

Shatby Revisited

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The foundation and rapid growth of Alexandria marks a key turning point in the history of the Ancient Mediterranean that is of direct relevance for the entire further development of western culture. The new social and cultural phenomena that we today view as characteristic of the 'Hellenistic' period appear to have played a particularly significant role in this city of Alexander the Great, which expanded rapidly from 331 BC onwards. Indeed, it is fair to say that the inhabitants of this city played an important and significant role in the creation of a new form of urbanity, as we understand it today.

For a long time before the foundation of Alexandria, Greek *emporía* and urban foundations had been established along the Mediterranean coasts and the Black Sea littoral, but these had primarily been artificially created colonies or trading posts which largely followed the same organisation, both socially and politically, as their Greek predecessors. As such, the daily lives of settlers, be it in Cyrenaica or the Crimean Peninsula, appear to have followed predominantly homogenous Greek patterns – as far as can be judged from the evidence available¹. The wide-ranging campaigns of Alexander the Great led to a significant 'internationalisation' of this Greek cultural sphere. This development was particularly strong in Alexandria, the first Greek city not characterised by any traditional ethnic and autochthonous or culturally homogenous Greek structures. The new metropolis was shaped by a multitude of people of very different origins, backgrounds and cultural traditions that came together and were united by the open and adaptive rule of the Ptolemaic rulers of Egypt. In this cultural melting-pot of the ancient world, social conventions, community definitions and identities had to be reinvented and newly defined. The largely mobile populace made up from migrants and culturally mobile individuals in combination with the sheer size of the rapidly expanding city led to the formation of a strong cooperative social organisation of strictly defined groups, coupled with a distanced but openly reflecting

1 See Murray, O., 1993: 102-123; Miller, Th., 1997: 10-11; Demetriou, D., 2012.

approach to specific cultural traditions of such groups – much as is in evidence in most large modern urban conglomerations across the world.

The Archaeology of early Alexandria

The emergence of a multi-ethnic and truly metropolitan culture in Alexandria is well documented in literary sources and frequently in the spotlight of historical research.² In the material culture of the city, however, this phenomenon is not clearly identifiable. The archaeological map of the early periods of this Greek metropolis in particular is still dominated by blank areas – the Roman Imperial, late Antique and not least modern settlement phases that overly it make it difficult, and in places impossible, to reliably reconstruct the first phases of urban development that date to the 4th and 3rd centuries BC. There are only few areas in the urban topography of Alexandria where it is possible to gain archaeological insights into the earliest phases of the city. One such archaeological 'window' is the part of the eastern necropolis currently being studied by the Commission for the Study of Ancient Urbanism of the Bavarian Academy of Sciences.³

Part of the necropolis is preserved in an open area in the modern Shatby area of Alexandria. Some of this was excavated between 1904 and 1910 by Evaristo Breccia, then director of the Graeco-Roman Museum of Alexandria. The results of his research are published to a remarkably high standard for their time.⁴ Nonetheless, his publication leaves a number of unanswered questions, while various archaeological features remained undocumented or undiscussed, providing an opportunity for a renewed programme of archaeological research in the area. From 2010 to 2014, several archaeological field seasons were carried out in the Shatby necropolis area, which sought to answer some of the questions left unanswered by Breccia's publication. Core aims of this project were to clarify the chronological

2 E.g. Jacob, C. & F. de Polignac, 2000; Ballet, P., 1999.

3 The full publication of the excavations and their results will be in monograph form as volume 16 of the Commission's, *Studien zur antiken Stadt'* (Studies in ancient urbanism).

4 Breccia, E., 1905; Breccia, E., 1912. See also: Adriani, A., 1963–66: 109 No. 59; 124–127 No. 79. 80; M.S., 2002, 26–36; Schmidt, S., 2010: 137–139; 143–147.

sequence of the several surviving subterranean funerary complexes at the site, to identify the rise of a specific Alexandrine funerary tradition amongst the numerous different traditions that different cultural groups brought to the city and to chronologically define the end of funerary activity in this part of the eastern necropolis of Alexandria.

