

Bibliotheca Alexandrina

Alex Med NEWSLETTER



Issue 23
May-July, 2011

Issue 23

C o n t e n t s

- 3 The Lighthouses of Alexandria
Yasser G. Aref
- 7 An Award Ceremony at the Consulate General of Italy in Alexandria in Honor of Dr. Mohamed Awad
Jaidaa Gawad Hamada
- 8 Hadia Taher and the Language of the Soul
Mahmoud Mansi
- 10 Eliahu Hanabi Synagogue
Abdallah Dawestashy
- 12 أنوبيس عامر إسكندرية
جيداء جواد حمادة
- 15 La Fondation de la Ville d'Alexandrie
Yasmine Hussein
- 18 Egyptian Cuisine: Reinvented
Samira Mahmoud
- 19 Mediterranean Frittata

Contact us

If you want to be added to our mailing list, please fill in the form and either mail or email it to us. If you would like to send a letter to the editor or to contribute to the newsletter (either an article in Arabic, English or French, or a poem) please send it to:
The Alexandria & Mediterranean Research Center, Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Chatby 21526, Alexandria, Egypt.
or
alex.med@bibalex.org

Register with Alex-Med

Surname:
First name:
Address (street, district):
Postal code, city, country:
Phone (home):
Phone (mobile):
Email:

Honoring the Past... Promoting the Future

This newsletter hopes to reach a wide public, both locally and internationally. It brings to you news about Alex Med and Alexandria. If you would like to send your views, comments or contribute topics related to Alexandria and the Mediterranean please use the contact details. Regular features include an article on an Alexandrian personage, another on an Alexandrian building or neighborhood, a page of photography that captures scenes from the life and sites of the city, and a gastronomical section on Mediterranean cuisine. Our mission is to involve you in our activities and in the making of a new Alexandria—one that honors the past, respects diversity and rises to the challenges of the 21st century.

Editor: Jaidaa Gawad Hamada
Graphics: Mina Nader
Photography: Abdallah Dawestashy
Front cover: The Mex Old Lighthouse.
Back cover: The medal granted to Dr. Mohamed Awad at the Consulate General of Italy.



The Lighthouses of Alexandria

Let there be light

Yasser G. Aref

“Where there is light, there is life”, Henry Plummer

As one of the oldest cities in the Mediterranean, Alexandria has always played a crucial role in shaping its history. Alexandria has also been famous for its legendary Lighthouse, the Pharos, which is regarded as one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The lighthouse stood on the small island of Pharos for almost 13 centuries. Even though the Pharos has long collapsed, its legend and fame still survive. Interestingly, Pharology, which is the science of designing lighthouses, is named after the Pharos. Throughout history, the great Lighthouse of Alexandria had always caught the attention of travelers and historians, among many others. Until today, its reputation and fame still overshadow the other lighthouses of Alexandria. Though little is known about them, there are six lighthouses that still exist in Alexandria. They are mainly located in the western part of the city, except for the Montazah Lighthouse, which is located in the Montazah Palace grounds. However, while some of these lighthouses are dysfunctional, others are not accessible.

It thus becomes important to shed light on these lighthouses before they fall into obscurity, not only because they are overshadowed by the more famous Pharos, but also because they run the risk of becoming obsolete as a result of breakthroughs in navigation technology. Added to that, lighthouses are always located in areas with the harshest types of weather conditions, thus making them more liable to deterioration. The last study about the lighthouses of Alexandria was conducted in 1912. Since then, there has been no record of or research on these unique structures.

It is worth noting that during the 1800s, lighthouses were part of Mohamed Ali's plan to modernize Egypt so as to make it a rival to European countries. To achieve this goal, railways, canals, bridges, telegraph posts, arsenals, docks, irrigation canals and harbors were constructed all over Egypt. Several lighthouses were accordingly constructed along the coast of Alexandria and eastwards in Rosetta, Damietta, Cape



Bourlos and Port Said, with the purpose of facilitating the navigation of vessels to and from Egyptian ports. A notable figure in this regard was Mohamed Mazhar Pasha, a chief engineer during the reign of Mohamed Ali, who, having studied engineering and mathematics for 10 years in France, was entrusted with the task of constructing the first modern lighthouse in Alexandria at the tip of Ras El Tin Peninsula. This lighthouse was constructed in compliance with Mohamed Ali's wish to renovate the Alexandria seaport and to establish a powerful, well-equipped navy.

Later on, many lighthouses were constructed, thanks to the diligence and intelligence of Mickillop or M. Killop Pasha, a British Royal Navy soldier and the Headmaster of the Egyptian Navy School, who was appointed as the first chief of the Lighthouses Department established in 1868. The location of each lighthouse was carefully chosen by a specialized committee that was comprised of experienced Egyptian sailors and professional maritime engineers under the supervision of distinguished foreign experts. Upon the death of Said Pasha in 1863, the lighthouse located in Ras El Tin was the only structure of its kind in any Egyptian port along the Mediterranean. Ismail Pasha, who ruled Egypt from 1863 to 1879, was subsequently responsible for the construction of several lighthouses in Alexandria, such as the ones in Agami (1873), the lighthouse at the end of the breakwater erected in the Alexandria Port (1876) and El Qabbari Lighthouse (1877).

Following is a survey of some of the lesser known though historically important lighthouses of Alexandria:

Ras El Tin Lighthouse:

Also known as the Grand Phare, Ras El Tin Lighthouse was constructed in 1842, during the reign of Mohamed Ali, by Mohamed Mazhar Pasha, and became operational in 1848. The lighthouse was modified several times starting from 1919, provided with electricity in 1954, and was eventually renovated in 1993. Located at the tip of Ras El Tin Peninsula, it acts as a regional or landfall light and marks the entrance to the Western Harbor of Alexandria. It is the first landmark seen on approaching Alexandria, along with the Marabout Fort to the west of Agami.

The lighthouse consists of a circular tapered wall-bearing stone tower with an outer diameter of 9.30 m and wall thickness of around 1.20 m. The stones were brought from the quarries of Cairo. The height of the building is 49 m, while its focal plane is 55 m above sea level. The tower has a lantern and gallery. Its light characteristics are three white flashes, every 30 seconds. The lighthouse was surrounded by a fort which was called El Fanar Fort or Ras El Tin Fort. Most probably, this fort was destroyed during the British bombardment of Alexandria in 1882.

Early photos of the lighthouse indicate that it was built with exposed stones which, most probably during the renovation of 1919, were plastered and painted in horizontal black and white stripes. The lighting equipment of the lighthouse consisted of a lantern with 24 panes. The mechanism was replaced and provided by Sauter of Paris in 1905. Originally the lighthouse did not have a light source as indicated by Sir John Gardner Wilkinson, who in 1847 described the lighthouse as being in a good position for vessels arriving from Europe, but, as he pointed out, Mohamed Ali made a mistake of not having a revolving light, which might have been done with some more expenses.



Ras El Tin Lighthouse

It is equipped with a light station that consists of a generator for electricity back up, living quarters for workers, a small workshop and an office. The top of the lighthouse can be reached by spiral, cantilevered stairs that connect the ground floor to a level just below the lantern room, then smaller metal stairs that lead to the lantern room. Around the year 2000 an elevator was installed. The light source is a light bulb with a revolving lens. Even during the day, the lens revolves so as not to concentrate the sun rays into the lantern. The lantern, in its turn, is equipped with an external and an internal gallery for the maintenance of the lens. The condition of the building is fairly good except for few external cracks in the plastering and broken windows as a result of the surrounding harsh weather. The lighthouse is located within the headquarters of the Egyptian Navy as well as the presidential Palace of Ras El Tin, which are restricted areas and can only be accessed with a special permission.

