number of inhabitants from all over the world. So, he ordered the architects to start work immediately.*

Many other Greek writers mentioned the island of Pharos and spread legends that were often as complicated as they were contradictory. One of them, for example, made this island the home of Proteus, the sea god son of Poseidon and guardian of the "herds of the sea"—that is to say, the seals. Proteus knew the past, present, and future, but did not like to reveal what he knew. Those who wished to consult him were obliged to catch him napping and tie him up; and even when he was caught, he would still try to escape by taking on all sorts of forms—that of an animal or that of an element such as water or fire—to avoid questions. But, if the one who had captured him did not let go, Proteus would finally return to his original form, give the desired answer, and dive into the sea.

According to another legend, Helen fled from Troy before the city was taken, because she missed Menelaus. She is said to have bribed a ship's captain, named Pharos, asking him to lead her to Sparta. But a storm had thrown them on an island near the coast of Egypt. There, a snake had bitten Pharos, who had died. Helen buried him and gave his name to the island in question. At the end of the war, Menelaus is said to have found her there and left with her, after being confined on the island for 20 days because he had not shown sufficient devotion toward the gods[4].

Regardless of these legends, the island of Pharos had already sparked the interest of the pharaohs, notably Thutmose III and Ramesses II, who had made it an important relay for trade with Greek, Phoenician, and Cyrenian countries. Excavations carried out at the beginning of the 20th century have thus uncovered important constructions, notably a pier, a breakwater, landing quays, and basins [25]. Similarly, from the beginning of the New Kingdom, the need to defend the fringes of the Delta against foreign attacks had become necessary, so an important guard post had been set up opposite the island, in the fishing and pirate village called Rhacotis, to protect the west of the Nile from Libyan intrusions [114].

It was probably for similar commercial and military reasons that Alexander had a new city built on the sites of Pharos and Rhacotis, rather than any literary reminiscences or the desire to create a new capital. It seemed clear indeed that a large city, established in this fertile territory and endowed with an efficient Greek-Macedonian administration, would soon develop to the great benefit of the Greek merchants long established in the Delta, provided that it is equipped with well-protected ports for both maritime trade—with the Aegean world—and river trade—with the hinterland.

On the other hand, when it was time to move into the heart of Asia and go after Darius again, Alexander continued to feel the need to protect his back. Appointed commander-in-chief by the Great King in the winter of 334 BC, Memnon of Rhodes had just fought many battles in the Aegean Sea to cut off the supplies of the Macedonian army, in Cos, Chios, and Mytilene in particular. While he had died of a fever in 333 BC, his nephew, Pharnabaze, continued the fight. In the same way, King Agis III of Sparta had just allied with the Persians one year earlier, thus recovering money and ships. Having rallied to his cause the 8 000 mercenaries who had fought in Issos, he seemed to want to transform Crete into a base of operations against Alexander [25].

Thus, this first Alexandria, like the 30 or so other cities bearing this name which the Conqueror marked out on his journey through Asia[5], was intended to administer, develop and secure the surrounding territory. Nothing predestined it to its fabulous destiny [162].

Probably in a hurry to leave to consult the oracle of Siwa about his origins, Alexander regulated with Dinocrates of Rhodes and Cleomenes of Naucratis the broad outlines of the organization of the future city and entrusted them with the task of carrying out its development in his absence. Thus, in the full summer of 331 BC, he was able to go on a pilgrimage to the oasis of Siwa, in the Libyan desert, where the temple of Amun-Re—the most important god of Egyptian mythology and the equivalent of Zeus for the Greeks—was located. There, the High Priest welcomed him by declaring him "The Son of God". Alexander had already been proclaimed "Pharaoh" by the clergy of Ptah, in Memphis, sometime before[6].

Finally, having settled all the affairs of Egypt—and taken care in particular not to leave the civil and military power in the hands of a single leader [158]—Alexander returned to Syria with his army [55]. On October 1st, 331 BC, he was going to win a decisive battle over Darius III, on the plain of Gaugamela (the camel's pasture).

Dinocrates of Rhodes

The architect Dinocrates of Rhodes was known to have participated in the reconstruction of the temple of Artemis in Ephesus, the one set on fire by Herostratus[7] on 21 July, 356 BC—the day of Alexander's birth.

Several years later, Alexander and Dinocrates met, under circumstances described by Vitruvius:

> *Counting on his experience and his skill, the architect Dinocrates set out one day from Macedonia to find Alexander, who was then master of the world, hoping to make a name for himself. Leaving his homeland, he carried letters of recommendation from his parents and friends for the most distinguished people of the court, to gain easier access to the king. Having been graciously received by them, he asked them to present him to Alexander as soon as possible. The promise was made of it, but the execution was postponed and a favorable opportunity had yet to be found. Dinocrates thinking that they were making a game out of the failures they had caused him, had no one else to turn to but himself. He was a handsome man, tall with pleasant features. His beauty was combined with great dignity. These gifts of nature filled him with confidence. He laid down his clothes in his*

hostelry, rubbed his body with oil, and crowned himself with a poplar branch. Then, covering his left shoulder with a lion's skin and arming his right hand with a club, he headed toward the court where the king was bestowing justice.

The unfamiliarity of this spectacle draws the attention of the crowd. Alexander sees Dinocrates, and, struck with astonishment, orders him to be allowed to approach, and asks him who he is. "I am the architect Dinocrates", he answered, "Macedonia is my fatherland. The models and plans that I present to Alexander are worthy of his greatness. I have given to Mount Athos the form of a man who, in the left hand, holds the enclosure of a city, and in the right holds a cup where come to pour the waters of all the rivers which go out of the mountain, to flow from there in the sea".

Alexander charmed by this idea, asked him if this city was surrounded by a countryside capable of providing it with the wheat necessary for its subsistence. [Dinocrates] having recognized that the supplies could only be made by sea, Alexander said to him: "Dinocrates, I agree with the beauty of your project; it pleases me; but I believe that whoever would dare to establish a colony in the place that you propose, would run the risk of being accused of improvidence. For just as a child without the milk of a nurse can neither be nourished nor develop, nor can a city grow without fertile countryside, or have a large population without abundant food, or support its inhabitants without rich crops. So, while I approve of the originality of your plan, I must tell you that I disapprove of the place you have chosen to carry it out; but I desire that you remain near me because I shall need your services".

From then on, Dinocrates never left the king and accompanied him to Egypt. There, Alexander having discovered a good port, naturally well sheltered, with easy access, surrounded by fertile campaigns, and for which the vicinity of the waters of the Nile was an immense resource, ordered Dinocrates to found a city which was called Alexandria.

It is still to Dinocrates that Alexander entrusted the realization of the funeral pyre of Hephaestion in Babylon[8]. It is unknown what happened to him afterward, although some people attribute to him the construction of the Tomb of Amphipolis, in the last quarter of the 4th century BC. Discovered in 2012, this gigantic building may have been dedicated to Hephaestion because his monogram is engraved on two marble blocks that belonged to the circular enclosure surrounding the monument.

Cleomenes of Naucratis

As for Cleomenes, a Greek administrator from Naucratis in Lower Egypt, it does not seem that Alexander knew him before he arrived in Egypt.