The Shatby archaeological zone offers the unique opportunity to study all of these aspects in one small area because of its specific topographic situation in relation to both ancient and modern Alexandria (Fig. 1). Even the first archaeological investigations at the site soon showed that the immediate vicinity to the old core of the city meant that this area held some of the earliest burials of the city, dating back to the time of the first settlers.⁵ At a later date, however, the city walls, as well as the city limits, included and surrounded this particular area which had originally been outside the city. As a result, the necropolis must have been purposefully abandoned at some point in time as part of a necessary extension of the urban zone of Alexandria.⁶ To date, however, there was no archaeological evidence to indicate when exactly this officially sanctioned urban growth of Alexandria actually occurred.

Our excavations focussed on two points of the archaeological zone of Shatby. One subterranean funerary complex, identified as Hypogaeum B, had already been excavated by Breccia. However, his publication includes neither plans nor photographs and no documentation other than a brief description. By re-excavating this subterranean complex, it was possible to correct inaccurate reconstructions through careful documentation of the actual architectural design, while its chronological relation to an adjacent chamber of the main and well researched funerary complex known as Hypogaeum A could also be clarified and understood. In addition, a third subterranean complex, identified as Hypogaeum C, was excavated for the first time, in the hope of studying previously undisturbed burials and in order to gain precise insights regarding their chronology and the observed funerary customs (Fig. 2).

5 Breccia, E., 1912, x; cf. Coulson, W.D.E., 1987.

6 See also: Grimm, G., 1996; for a critical reception: McKenzie, J., 2007, 27–29. 71 (favouring the expansion of the city in the 1st century BC).

From burial vault to subterranean meeting place

The first excavation season carried out as part of this project in 2010 showed that Hypogeum B consists of a central courtyard or light-well accessed by stairs running along two of its sides. This open space gave access to an underground chamber containing several burial niches, known as *loculi* (Fig. 3). These had already been opened in the course of Breccia's excavations in the early 20th century, but the remains of different cover-slabs for the niches could be identified lying on the floor of the chamber. Crossing from the entrance to this chamber, a wide niche cut into the side of the central courtyard serves as a simple room. A rock-cut bench running along its sides shows that it was used as a meeting place of some sort (Fig. 4). In terms of basic layout, the complex therefore follows a standard pattern known from numerous other later tomb complexes in Alexandria.⁷

Of particular interest during the excavation of Hypogeum B was the observation that during construction of the stairway, the back ends of two *loculus*-tombs belonging to a neighbouring funerary complex (Hypogeum A) were cut and damaged. This provides some indicators of the chronological sequence of both *hypogea* – as the excavated complex must clearly have been constructed at a later time if it cut the burial niches of another underground complex. This hypothetical chronological sequence is further corroborated by the doorway giving access to the burial chamber of Hypogeum B. While standard plans of underground funerary complexes in Alexandria are highly symmetrical with doorways in central positions of the courtyard sides – a pattern to which the construction of the meeting place across from the chamber conforms – the access doorway to the chamber of Hypogeum B is off-centre, and lies at the northernmost possible point in the west side of the courtyard. It appears highly plausible that this exception resulted from an attempt on the part of the builders to avoid any potential further conflicts with funerary chambers or burial niches to the south. This can be seen as a further indicator that the neighbouring burial chamber of Hypogaeum A not only existed, but was completed and in use with fully constructed *loculi*, before work on Hypogeum B even began.

7 For a typology of Alexandrine tombs, see: Nenna, M.-D., 2009: 176–193.

This chronological sequence in construction of the subterranean tombs at Shatby allows first hypotheses regarding the changes in customs and needs of the individuals who buried relatives or were buried here themselves. The earliest chamber, which lies to the east of the main courtyard of the underground complex known as Hypogeum A, appears to have been constructed for a family. It is the only chamber in the entire remaining part of the Shatby necropolis that could be closed off from the remainder of the funerary complex. Interestingly, the individual *loculus*-niches in this chamber did not have covering slabs, but apparently remained open and are likely to have contained wooden sarcophagi.⁸ It seems, therefore, that at the time of construction of this part of the burial complex regular visits to the burial chamber were not a defining element of contemporary funerary customs and culture; the burial vault itself was only accessed during the actual ceremony and act of deposition of a body. It seems that for the next of kin, relatives or associates, the main interest was to clearly convey an impression of the family as one intact and closed unit, in life as in death – a social message conveyed through the means of a closed family burial vault only accessible to the family and during the occasion of the death of one of their own. Similar types of burial precincts attached to specific social units – often families – are regularly found in earlier Greek funerary architecture and rites, where they culminated in types of burial that actually made individual burials or tombs more or less anonymous to visitors or even relatives.⁹