The Mex High Lighthouse:

Also known as the Mex Grand Lighthouse, the Mex High Lighthouse was constructed between 1890 and 1891, and was first lit in



The Mex High Lighthouse

1894, the same year of the construction of the Mex Old Lighthouse which was erected on an island about 150 m from the coast. The construction of both lighthouses cost about 3600 LE. The original light source was visible from a distance of 10 miles. The light has a focal plane of 38 m. Its light characteristics are two continuous white lights, one above the other; the lower is at a focal plane of 29 m. The total height of the lighthouse is approximately 30 m. The building is a round tower with double galleries and a dome topped by a ball-and-spike day mark. The upper half of the tower is painted black, whereas the lower one is white. The light is located within a rectangular light station with a central open court. The condition of the lighthouse is fairly good with some longitudinal cracks in the external plastering. The Mex High Lighthouse works with the Mex Low Lighthouse to indicate a safe passage for vessels entering the harbor.

The Mex Low Lighthouse:

The Mex Low Lighthouse was constructed in 1908 while the station was established in 1894. The lighthouse is still active, with a focal plane of 18 m. It has two continuous red lights, one above the other; alongside a continuous white light at a focal plane of



The Mex Low Lighthouse

13 m. Its total height is 20 m. It is a round tapered tower with a domed top rather than a lantern. The lights are shown through small openings. The tower is painted with vertical red and white stripes. The lighthouse is manned with an adjacent light station that houses services. It consists of external stairs to reach the summit while maintenance is undertaken by using an internal staircase. The top of the lighthouse is marked with a decorative spike.

Old photographs taken around 1897 show that the Mex Low Lighthouse was originally a signal tower before it was converted into its current status. The same pictures illustrate that the Mex Old Lighthouse – which is now deserted – was functioning at that time. The reason for neglecting the Mex Old Lighthouse and renovating the Mex signal tower to be the Mex Low Lighthouse remains unknown.

El Agami Lighthouse:

An unmanned lighthouse, its construction date is unknown though some references speculate that it was established in 1873. It has a height of 14 m and a focal plane of 17 m, with two white flashes every 15 seconds. It is a stone tower with a lantern and a gallery, painted with vertical black and white stripes. The lighthouse is located on a spit at the westernmost entrance to the harbor area, about 20 km southwest of the center of Alexandria. The Agami Lighthouse is located in a restricted military area controlled by the Egyptian Coast Guard Forces. As a result, little is known about its condition.

Other Notable “Dark” Lighthouses:

The Montazah Palace Lighthouse:

This lighthouse is located on the King’s Tea Island in front of the Salamlek Palace at the eastern end of Alexandria, within the



The Montazah Palace Lighthouse

boundaries of the Royal Palace of Montazah. The construction date harks back to the 1940s, after the construction of the Tea Island Bridge in 1941. The light is inactive and its height is about 15 m. It is constructed out of stone and unpainted plaster, with vertical fluting, a lantern and a gallery. It does not appear that this lighthouse was ever an official aid to navigation, although decorative lights may have been displayed.

The Mex Old Lighthouse:

It was on 1 January 1908 when the light of the Mex Old Lighthouse was switched off. The reason for this is most probably the building of a newer and higher lighthouse, the Mex Low Lighthouse. Now the Mex Old Lighthouse stands deserted and unmaintained facing the strong waves and harsh weather. The wooden bridge that once connected the lighthouse to the mainland is broken. Built in white sandstone with two galleries and without a lantern, the light was named in old photographs as a signal tower and not as a lighthouse. It is worth noting that the area around the lighthouse was named the Old Lighthouse Bay as it appeared in some maps. The lighthouse is named among locals as the “blind lighthouse” because it is dark and not functioning. It has two galleries and a beacon with vertical white and black stripes.

An adjacent structure built in reinforced concrete near the lighthouse seems to be of a more recent period, most probably as a place for its keepers. The light was an unmanned light signal. While it was sometimes referred to as a semaphore, in some maps it was named a lighthouse or the “Little Tower of Mex” (*Petite Tour de Mex*), as in the map of 1917 by the Survey Department of Egypt.

Vanished Lighthouses:

Alongside these functioning and nonfunctioning lighthouses, there used to be other lighthouses that have now vanished. Examples of these lighthouses include:



El Qamareya Lighthouse:

It was constructed in 1909 in the area of Mex. However, there is no clear evidence whether it was a lighthouse or a signal tower for vessels as it was referred to in some maps. It is generally assumed that this lighthouse might have been dismantled to give way to new constructions and improvements of the harbor of Alexandria.

The Qabbari Lighthouse:

This lighthouse was built in 1877 and is mentioned in some references as being built by Ismail Pasha, though it is not shown in any maps of Alexandria.

El Omayed Lighthouse:

This lighthouse is located in El Omayed, about 80 km west of Alexandria. It was constructed near a castle built in the 13th century by Sultan Bybars. In 1873 a lighthouse was constructed close to the castle. It is believed that the castle was knocked down to provide required stone to build the light-keeper's quarters. However, Robecchi-Bricchetti, who visited the place in 1885, alleges that the castle was still standing by that time. The lighthouse was erected by Ismail Pasha to please a foreign power which

had had a ship wrecked along the coast of the Mediterranean. The light was extinguished during the First World War and has never been lit since then.

Tour de la Mission d’Egypte:

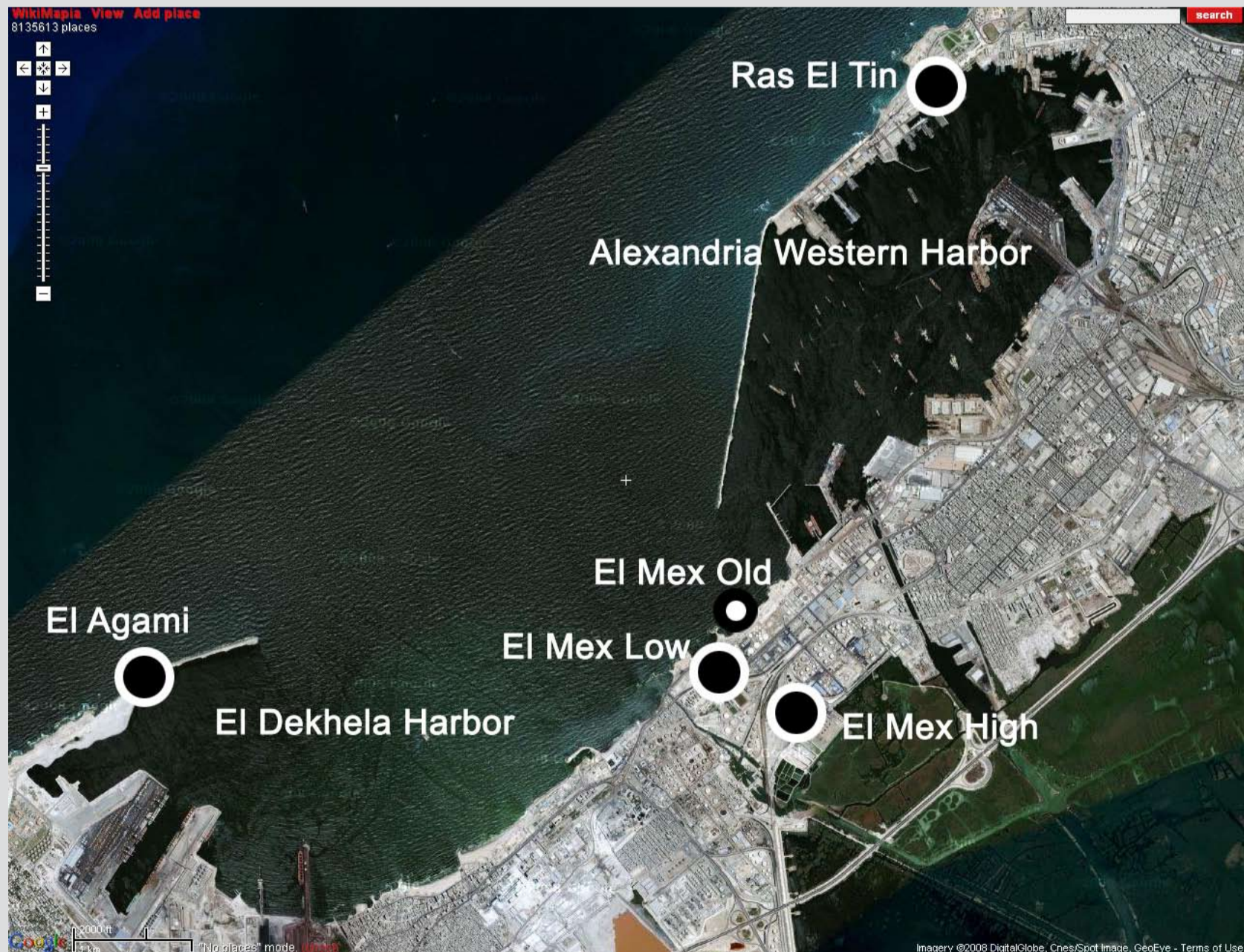
The Tour de la Mission d’Egypte was located in the North Eastern part of Ras El Tin Peninsula. It was constructed by the French army during the French Expedition to Egypt in 1798. It was a cylindrical brick tower, standing on natural rock. It was aligned with the Fort Qaitbey limit, and used to mark a dangerous rocky area at the entrance of the seaport of Alexandria. The tower no longer exists and was last recorded in 1916. However, it is not known if the Tour de la Mission d’Egypte was ever lit or not.



