Ancient Alexandria Emerges, By Land and By Sea

Excavators are finding surprisingly late signs of intellectual life in the ancient capital of Hellenistic Egypt and discovering that geology played a dramatic role in the city’s fall.

Oxford, U.K.—For centuries the massive Pharos lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, guided sailors to the busy wharves that made Alexandria a prosperous center of Mediterranean culture and home to the greatest library of ancient times. Yet while rivals Rome and Constantinople survived the chaotic period following the collapse of the Roman Empire, Alexandria faded from the historical record. By the 8th century C.E. the famed metropolis had fallen into oblivion. Today the city of Alexandria, site of Alexander the Great’s tomb and Cleopatra’s death, attracts scholars the way it once drew merchants and philosophers, arguing that contracting out the leadership of maritime digs to non-archaeologists uncomfortable with turning over part of the scientific process to those who lack formal training. "I’d be wary of

Ancient Alexandria was famed for its philosophical disputes, and that tradition is very much alive in excavations now under way in the Egyptian port. Scholars are hotly debating a controversial agreement that gives a nonscientist, French businessman Franck Goddio, control over underwater archaeological data collection for Oxford University. At a conference held in December—a coming-out party for Oxford’s new Center for Maritime Archaeology—dozens of scholars discussed new finds (see main text). But others avoided the event, arguing that contracting out the leadership of maritime digs to non-scientists sets a poor precedent.

Under the deal signed 18 months ago, Goddio will oversee underwater excavations; Oxford graduate students, under the guidance of professors, will analyze the data. The Hilti Foundation of Lichtenstein, which has supported Goddio’s work for a decade and is funded by a tool company of the same name, will provide at least $300,000 to fuel the center, which for now will focus on Goddio’s work in Alexandria and nearby Abukir Bay.

Goddio, who has worked for 20 years on more than 50 underwater sites, is a Jacques Cousteau of archaeology, often featured on European television. Although he lacks a degree in archaeology—he studied statistics—Goddio says his experience speaks for itself. But he also seeks academic respectability. The Oxford agreement “is a chance for us to get closer to a university which could back our work and take advantage of our discoveries,” says Goddio. “We were looking for a scientific base or ‘harbor’ for the findings and results from Franck Goddio’s excavations,” adds Michael Hilti, who heads the Hilti Foundation. “With Oxford, I think we have found a perfect partner.”

The arrangement makes sense to university officials, who are eager to enter the burgeoning and expensive field of maritime archaeology. “We were blown over by the quality of Franck’s underwater fieldwork,” recalls Barry Cunliffe, the Oxford classical archaeologist who helped broker the deal. “It was an extremely smart piece of archaeology, well-ordered and observed.”

But Goddio’s deal with Oxford raises concerns among many maritime archaeologists uncomfortable with turning over part of the scientific process to those who lack formal training. “I’d be wary of
Facing the past. Divers have found artifacts such as this sphinx representing Cleopatra's father.

Down under
Just a few hundred meters away, an important part of ancient Alexandria lies undisturbed underwater, meters from the modern breakwater lining the harbor. In the 1990s, Empereur uncovered statuary and blocks that may be portions of the Pharos light-house, which survived in ruins until an earthquake in the 14th century. Goddio found a sunken palace from the Ptolemaic era and brought up statues and other artifacts that he hailed as remnants of Cleopatra's palace. That claim, as well as the exact location of the Pharos, remains in dispute.

More recent finds are less spectacular, but they shed important light on the evolution of the harbor that was Alexandria's heart. For example, Goddio's team now has found evidence of a dock that dates to about 400 B.C.E., predating Alexander. "We were surprised, took new samples, and got the same answer — this was most probably a pre-Ptolemaic structure [and is now] 7.5 m below sea level," says Goddio. Geologist and team member Jean-Daniel Stanley of D.C.'s Smithsonian Institution told meeting participants he has found tantalizing hints that inhabitants smelted lead on the site as early as 2000 B.C.E.

The discoveries are part of an ambitious effort by Goddio to map the entire harbor bottom — one data point for every 25 centimeters — and conduct extensive radiocarbon dating of planks and pilings brought up by divers. The survey of the 2.5-kilometer-by-1.5-kilometer area will give researchers "quite a precise idea" of the location of docks and buildings that lined the harbor, says Goddio: "A ghost from the past is being brought back to life."

Meanwhile, geologist Stanley has examined dozens of cores from the harbor and

**Modern mariner.** Former businessman Franck Goddio leads spectacular underwater digs.

Several scholars who declined to attend the conference because of their concerns about Oxford's ties to a private underwater archaeologist, Franck Goddio (see sidebar). Empereur adds that the houses, streets, and mosaics that have been uncovered represent "just 1% of what could be rescued."

Even that small percentage is rewriting the city's history. Most historians assume that intellectual life in the city withered with the destruction of the library — which likely occurred over hundreds of years — and the rise of Christianity. But among the most intriguing recent finds is a complex of lecture halls that appear to be "the center of [the city's] intellectual and social life in late antiquity," says Warsaw University's Grzegorz Majcherek of the Polish-Egyptian Archaeology Mission. Each hall includes a single central seat for a notable — likely the teacher — and often a smaller seat on the floor, perhaps for students recitations. The complex is part of the old city's most extensive area of urban architecture. Majcherek estimates that the halls were built in the late 5th and early 6th centuries C.E. and notes that a Roman theater was even converted into a lecture hall at this time. He speculates that what he calls "the Oxford of antiquity" could have survived into the era of Arab control — "surprisingly late."

The find intrigues historians, who say there has been little evidence that intellectual life in the city flourished for so long. "This is the most exciting find in years in Alexandria," says Clauss. "The buildings Professor Majcherek has found demonstrate the existence of a think tank long after the fall of Rome. "It is surprising that it seems to function in a modern way," he adds.

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Oxford Center Raises Controversy
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