The same underground complex of Hypogeum A, however, has a very different further burial chamber on the western side of the courtyard, which must have been constructed at a later date: in this chamber, every individual *loculus* was closed off by an individually designed slab. The names of the deceased were marked on these

8 There is indirect evidence for the use of wooden sarcophagi in *loculi*; the cover-slabs from the Charmyleion in Kos show depictions of sarcophagus fronts, and also date to the 3rd century BC: Schazmann, P., 1934: 111, Fig. 2. 19; see also: Roux, G., 1987: 111–113, Pls. 64. 65. For dating and chronology see: Rumscheid, F., 1994: 76–82.

9 See for example the burials in the family precincts of Athens: Closterman, W.E., 1999: 51–54. For a more general discussion of the functions of Athenian family tombs, see: Bergemann, J., 1997; Marchiandi, D., 2011.

slabs (Fig. 5).¹⁰ In addition, there appears to have been no mechanism for closing off the burial chamber as a whole from the rest of the funerary complex. This suggests that permanent access to the chamber was possible at least for the wider family, if not even for a more general audience, implying a growing desire or convention to use of the funerary complex as a place of individual or even collective memory and commemoration.

This increasing tendency to utilise burial sites as a social meeting place for memory and the commemoration of the deceased can be observed very clearly in the more recent funerary complex identified as Hypogeum B. Compared to the funerary compound discussed above, this is much simpler in plan and layout and significantly more plain in terms of its architecture and decoration. Nonetheless, even this small complex includes a key space dedicated to the sole purpose of sitting and meeting, i.e. social interaction in a funerary context. This meeting place facing the burial chamber even includes a small well to ensure a regular water supply for whatever events or rites took place there.¹¹ As such, Hypogeum B shows the extent to which tombs and funerary context had gained importance for the definition of identity and celebration of social bonds since the construction of Hypogeum A. Regular celebrations and ceremonies in funerary contexts, as well as the individualisation of both the burial process and the physical site of the burial itself highlighted and showcased the affiliation of each individual to a larger social group or unit – be this the family or any other form of association.

Shatby necropolis and the development of the city of Alexandria

Excavation of the third funerary complex, identified as Hypogeum C, in 2012 and 2013 provided surprising results: while it initially appeared to follow the common layout and plan of a complex with a central courtyard or light-well accessed by stairs running along two of the sides of the central courtyard, it soon became evident that Hypogeum C had never been completed. At the bottom of the access

10 Breccia, E., 1912: xxxiv–xl.

11 On meeting places and social spaces in funerary contexts in Alexandria see: Schmidt, S., 2010. On the water supply in Alexandrine tombs see: Tricoche, A., 2009.

stairs was a block of stone that had been quarried out for removal, but the block itself was still actually in situ (Fig. 6). Quarry marks could further be identified at several points of the stairs. The bottom of the courtyard was covered in several small ashlar blocks that were loosely set on a thick layer of rubble and stone-waste chips, while the floor itself was uneven and bedrock seams that had been left standing between the ashlar during cutting could still be identified.

While the general shape of the access stairs and courtyard had largely been completed and the traces of work in progress indicate that only cosmetic work remained to be done when the construction process was abandoned, the actual burial chambers themselves (or perhaps burial chamber and meeting room?) were never actually built. Work on access doorways that were clearly intended to lead to chambers to the north and west of the courtyard had begun – but they only reach a depth of 40-50cm and were not completed to full height (interestingly, the construction process of these doorways appears to have begun from the top downwards) (Fig. 7).