Tour de la Mission d’Egypte

Generally speaking, the placement of lighthouses should follow the topography of the area. Aligning two fixed points on land provides a navigator with a line of position called a range. Ranges can be used to precisely align a vessel within a narrow channel. If the landmarks of a range are illuminated with a set of fixed lighthouses, navigation can also be done at night. Such paired lighthouses are called range lights. Two lights are used in this scheme. The one closer to the vessel is named the front range; the furthest is called the rear range. The rear range light is always taller than the front one. When the vessel is on the correct course, the two lights line up above one another. The placement of the Mex lighthouses, the Low and High Lighthouses, follows this rule. The Mex Old Lighthouse also had a range light with the Mex High Lighthouse. In this case the high range light was playing a double role determining the two passages. This role became obsolete when the Mex Old Lighthouse was switched off.

To conclude, the lighthouses of Alexandria have made a significant contribution to maritime history; they embody distinctive characteristics and represent a unique building type and method of construction. They are regarded as structures of special architectural merit.



satellite image of the Western Harbor illustrating the location of lighthouses

An Award Ceremony at the Consulate General of Italy in Alexandria in Honor of Dr. Mohamed Awad

Jaidaa Gawad Hamada

On 14 July 2011, President Giorgio Napolitano, president of the Italian Republic, granted Dr. Mohamed Awad, Director of the Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center (Alex-Med) at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the honorary Knight of the Order of the Star of Italian Solidarity (*Cavaliere dell'Ordine della Stella della Solidarietà Italiana OSSI*), in recognition of his tireless efforts in preserving the cultural and architectural heritage of Alexandria, and for his seminal contributions to the field of Italian cultural heritage in Egypt, particularly with regards to architecture and engineering.

On this occasion, a special celebration was held on 19 June 2011 in the Consulate General of Italy in Alexandria where Counselor Marico Concetto Vinci, the Consul General of Italy in Alexandria, presented Dr. Awad with the medal; a gesture of gratitude for his substantial endeavors in studying the cultural and architectural heritage of Italy in Egypt in general, and in Alexandria in particular. Chief among his feats in this regard are his thorough research about the works of Italian architects in Alexandria, Cairo and Port Said; his organization of various seminars about this theme; his instrumental contribution to a wide range of exhibitions, among the most important of which was "Italian Architects and Engineers in Egypt from the 19th to the 21st Century" which was inaugurated by President Giorgio Napolitano at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina; and his illuminating publications in this domain, most notably his book *Italy in Alexandria* which plays a decisive role in highlighting the Italian architectural contribution to the urban aspect of Alexandrian architecture.

It is worth mentioning that less than a year ago, Dr. Awad was similarly bestowed the honorary title of "Friend" by the League of Hellenic-Egyptian Friendship to commemorate his ceaseless efforts to strengthen and deepen the centuries-long Greek-Egyptian friendship, as well as his involvement in preserving and promoting the cultural heritage of Alexandria.



Dr. Mohamed Awad and Counselor Marico Concetto Vinci during the award ceremony



Counselor Marico Concetto Vinci granting Dr. Mohamed Awad the medal



Dr. Mohamed Awad, Counselor Marico Concetto Vinci and some distinguished attendees

...dell'Ordine della Stella della
...knight of the Order of the Star
... granted by the President of
... Dr. Mohamed Fayed Awad in
... given in the field
... with particular
... and engineering. Architects. In
... of Italian Architects. In
... his instrumental contribution to
... "Italian Architects and Engineers
... inaugurated by
... at the Bibliotheca
... his prestigious publications
... have sensibly
... the last decades of civilization, the
... in the urbanistic panorama of this



Silence can be a way of meditating to reach what is beyond the surrounding mundane world. However, not everyone who resorts to silence is able to fully capture the true essence of this mystical mood. In fact, some people were chosen to become messengers who convey to us what the realm of silence says. The only means of communication in such scenarios is art; the universal language of humankind. We can only imagine and assume how inspiring such a language is, but its true meaning lies within the hearts of these messengers.

One of these messengers is an Alexandrian one. Hadia Taher is her name. She will reveal little about herself, while the rest will be told through each enigmatic painting her heart speaks. Feminism, individualism, spirituality and much more, are the defining features of both the life and works of our deaf artist.

Taher exhibited a precocious talent. "My love for drawing started at a very young age, and I drew almost everything I saw", she states. "Success is a blessing from God. I've always believed in Him, thus always believed that He helps any human being seeking success, as long as this success is useful to humankind". Aided as she was by a group of people who deeply believed in her and guided her through the maze of life, Taher was able to prove her talent in her unique way.

Hadia Taher was born in Alexandria in 1982. Her family has always been there for her. Her mother, in particular, has played, and in fact continues to play, a very decisive role in making her the person she is right now. More effort was exerted on her mother's part to make her the artist she has become. "My mother always helps and encourages me, along with other artists from the Atelier like the sculptor Mohamed Toussoun and the great artist Esmat Dawestashy", she gratefully states.

Around seventeen articles and reviews about Taher and her works were written and published in several Egyptian and Arab newspapers, among the most renowned of which are Al-Ahram and Al-Akhbar. She worked in several places that are related to art until she finally settled in Mahmoud Said Museum.

Taher dropped out of school at a very young age. In other words, she renounced the traditional Egyptian system of education and created her own. "I always attend exhibitions for different artists who represent different

schools, and I learn more from sharing artistic conversations with them. I also work in Mahmoud Said Museum, which is one of the major original schools in this field", she explains. She even went as far as learning, all by herself, English, German and French. With the support of her family who refused to let her learn the sign language, she learnt how to speak more accurately and to read lips.

So far, Taher has produced ninety six paintings of which she sold ninety, whereas the remaining six are hanging in her home. The first exhibition she participated in was at the age of eight. Currently, she is working on producing more paintings to be displayed in her upcoming exhibition, which will be held in Mahmoud Said Museum in 2012. Moreover, she took part in twenty two group exhibitions, four solo exhibitions, won two awards (first position - Nagy Salon 2005, Alexandria as the Capital City of Tourism in the Arab World 2010), three of her pieces were displayed in different museums, and also two of her paintings were taken as book covers. Taher's favorite artist is Van Gogh. She is also talented in other domains such as photography and decoration.

another. "I love drawing nature because I am fascinated with its colors and I feel I can understand its language. I simply maintain a sort of communication with it. Nature possesses diversified colors that provide relief and bliss", she explains.