The archaeological situation in Hypogeum C therefore seems to imply that rather than being abandoned on purpose, work on this funerary complex was halted during the actual process of construction. Some indicators for such a process also exist in the funerary complex excavated in 2010 (Hypogeum B): here, spaces for further *loculi* had been marked out by thin pick-lines in the walls of the burial chamber – but the actual burial niches themselves were never constructed. Such a sudden end to work in several funerary complexes at Shatby, however, can only really be explained by an unpredictable event that surprised the individuals or associations charged with their construction and extension, and caused an immediate cessation of all funerary activity in Shatby necropolis. Such a development could have been brought on by an unforeseen extension of the city limits that ranged beyond the existing necropoleis and meant that they could no longer be used for funerary purposes. As such, the archaeological evidence from Shatby suggest that instead of a gradual extension of the urban area towards the east, the city of Alexandria may have been purposefully extended in this direction as the result of a central political decision.

The latest excavations provide some indication of what appears to have happened next in the Shatby area. The area was not levelled and built over immediately, but remained in its abandoned form for at least some period of time. The abandoned building site, termed Hypogeum C in the course of this project, was soon used as a shelter or similar form of habitation. Large quantities of table- and cooking wares were found on the lowest landing of the access stairway, as well as just outside it, in the south-eastern corner of the unfinished courtyard. Here, discoloured soil between roughly arranged stones showed the existence of a simple hearth for some time. It seems, therefore, that the covered stairwell was used as a basic form of residence – while the ceramic material indicates occupation for several years. The ceramics furthermore provide a clear chronological frame for this reuse of the Hypogeum construction site as a habitation: the identifiable cups, plates and pots all date to the late 3rd century and early 2nd century BC (Figs. 8–10).¹² At the same time, they represent a *terminus ante quem* for the abandonment of the necropolis of Shatby as a burial place and, by extension, for the expansion of the urban area of Alexandria towards the East. In other words, the material from the excavation of Hypogeum C suggests that the city limits of Alexandria were enlarged significantly around the final quarter of the 3rd century BC. Only a little more than a century after its very foundation, therefore, the city of Alexandria had already grown so much that its territory had to be extended.

This observation fits well with what is known about the political constellation in Alexandria in the late 3rd century BC. The time up to the death of Ptolemy III., in 222 BC is generally seen as a period of particular bloom, growth and prosperity of the city. One well-known and well-documented public building project from this time is the monumental extension of the city's sanctuary of Serapis.¹³ In this context, a political decision to extend the city limits and its walls, in

12 The ceramics from the excavations are currently being processed and analysed by Aude Simony. A preliminary assessment has shown that the material has parallels amongst that from the British Consulate excavations (cricket ground), see: Harlaut, C., 2002, as well as amongst the ceramics from the Gabbari excavations: Ballet – Ballet, P. & C. Harlaut, 2001: 301–318.

13 Wace, A.J.B., 1945: 106–107; Sabottka, M., 2008: 22.

order to increase the urban area as part of a planned public building programme, does not seem unlikely, especially so, as the following reign of Ptolemy IV. heralded a period of crisis and decline for the Ptolemaic kings of Egypt, which also affected the city of Alexandria. It seems highly unlikely that the city limits would have been extended during such a period of external threats and internal unrest.¹⁴ Indeed, the archaeological record could be taken to suggest that the difficult situation under Ptolemy IV. meant that the extension of the city, which had been decided on and enacted during more prosperous times of rapid urban growth, was not actually followed by concrete building activity in the form of houses or public buildings for some time – allowing for the abandoned underground complex of Hypogeum C to be occupied at least temporarily, as shown above.¹⁵ While this cannot be taken as absolute proof, it makes an extension of the city limits under Ptolemy III in the late 3rd century BC highly plausible.