Another remarkable feature of Taher's art is the tools she uses. While the majority of artists use paintbrushes, she uses a painting knife, which is usually used to apply paint on the canvas. The reason why very few artists rely on this tool is the difficulty posed by employing it. Taher, on the other hand, solely relies on it, whereupon her works become paintings but with a profound sense of sculpturing. She says that this tool helps her add more details than when she uses the paintbrush. These concave / convex terrains on the scales of her pieces add more life to them, revealing a new visual dimension. Hence, the uniqueness of her work.

In highlighting the role of art, Taher states: "There is a relationship between art and everything else in life, as it is a point of meditation for human beings; a way for taming morals, and Egypt has always been the seat of civilization and art".

Hadia Taher and the Language of the Soul

Mahmoud Mansi



Interestingly, Taher's drawings of facial features resemble those of Ancient Egyptian women, especially the drawings of princesses on temples, characterized as they are by their wide black eyes. Her paintings also carry the same uniqueness of our Ancient Egyptian art that is based on four main elements: symbolism, brightness of colors, a reverence for Mother Nature, and the story each piece narrates. The very same blend of elements has been used for decorating ancient churches, mosques and houses.

Most of Taher's paintings feature flowers which partake of the essence of the culture of Egypt; that is, the culture of farming that has kept Egypt alive for thousands of years. In so doing, it is as if she is reminding us of our source of life; as if she is a messenger from the past mumbling her visual colors at a time when people no longer listen to one

Following are some views about Hadia Taher's works and the talent she exhibits:

"I am thrilled by her art that reflects the environment and carries the meanings of protecting earth, water and plants." Nadia Makram Ebid, former Minister of Environment.

"Hadia Taher is an artist with a bright future as she harbors a chain of unlimited creative gifts to offer". Esmat Dawestashy.

"Those who observe her paintings would know that her weakness in hearing is merely a lie; perhaps she doesn't properly hear the vibrating voices caused by our tongues, but she is more capable of hearing the motions of the lips and the pulses of feelings. Perhaps she does not pronounce easily but the fluent tongue of her paintings says much of which our own tongues are incapable". Mohamed Toussoun.

ELIAHU HANABI SYNAGOGUE



Photos and design: Abdallah Dawestashy



«أتوبيس عام الإسكندرية»

يكتب شهادة ميلاد لموهبة سكندرية جديدة في

عالم الأدب.

جيداء جواد حمادة

المجموعة لها علاقة وثيقة به و بالخبرات الحياتية التي مر بها و كأنه يتوقف عند المحطات المؤثرة في حياته. و يتضح ذلك ليس فقط من خلال تقسيم الكتاب إلي أربع محطات، و لكن أيضا في السؤال الذي يطرحه الكاتب في أول الكتاب: "في محطة القطار توقفت و سألت نفسي، و الكل يمر أمامك دون توقف، أي محطة أنت؟".

و تحت عنوان "أطلع يا أسطي" تبدأ المحطة الأولى، و كأنها صفاة البدء لسباق يحاول فيه الكاتب جاهدا أن يصل إلي نقطة النهاية كما يتضح في عنوان المحطة الرابعة "آخر الخط يا أفندي". و لعل ما يميز المحطة الأولى هو الأسلوب الساخر الذي اتخذه الكاتب لرصد بعض المظاهر السلبية في المجتمع، فعلي سبيل المثال في قصة "مكالمة خاصة"، و التي هي أبعد ما تكون عن الخاصة، ينتقد الكاتب سلوك بعض راكبي المواصلات العامة و القطارات حين



خلال سنتين لكتاب كامل. و قد لعبت آراء أصدقائه النقدية دورا مهما في إثراء كتاباته. و الجدير بالذكر أن الكتاب صدر عام ٢٠١٠، أي قبل اندلاع ثورة ٢٥ يناير ٢٠١١، و مع ذلك فإن الكثير من قصصه تصطبغ بالروح الثورية، كما أنه هاجم في العديد منها النظام الفاسد الذي ظلت البلاد تحت وطأته لأكثر من ثلاثة عقود. و لذلك عبر الكاتب خلال اللقاء عن سعادته الغامرة بانقشاع الغيوم التي طالما حجبت شمس الحرية عن البلاد. و علي الرغم من أن عنوان الكتاب يصنفه علي إنه مجموعة من القصص القصيرة، إلا أن الكاتب يخرج به عن المفهوم التقليدي للقصة القصيرة، و كأنه يعزف فيه مجموعة من التيمات المتنوعة كالقصة القصيرة، و الخاطرة، و المذكرات، و الشعر و السيرة الذاتية، بالإضافة إلي آرائه النقدية إزاء العديد من الظواهر السلبية في المجتمع. و يصاحب هذا التنوع في طريقة السرد تنوعا في نبرة الكاتب، فتارة نجده يستخدم أسلوبا ساخرا، و تارة أخرى نجده يلجأ إلي نبرة يشوبها الحزن و الألم، و ذلك حسب الموضوع الذي يتناوله، فيصبح الكتاب في نهاية الأمر مرآة تعكس صورته و تفاعله مع مجتمعه، فكثير من نصوص

ضمن سلسلة من الأنشطة الثقافية و الصالونات الأدبية، أقامت مكتبة دار العين بالإسكندرية حفل توقيع و مناقشة المجموعة القصصية "أتوبيس عام الإسكندرية"، و الذي يعد باكورة الأعمال الأدبية للكاتب الشاب أسر مطر، و هو أحد أبناء الإسكندرية، و واحد من عشاقها، و لذلك اختار الكاتب الإسكندرية لتكون ليس فقط موقعا لأحداث الكتاب، إنما لتصبح واحدة من الشخصيات المحورية في النسيج السرد الذي يغزله. و قد توج الكاتب عشقه للإسكندرية باختياره لإدارة الحوار واحدة من عاشقات الإسكندرية و هي الأستاذة الدكتورة سحر حمودة، أستاذ الأدب الإنجليزي بكلية الآداب جامعة الإسكندرية، و عميد كلية اللغات و الترجمة بجامعة فاروس، و مدير مركز الدراسات الهلنستية و نائب مدير مركز دراسات البحر المتوسط في مكتبة الإسكندرية. و قد بدأت حديثها بتعريف الكاتب، ثم انتقلت لنقاش و تحليل مبسط عن بعض نصوص المجموعة و أسلوب أسر مطر في الكتابة و الذي يبشر بميلاد موهبة سكندرية جديدة في عالم الأدب. و قد أوضح الكاتب أن بدايات الكتاب كانت من خلال Note صغير كتبه علي صفحته الخاصة علي ال Facebook، ثم تحول في



أطلق عليه "ثقافة الخوف"، و التي يراها سببا لكثير من الأزمات التي أصابت المجتمع في العقود الأخيرة. وأخيرا يصل الكاتب إلي المحطة الأخيرة، و التي أطلق عليها "آخر الخطأ أفندي". و علي الرغم من اختلاف القصص التي تدرج تحت هذه المحطة، إلا أنها جميعا تشترك في نبرتي الحزن و الشجن التي تخيم علي الكاتب، و تختلف أسباب الشعور بالأسى بين الحنين إلي الماضي، كما هو الحال في قصتي "حيث يوجد القلب الكبير" و "بالأمس حلمت بك أنا أيضا، و لكنني لم أتذكر"، و ذكريات الحب كما هو الحال في قصة "الخطاب الأخير لهما"، و سنوات العمر التي تمضي كقصة "صباح ممطر من عصر حجري". و موت المقربين منه كقصة "أضغاث أحلام" و "رسالة إلي شادي"، و الحزن علي الأحلام التي لم تتحقق، مثل قصتي "ميم" و "فقط حين أنام". و تأتي قصيدة "أنا مين" كنقطة النهاية لهذه الرحلة، و فيها يشبه الكاتب نفسه بمجموعة من الكائنات الحية و ببعض الأشياء التي نستعملها في حياتنا اليومية، و كأنه يري نفسه أو أجزاء منه في العالم المحيط به، و بذلك يصعب فصله عن هذا العالم أو انتزاعه منه مهما ضاق به ذرعا.

و في نهاية اللقاء توجه أسر مطر بالشكر للأستاذة الدكتورة سحر حمودة و للسادة الحضور، ثم ألقط الحضور بعض الصور التذكارية مع الكاتب وقام بتوقيع نسخ من كتابه لهم. و بهذا يكتب "أتوبيس عام الإسكندرية" شهادة ميلاد لموهبة سكندرية جديدة في عالم الأدب.

خلال الروايات الستة، يصبح ترام الإسكندرية بمثابة نافذة علي ما يدور في المجتمع. و عند وصول الكاتب إلي المحطة الثالثة، و عنوانها "في بلاد الفسافيس"، يصبح أسلوبه أكثر اعتمادا علي الرمزية. و يتضح ذلك في قصة "أحمر و شرشر" و التي لا تخلو من النقد للقهري الذي يتعرض له الفرد في المجتمعات المستبدة إذا أبدى اعتراضه أو رغبته في أن يسلك طريقا مختلفا عن ما يفرضه النظام الحاكم عليه. و تحت عنوان "أنا مبدع إذن أنا مسطول" يعتمد الكاتب كتابة ما يسميه هو مجموعة من "التخاريف" علي غرار ما يفعله بعض ممن يطلقون علي أنفسهم ألقاب "فنانين" أو "مبدعين"، معتقدين أن الفن و الإبداع لا بد أن يكونا قائمين علي ما يصعب فهمه. و بنفس الأسلوب الرمزي الذي يتبعه الكاتب في قصة "أحمر و شرشر"، تتناول قصة "أوليمبياد الفسافيس" مظاهر الفساد التي تمتد إلي الألعاب الرياضية. و علي الرغم من جدية الموضوع الذي تتناوله قصة "ليه المفروض ما نكرهش إسرائيل"، فإن الكاتب يتناوله بأسلوبا ساخرا تجعله أكثر قربا للفهم، و تزيد من وطأة الألم إزاء ما يحدث للشعوب العربية من انتهاكات لأراضيهم و حقوقهم و أرواحهم. و يظهر شغف أسر مطر بالروائي المصري الكبير بهاء طاهر و روايته "واحة الغروب" ليس فقط في عنوان قصته "واحة الغروب و عريرت الكتابة و آلة البناء و صباح الخير يا مصر" بل أيضا في نهايتها، و ذلك من خلال ترديده لنص منها يعبر محتواه عن الأسلوب الذي يتبعه الحكام المستبدين لإشاعة الخوف في شعوبهم. و تنتهي المحطة الثالثة لرحلة أسر مطر بقصة "الخوف" و التي يعبر فيها عن استيائه مما

يتحدثون في التلفزيون المحمول بصوت عال، دون أدني احترام لخصوصياتهم الشخصية أو لخصوصيات الغير، و بذلك تصبح المكالمات الخاصة عامة. و يرصد الكاتب في نفس المحطة ظاهرة أخرى و هي إذا صح التعبير "بلطجة" أحد أبناء الأثرياء و أصحاب النفوذ، و الذي يرفض إفساح الطريق لسيارة أخرى رغم أنه قادم في الإتجاه المعاكس معتمدا علي نفوذ والده. أما قصة "الإرهابي"، فهي لا تخلو من النقد لكثير من آفات المجتمع كالتطرف الديني، و استبداد السلطة، و عدم دقة الإعلام في تحري الكثير من الأحداث. و تبدأ المحطة التالية، و عنوانها "أي حنة علي جنب" بقصة "هو حضرتك مش متجوز ليه؟"، و التي يعبر فيها الكاتب عن استيائه من تدخل الآخرين في شئونه الخاصة، كما يعبر فيها عن رفضه لفكرة الزواج علي إنه ضرورة ملحة يجب القيام بها قبل مضي الوقت، أو صفقة يتربح منها الفرد بغض النظر عن التوافق و المشاعر. و في رواية "عامر سليمان عامر" يعبر الكاتب عن أسفه لمصير الآلاف من الشباب الذين يركضون وراء سراب السفر، و يضحون بكل ما يمتلكون، و كأن السفر هو العصا السحرية التي ستحل لهم جميع مشاكلهم، و الأسوأ من ذلك هي الهجرة الغير شرعية التي تؤدي بحياة الآلاف ممن يحملون بالسفر. و تختلف القصة الأخيرة في تلك المحطة، و عنوانها "ست حكايات من الترام"، من حيث كونها إطارا لمجموعة من القصص، بطلها الحقيقي هو ترام الإسكندرية، و الذي يصفه الكاتب بأنه "العمود الفقري" للإسكندرية و أحد الأشياء التي تعطي المدينة طابعا خاصا، "فكما لا يمكن تخيل الإسكندرية بدون البحر، كذلك لا توجد إسكندرية بلا ترام". و من

La Fondation de la Ville d'Alexandrie

Yasmine Hussein

Selon Richard Billows les historiens tendent à accepter l'hypothèse que la création des empires hellénistiques a entraîné le déclin des cités grecques, alors qu'en réalité, durant l'époque hellénistique elles ont connu une période de croissance spectaculaire et de développement¹. Les récits de la fondation des cités à l'époque classique ne se différencient pas de ceux de l'époque hellénistique. À l'origine de la création, les fondateurs vont généralement consulter un oracle. Ainsi par exemple, selon la tradition racontée par Eusèbe de Césarée, la ville de Byzance aurait été fondée par des colons venus de Megara en 667 av. J.-C après la consultation de l'oracle de Delphes. De même, selon les légendes, Alexandre le Grand a eu l'idée de la fondation d'Alexandrie après avoir consulté l'oracle de Zeus Ammon à Siwa. Dans les récits, un homme (ou plusieurs) est considéré comme le fondateur. Après sa mort, il devient le « héros fondateur » et fait l'objet d'un culte dans un *hérôon*; un exemple attesté archéologiquement est celui du tombeau du fondateur et roi Battos en Cyrénaïque². De même, Alexandre le Grand est considéré « le héros fondateur » de la ville d'Alexandrie. Il était à la tête et à l'origine du culte dynastique comme *Ktistes* ou fondateur de la cité et de la dynastie royale. À sa mort, le cadavre embaumé d'Alexandre le Grand devint sacré; un mausolée somptueux (le *Sôma*) fut construit par Ptolémée IV Philopator pour exposer la dépouille d'Alexandre. Le lieu devint le centre de son culte, qui a perduré jusqu'au règne de l'empereur chrétien Théodose, qui l'a



Statuette d'Alexandre le fondateur ou Ktistes d'Alexandrie, British Museum

décrété illégal en 391 ap. J.-C. Quant aux récits de fondation eux-mêmes, ils sont souvent le reflet d'une situation historique et économique. À titre d'exemple, Massalia l'ancienne Marseille est fondée autour de 600 av. J.-C. par des Grecs d'Ionie pour devenir avant tout un port et une

ville marchande. Trois cent ans plus tard Alexandrie est fondée pratiquement pour les mêmes raisons par Alexandre le Grand. Alors la fondation des villes hellénistiques peut être considérée comme la deuxième grande vague de fondations coloniales, dues à l'initiative des rois, dans le sillage d'Alexandre le Grand qui inaugure le mouvement par notre Alexandrie, au sein d'un processus d'hellénisation du nouveau territoire. Cependant, Alexandrie ne fut pas la seule cité fondée par le conquérant. Entre le Nil et l'Indus on évalue à 34 le nombre de villes portant son nom et notamment 7 érigées à son initiative personnelle. La plus éloignée est Alexandrie Eskhatè, fondée en 329 av. J.-C au Turkestan actuel. Bien sûr la plus célèbre fut la première érigée par le Macédonien en Égypte.