Although the new research project in the Shatby necropolis took place on a very small scale and included only limited excavation, the new results therefore contribute some key components for a better

14 It should be noted, however, that it is equally possible that the fortifications of the city were extended, or at least moved, on the sole basis of military and fortificatory considerations. The elevated range of hills of the *lignes francaises* (French fortifications), today marked by the courses of Sh. Ahmed Kamha and Sh. Mansour Fahmi roads east of the University area (Faculty of Engineering) between the suburban railway and the Abukir road, would have been an ideal position for besieging the city. As such, an extension of the city limits, and therefore fortifications, beyond this area would have efficiently negated this natural strategic advantage of any potential aggressor.

15 The earliest residential structures can be proven on the basis of mosaics date to the Roman Imperial period. These are known from an area north of the new Jewish cemetery: Breccia, E., 1905: 55–56; Breccia, E., 1912: ix–x; Breccia, E., 1914: 75. 274; Blake, M.E., 1930: 80 Plate 22, 2; Daszewski, W.A., 1985: 45 note 124; Tkaczow, B., 1993: 169 No. 136 (Alexandria Museum Inv. No. 10200). From the new Jewish cemetery itself: Breccia, E., 1905: 56 note 1; Breccia, E., 1914: 75. From the University district north of the Abukir Road: Breccia, E., 1933: 20f. Plates VII, 26. 27 = Tkaczow, B., 1993: 171 on No. 138A Fig. 68, b. c. Adriani, A., 1934: 35f. Plates XIX. XX, 2 = Daszewski, W.A., 1985: 44 note 112; Tkaczow, B., 1993: 170 No 138A Fig. 68 a. Adriani, A. 1940: 149f. Plate LXI = Daszewski, W.A., 1985: 20 note 56; Tkaczow, B., 1993: 170 No. 138 Fig. 67 (Alexandria Museum Inv. No. 25093).

understanding of the appearance and development of early Alexandria. It is now possible to suggest a clearer and chronologically more refined model of the urban development of this first true Greek metropolis. At the same time, the observed changes in tomb appearance and funerary customs allow a more refined understanding of the kind of ways in which the population reacted to the new social conditions of this major city. In this, the very limited window into Alexandria's past that is the Shatby archaeological zone allows us to gain a surprising number of impressions of the way of life, and changes therein, of this new and open metropolis that attracted people from far beyond the Greek World and cultural sphere.

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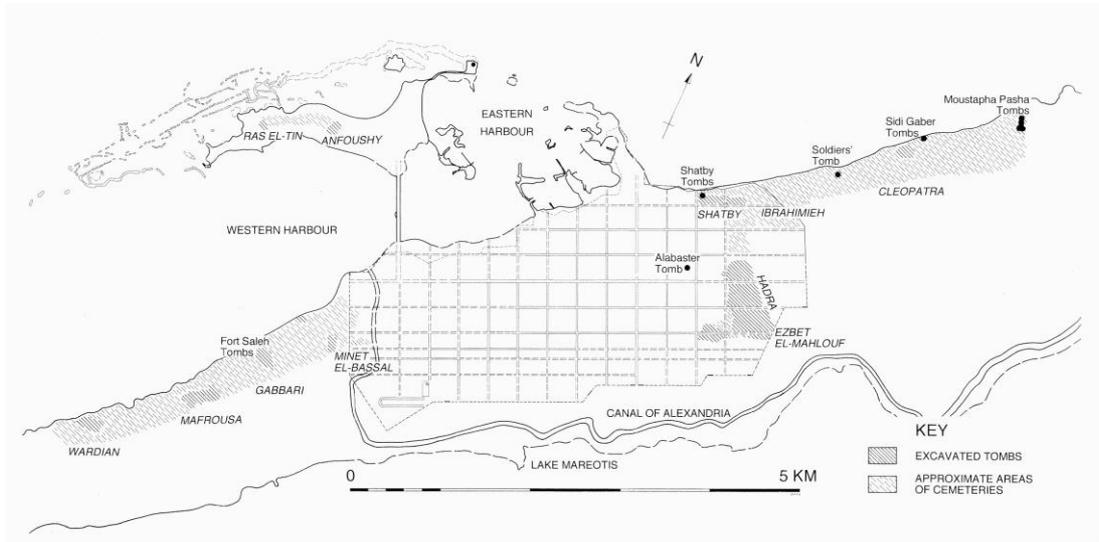