La fondation d'Alexandrie est un événement toujours mentionné dans les biographies mythiques mais aussi historiques d'Alexandre le Grand. Parmi les sources primaires sur Alexandre, nous pouvons citer les plus importantes : Arrien, *L'Anabase d'Alexandre le Grand*, Quinte-Curce, *L'Histoire d'Alexandre le Grand*, Diodore de Sicile, *Bibliothèque d'Histoire du Monde* (livre XVII), Plutarque, *Vie d'Alexandre* et des passages importants de la *Géographie* de Strabon.

En novembre 332 Alexandre le Grand est arrivé en Égypte, et les Égyptiens l'ont accueilli comme leur libérateur. Le satrape perse Mazakès s'est rendu sans résistance. À Memphis Alexandre a sacrifié à Apis, et a été

couronné de la double couronne traditionnelle des pharaons; les prêtres égyptiens étaient apaisés et leur religion encouragée. Deux actions mémorables de l'histoire d'Alexandre se sont déroulées pendant l'hiver (332-331) : l'expédition problématique à l'oracle de Zeus Ammon (Oasis de Siwa) et la fondation de la ville d'Alexandrie qui fut appelée par les Anciens *Alexandria ad Aegyptum* « Alexandrie d'Égypte » ou *Alexandria apud Aegyptum* « en marge de l'Égypte », n'étant située ni dans le Delta ni dans la Vallée du Nil³.

Mais avant de discuter des récits de la fondation d'Alexandrie dans ces sources anciennes, on doit commencer par l'histoire du site d'Alexandrie.



Stèle du satrape

Sur cette bande de terre entre la Méditerranée et le lac Maréotis, si l'on regarde précisément, les sites pouvant abriter la fondation et le développement d'une grande ville n'étaient pas si nombreux; plusieurs villages étaient éparpillés et parmi eux celui de Rhacotis. Cependant les chercheurs, les archéologues et les historiens sont partagés quant au fait de désigner ce dernier comme l'ancêtre d'Alexandrie qui, après la fondation de la ville, serait devenu un quartier de la ville. Le nom de Rhacotis est une version hellénisée de « Rhacot » qui est la translittération du nom Égyptien du chantier d'Alexandrie en construction⁴. Un nombre de textes bilingues de l'époque ptolémaïque traduisaient le nom grec d'Alexandrie soit en hiéroglyphiques ou en démotique par Rhacot; cela indique que les habitants égyptiens refusaient d'appeler la ville par son nom grec. Pour confirmer, on peut mentionner l'exemple de la Stèle du Satrape qui distinguait nettement la résidence de



Temple de l'Oracle d'Ammon à Siwa

Ptolémée fils de Lagos, gouverneur de l'Égypte (la cité des Grecs, Alexandrie), de la cité indigène, Rhacotis. Le texte, se référant à la nouvelle résidence de Ptolémée, dit: «*Pour sa résidence, il (Ptolémée) a choisi la forteresse du roi Alexandre, telle qu'on la nomme, au bord de la mer Ionienne, en un lieu qui s'appelait naguère Rhacôtis*»⁵.

La présence des Grecs est de plus en plus importante sur la côte à l'époque, due à l'intensification des relations commerciales avec les villes du Delta mais aussi due à certaines colonies grecques comme Naucratis.

La question qui découle de toutes ces particularités géographiques ainsi que de la fréquentation humaine de la zone est la suivante : la ville a-t-elle été fondée à partir de rien, ex nihilo, ou une ville égyptienne précédait-elle l'Alexandrie grecque? Selon Paolo Gallo, la fréquentation croissante des navigateurs grecs n'a pas laissé les dernières dynasties indigènes insensibles à l'intérêt de cette région. Notamment, la vingt-sixième dynastie, qui était puissante militairement, n'a pas dû laisser la côte dépourvue de moyens de défense. De ce fait, Paolo Gallo, corrobore l'hypothèse de la présence de fortins qui jalonnaient toute la côte jusqu'à la Cyrénaïque. De même des tessons de céramiques culinaires, provenant des couches les plus profondes des fouilles terrestres entreprises, confirment l'hypothèse d'une fréquentation humaine. Cependant, pour l'archéologue, si présence humaine il y avait, on ne peut pas parler de ville. En effet, même si des sources historiques évoquent la présence d'un village (qui serait Rhacotis), Paolo Gallo démontre que les Pharaonica (objets, monuments pharaoniques) retrouvés à Alexandrie, que ce soit sur terre ou immergés, ne proviennent pas de la ville. Pour l'archéologue, Alexandrie a été une ville grecque avant tout et les objets pharaoniques auraient été introduits par les Romains⁶. Pour le chercheur Jean Yoyotte, ce sont les premiers Ptolémées qui ont commencé à amener ces objets à Alexandrie, conférant

ainsi à la cité un caractère plus « égyptien » qu'on ne l'aurait pensé, introduisant une mixité religieuse gréco-égyptienne⁷.

La ville fut donc fondée en 331 avant notre ère, de la volonté même du conquérant macédonien durant la période où il fut présent en Égypte. À ce sujet, le mythe et les modalités pratiques de la création de la cité se confondent et sont notamment relayés par les sources littéraires anciennes qui proposent des versions différentes.

Chez Plutarque, il apparaît qu'après s'être rendu maître de l'Égypte, Alexandre a décidé d'y fonder une ville grecque importante qui porterait son nom. Dans un rêve, il crut voir un vieil homme aux cheveux blancs lui réciter ces vers de l'*Odyssée* 4, 354-355: «*Puis, sur la mer houleuse, il existe un îlot, en avant de l'Égypte, on l'appelle Pharos* ». Selon Plutarque dans *La Vie d'Alexandre*, 26, 3-14 Alexandre se leva aussitôt et se rendit à Pharos, où il trouvait la place « favorable » et il ordonna qu'on traçât le plan de la nouvelle ville. Comme, il n'y avait pas de craie, on lança de la farine et on traça des lignes droites pour aboutir à un ensemble en forme de chlamyde. Cependant une multitude infinie d'oiseaux mangea toute la farine et ce présage troubla fort Alexandre. Ses devins le rassurèrent en lui expliquant que la cité abonderait en ressources et nourrirait les hommes de tous pays. Le monarque ordonna alors de se mettre à la tâche et partit pour Siwa.

Selon Arrien : «*Alexandre, maître de l'Égypte, débarqua où est aujourd'hui située la ville d'Alexandrie. Il lui sembla que l'emplacement convenait admirablement à la fondation d'une ville, et que cette ville serait prospère. Il établit lui-même le plan en damier de la cité, l'endroit où il faudrait construire l'agora, le nombre des sanctuaires et pour quels dieux (les dieux grecs mais aussi Isis l'Égyptienne) et où devaient être placés les remparts entourant la ville. Il offrit un sacrifice* »⁸.

La source accordée au Pseudo-Callisthène, *Le Roman d'Alexandre*, I, 32,



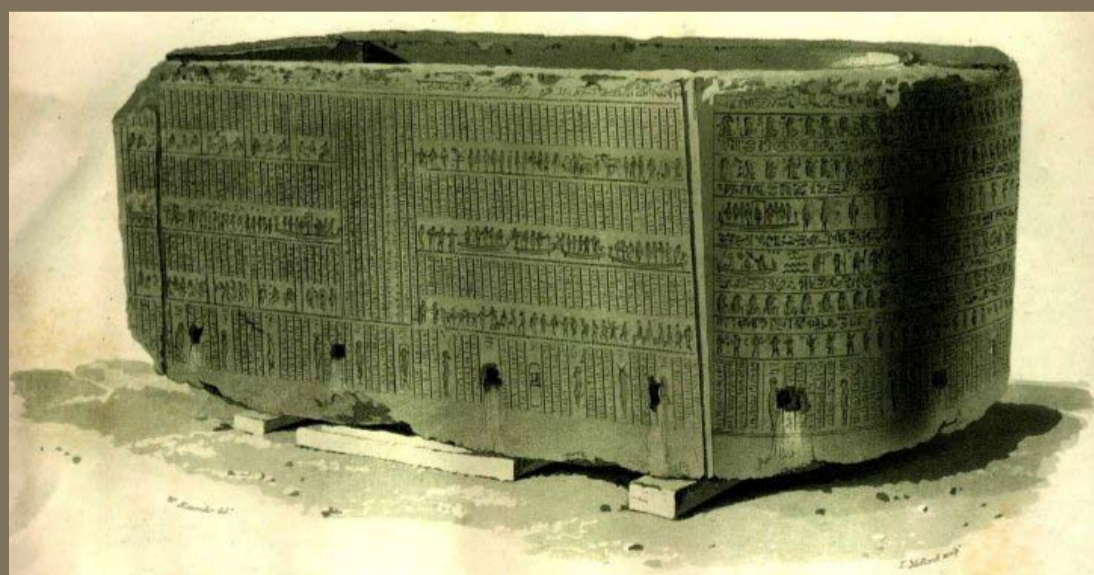
Gravure d'Alexandre traçant le plan de la ville d'Alexandrie par André Castaigne, 1898-1899

attribue la fondation de la ville à son retour de Siwa, où Alexandre reçut l'oracle de Zeus Ammon. Il vit, depuis la terre, une île dont il demanda le nom. Les habitants lui répondirent : «*C'est Pharos* ». Comme selon Plutarque, les ouvriers tracèrent la ville avec de la farine que les oiseaux mangèrent ; ce à quoi les augures répondirent favorablement. Enfin, selon Arrien, c'est en naviguant sur le lac Maréotis qu'Alexandre découvrit l'île de Pharos, s'éprit du lieu et décida d'y fonder sa future cité éponyme et c'est lui-même qui traça le plan tout en insistant sur l'agora, les temples et les remparts.

Malgré l'aspect légendaire attribué à la fondation d'Alexandrie, les causes de cette décision ne sont pas seulement mythiques. En effet l'intention était aussi de concurrencer les cités commerçantes de la Grèce continentale ou insulaire telles que Athènes, Rhodes et Chios, dont la présence des navires était croissante sur la côte égyptienne et dans la région de Canope. De même il y avait la possibilité de prendre la succession des ports Phéniciens. À cela s'ajoute le désir d'Alexandre de prendre sa revanche sur les cités grecques dont il se défie ainsi que de châtier les Levantins qui lui ont opposé une si longue résistance. L'ambition fut donc de créer une cité qui contrôlerait le trafic commercial. C'est dans ce contexte que le site présentait l'avantage d'être protégé par l'îlot de Pharos et de favoriser le transfert des marchandises sur le Nil.

L'auteur Romain Vitruve a écrit un traité, *De Architectura*, dans lequel il évoque les circonstances selon lesquelles le conquérant a ordonné la mise en œuvre du chantier de la ville et il a mentionné en IV, 2 qu'Alexandre décida de confier la tâche à l'architecte grec Dinocratès de Rhodes et à son administrateur Cléomène de Naucratis.

L'historien Diodore de Sicile dans sa *Bibliothèque Historique*, XVII, livre II a aussi largement commenté la fondation de la cité. En effet, une fois le terrain arpenté et divisé en quartiers, le monarque donna à la future ville le nom d'Alexandrie. Toujours selon cette source, la ville s'étendait d'une porte à l'autre sur une longueur de quarante stades et une largeur d'un plèthre. La forme qu'aurait donnée Alexandre à sa cité est conçue de



Pharonica



Plan de la ville d'Alexandrie à l'époque Hellénistique

telle façon à laisser traverser la ville par les vents de l'été et y assurer un climat tempéré. Le monarque aurait aussi donné l'ordre d'édifier un palais.

Un autre récit légendaire relie Alexandre à sa ville dès l'antiquité jusqu'au moyen âge. C'est le récit de l'ascension d'Alexandre inséré à la fois dans les recensions grecques du IXe siècle du Pseudo-Callisthène et dans la traduction latine du Xe siècle par l'archiprêtre Léon de Naples d'une recension grecque antérieure. Ce récit est systématiquement associé à la fondation d'Alexandrie: c'est après avoir édifié la ville qu'un ange visite Alexandre et l'enlève dans les airs: « *Un ange... le prit dans les airs et dit: Regarde ce que tu as au-dessous de toi. Alexandre répondit: Je vois ma ville et d'autres villes avec elle. L'ange monta*



L'ascension d'Alexandre le Grand, le relief de l'église du Xe s. de Xaxuli en Turquie

plus haut et dit: Regarde encore. Alexandre répondit: Ma ville s'est mêlée aux autres villes, je ne la reconnais plus. L'ange le prit plus haut et dit: Regarde encore. Alexandre s'écria: Je ne vois plus que ma ville seule.

L'ange dit alors: Ce que tu vois est la terre entière, entourée par la mer. Ton Seigneur a voulu te montrer l'étendue de la terre qu'il soumet à ton pouvoir»⁹

La présentation, non exhaustive, des versions légendaires de la création d'Alexandrie démontre que le mythe tient à deux éléments, à deux destins exceptionnels: celui d'un homme, Alexandre le Grand, fondateur de la civilisation hellénistique, dont l'empire s'étend du Nil à l'Indus; et celui d'une ville, devenue sous l'impulsion des premiers souverains lagides le foyer de civilisation le plus important du monde méditerranéen, dont les protagonistes, qu'ils soient des scientifiques ou des monarques, constituent des références culturelles encore bien vivaces de nos jours.

Si la création de la ville est largement relayée par la légende, Alexandrie ne prit son envergure qu'avec les premiers rois lagides. Si les bases, notamment en terme d'organisation spatiale, ont été jetées par Alexandre et ses proches, c'est sous les premiers Lagides que la ville a pris cette dimension architecturale, économique et culturelle qu'on lui connaît et qui ont consacré Alexandrie comme le foyer de civilisation le plus important à l'époque hellénistique. Une dimension architecturale tout d'abord grâce aux nombreux bâtiments, véritables joyaux d'architecture grecque tels que le Gymnase, le théâtre, le Sarapieon et les quartiers royaux. De même, le Phare a été édifié par des architectes grecs. Si le nombre, la taille et la diversité des objets ou monuments

pharaoniques semblent desservir la thèse selon laquelle une ville égyptienne aurait existé avant, cela permet néanmoins d'entrevoir la richesse et le prestige acquis par Alexandrie. Une dimension économique quant on sait l'importance qu'a acquis la cité dans les échanges commerciaux durant la période hellénistique. Tournée vers le monde méditerranéen, mais aussi vers l'Égypte, Alexandrie a acquis une position incontournable dans les échanges économiques. Strabon nous décrit aussi des canaux reliant la côte méditerranéenne aux bras du Nil, ainsi que des citernes très sophistiquées et en nombre très important qui témoignent d'une affluence dans cette ville qui fut l'une des plus peuplées du monde méditerranéen. Enfin une dimension culturelle. Alexandrie est devenue sous le règne des Lagides le centre intellectuel du monde connu. Les Ptolémées ont mis en place ces institutions que furent le Musée et la Bibliothèque qui ont fait d'Alexandrie un foyer intellectuel, attirant les chercheurs les plus illustres du monde hellénistique. La Bibliothèque a vite compté des milliers d'ouvrages. Alexandrie est demeurée longtemps un centre de recherches scientifiques et philosophiques de premier ordre.