Fig. 1

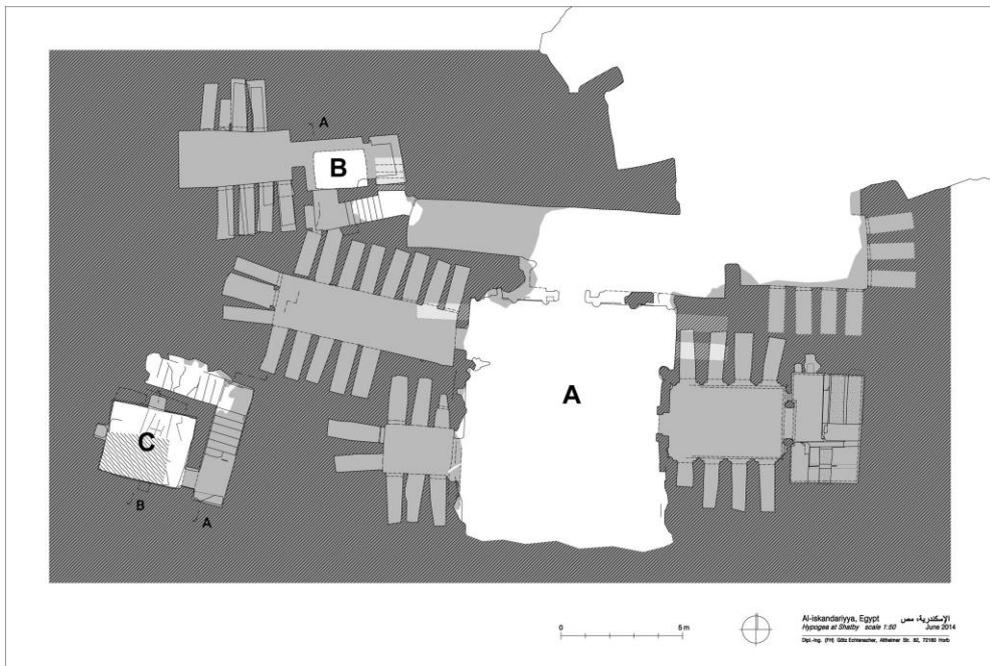


Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4



Fig. 5



Fig. 6



Fig. 7

SHATBY NECROPOLIS
POTTERY FROM HYPOGEUM C

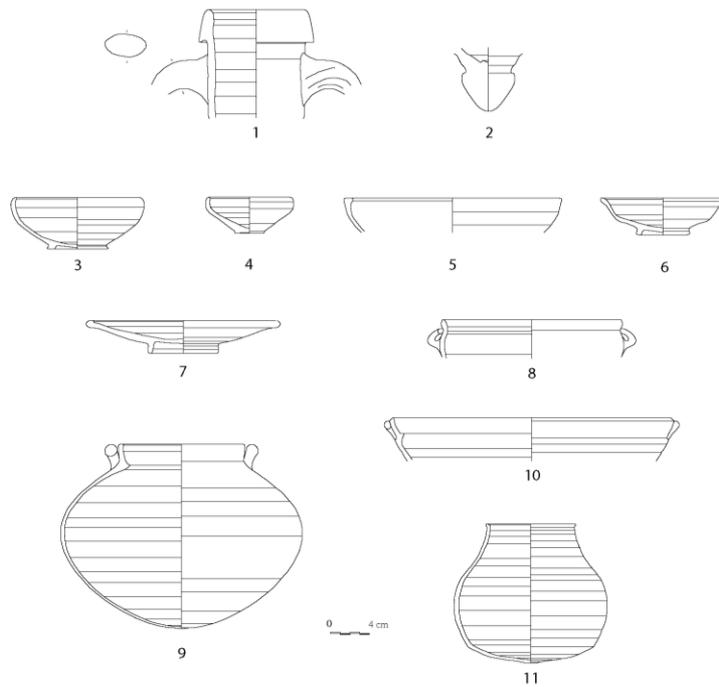


Fig. 8



Fig. 9



Fig. 10