- 1 Billows, R., «Cities», in A. Erskine ed., Blackwell Companion to the Hellenistic World, Blackwell: Oxford, 2003, 196-215.
- 2 Baldassare, I., «Cirene», dans E. Greco (dir.), La città greca antica. Istituzioni, società e forme urbane, Rome, 1999.
- 3 Bill, H. I., «Alexandria ad Aegyptum», dans The Journal of Roman Studies, Vol. 36, Society for the Promotion of Roman Studies, 1946, pp. 130-132. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/298045>
- 4 Chauveau, M., «Alexandrie et Rhakotis: le point de vue des Egyptiens», dans Alexandrie: une mégapole cosmopolite, J. Leclant (dir.), Cahiers de la villa Kerylos, ix, Paris, 1999, pp. 2-4.
- 5 Bevan, E., Histoire des Lagides, Paris, 1934, p. 46-49.
- 6 Gallo, P., Les Pharaonica d'Alexandrie, Conférence le 8 septembre 2001, <http://sedlouvreiers.pagesperso-orange.fr/confetextes/alexandrie.htm>
- 7 Yoyotte, J., «Pharaonica», dans F. Goddio (dir.), Alexandrie, Les Quartiers Royaux Submergés, Periplus Publishing, London, 1998
- 8 Arrien, Histoire d'Alexandre: L'Anabase d'Alexandre le Grand et L'Inde, trad. par Pierre Savinel, Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1984
- 9 De Polignac, F., «Alexandre Entre Ciel et Terre: Initiation et Investiture», dans Studia Islamica, No. 84, 1996, pp. 135-144, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1595998>.

Egyptian Cuisine: Reinvented

Samira Mahmoud

The United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has officially accepted to include the Mediterranean diet in the World Heritage List on account of its health-promoting features. In general, the traditional Egyptian diet, which is primarily based on a cereal/ legume mix, shares many of its features such as: a daily intake of fresh and raw vegetables and fruits in season; plenty of dark leafy vegetables; a preference for plant sources of proteins over animal; several cereal and legume-based dishes; and healthy snacks such as dried fruits, legumes and seeds. On the other hand, dairy products, poultry, eggs, fish and occasionally red meat, represent the recommended sources of animal proteins.

Despite its many positive aspects, Egyptian cuisine is not as well-known as some other Middle Eastern cuisines such as those of Lebanon and Morocco. For this reason, Dr. Habiba Hassan Wassef, a nutritionist, public health policy analyst and a world-renowned expert on Egyptian food, asserts it is high time to give Egyptian cuisine its due recognition.

There are several Euro-Mediterranean initiatives and Italian sponsored projects and activities (the RIFOSAL Consortium, the Mediterranean Institute of Certification IMC, and the Mediterranean Diet Foundation) that are working with Egyptian partners on making Egyptian agrifood products and dishes better known across Europe and the rest of the world. Studies presented at the Meeting on Perspectives for Food 2030 (Brussels 2007) have shown that the health attributes of a food product largely contribute to its market success. "Now that health is recognized as the main driving force for the consumer of the future, health-promoting Egyptian foods are expected to occupy a privileged place among other foods in the coming years", states Dr. Habiba Wassef in one of her many informative presentations on this subject.*

Several organizations that were working independently to make known the Egyptian cuisine are now joining hands. A number of enterprises have already been initiated by the Agricultural Research Center (ARC) and the National Research Center (NRC) under Dr. Wassef's leadership, to characterize the authentic agricultural and food products of the land, the true culinary heritage of Egyptians, and to document traditional food processing technologies. The healthy benefits of the Egyptian diet and food products are being tested and validated by scientific research. Important work is also underway for documenting Egypt's food heritage by Dr. Hala Barakat and her team at the Center for Documentation of the Cultural Heritage of Egypt of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (CultNat). This initiative builds on and consolidates a long history of research on the characteristics of Egyptian food which started as far back as the early 1940s. Barakat's team has recently invited a multidisciplinary group of interested partners, including the Egyptian Chefs Association, to join hands and work together towards the common goal of studying, valorizing and further developing our food heritage.

Another important step, which is already supported by the Egyptian Chamber of Food Industries, is to develop an accreditation system to certify agro-food products of proven Egyptian origin. This would contribute to enlarging the list of protected and certified food of Egyptian origin that can become available on the world market. However, this initiative needs to be backed by scientific research, as certification and accreditation are awarded on the bases of evidence of the historical and cultural origins; the traditional processing techniques; and the chemical and sensory characterization that includes proof for validating health claims.

A re-invention of the Egyptian cuisine by qualified Egyptian chefs and adapting it to the preferences of the 21st century consumer is the culminating step in this whole process. In this way, the chefs of Egypt will transpose Egypt's heritage, thereby making it attractive to the modern consumer, which, in its turn, can help open up innovative opportunities for Egyptians involved in mass catering and the food industry.

"Egypt has an ancient food system that shares the main characteristics of the Mediterranean diet. In order to re-invent our cuisine in a new form, there is a three-step process that Egyptian Chefs must take into account", says Dr. Wassef.

- 1) Firstly, we must select some of the traditional dishes that we think the modern consumer would like;
- 2) Secondly, we must choose a second selection of those dishes that are best suited to a catering operation of a 5-star establishment;
- 3) Thirdly, we need to adjust them into recipes that suit the preferences of the modern consumer, using less fat, less salt and less sugar.

The "*nouvelle cuisine*" type of recipe that is thus created can then contribute to a progressive build up of a repertoire for the "Cuisine of Egypt" that can be introduced to the world as derived from true Egyptian tradition.



*Mediterranean Study Days on Food Quality and Safety, Cairo Marriott Hotel, 28 May 2009.

Mediterranean Frittata

This vegetarian frittata, also known as Italian omelet, contains cheese, roasted peppers, and olives. Prepared in less than 30 minutes, it makes a delicious entree for breakfast or brunch.

Ingredients:

Makes 6 servings.

- 1 cup chopped onion
- 2 cloves garlic, minced
- 3 tablespoons olive oil
- 8 eggs, beaten
- 1/4 cup light cream or milk
- 1/2 cup crumbled feta cheese
- 1/2 cup chopped roasted red sweet peppers
- 1/2 cup sliced kalamata or pitted ripe olives (optional)
- 1/4 cup slivered fresh basil
- 1/8 teaspoon ground black pepper
- 1/2 cup onion-and-garlic croutons, coarsely crushed
- 2 tablespoons finely shredded Parmesan cheese
- Fresh basil leaves (optional)



Directions:

1. Preheat broiler.
2. In a large skillet cook onion and garlic in 2 tablespoons hot oil until onion is just tender.
3. Meanwhile, in a bowl, beat together eggs and light cream or milk.
4. Stir in feta cheese, roasted sweet pepper, olives (if desired), basil, and black pepper.
5. Pour egg mixture over onion mixture in skillet.
6. Cook over medium heat.
7. As mixture sets, run a spatula around the edge of the skillet, lifting egg mixture so uncooked portion flows underneath.
8. Continue cooking and lifting edges until egg mixture is almost set (surface will be moist).
9. Reduce heat as necessary to prevent overcooking.
10. In a bowl combine crushed croutons, Parmesan cheese, and the remaining tablespoon of oil; sprinkle mixture over frittata.
11. Broil 4 to 5 inches from heat for 1 to 2 minutes or until top is set and crumbs are golden.
12. Cut frittata in wedges to serve.
13. If desired, garnish with fresh basil leaves.

Nutrition Facts:

Calories 246, Total Fat 19 g, Saturated Fat 5 g, Cholesterol 295 mg, Sodium 383 mg, Carbohydrate 8 g, Fiber 1 g, Protein 11 g.
Daily Values: Vitamin A 0%, Vitamin C 60%, Calcium 12%, Iron 9%. Exchanges: Other Carbohydrate .5, Medium-Fat Meat 1.5, Fat 2.
Percent Daily Values are based on a 2,000 calorie diet.





The Alexandria & Mediterranean Research Center, Bibliotheca Alexandrina
Chatby 21526, Alexandria, Egypt.
or
alex.med@bibalex.org



Alex Newsletter Med

