Tobias Georges, Felix Albrecht, and Reinhardt Feldmeier (eds.). In collaboration with Manuel Kaden and Christoph Martsch


A 2010 symposium on Alexandria in Germany provides the foundation of this book. The authors originally published their symposium contributions in two issues of Biblische Notizen (147/148). To these original fourteen pieces, seven additional chapters have been added to round out the picture of Alexandria in antiquity. Five broad sections provide the framework of the volume: (1) Archaeology and History of Alexandria, (2) Pagan Alexandria, (3) Jewish Alexandria, (4) Christian Alexandria, and (5) Islamic Alexandria.

Founded by Alexander the Great in 331 BCE during his conquest of the Persians, Alexandria became the capital of the Ptolemaic kingdom and its principal port on the Mediterranean. The city grew and thrived under the first two Ptolemies. Alexandria became the intellectual center of the Greco-Roman world with the largest collection of manuscripts in the ancient world housed in its Great Library. The unparalleled Museion employed scholars with a fixed salary. These tools, the Library and Museion, provided the setting for the origin and center of ancient philology, as well as advancements in the fields of the natural sciences, medicine (Herophilus), mathematics (Euclid), geography (Eratosthenes), astronomy (Aristarchus), and engineering (Ctesibius). After the Roman conquest of Athens, the cities of Rome and Alexandria both asserted themselves as new centers of philosophy. Within this context, religious life in Alexandria took on new and varied forms.

Balbina Bäbler’s chapter on the archaeology of Alexandria opens the volume after a brief foreword. Bäbler includes a discussion of the research on Alexandria and the foundation of the city, as well as sections on the royal quarter, the lighthouse, other public installations, the water supply, the necropolis (Kom el-Shoqafa specifically) and Kom el-Dikka, a new city center in late antiquity. Dorit Engster then presents a chapter on “scientific research and technological progress in Alexandria.” Engster explores the impact Alexandria had diachronically as a center of culture and scientific research, noting that Ptolemy I seems to have had a personal preference for historiography, while Ptolemy II fostered the natural sciences (36). H.-G. Nesselrath completes the first section with a chapter dedicated to the great library and the Museion. Nesselrath explores the meaning and function of the Museion and writes an engaging section on its justification by Demetrius of Phalerum and Ptolemy I, linking the development of the library and the Museion under Demetrius (67–70). He then discusses, using what meager sources we have, the
arrangement and provisions of the Museion. Nesselrath also tackles the question of whether the library and Museion were separate institutions or intricately connected. Considering the range of specialties represented by the scholars using the facilities, they needed more than just scrolls and the library was not the only scientific accessoire possessed by the Museion—other amenities included a botanical garden, a zoological garden, and an observatory (75–77). After discussing how “great” the library was (in terms of volumes), the chapter ends with a roughly nine-page history of the Museion and library in two sections, the Ptolemaic and Roman periods respectively.

Jürgen Zangenberg begins the second section, “Pagan Alexandria,” with his piece on “Fragile Diversity: Observations on Alexandrian Social History in the Greco-Roman Era.” Zangenberg, after a few brief methodological notes, includes a section on each of the three groups in Alexandria (from an administrative perspective): Greeks, Egyptians, and Jews. He concludes with a section on the events of 38 CE. Zangenberg’s chapter excels at highlighting the interpenetration of the culturally distinct groups and the fluidity of the categories. For example, in our varied sources (private documents, but also official records) an “Egyptian” could be called a “Hellene” if he enjoyed tax privileges; a self-defining Jewish person could be administratively regarded as “Egyptian” when the person lived outside Alexandria and his tax liability was being emphasized (92). He also includes a useful section on the contested question of the Jews’ legal status as a politeuma in Alexandria.

Ilinca Tanaseanu-Döbler next presents a chapter on philosophy in Alexandria, using the circle of Ammonios Saccas as a case study. After a brief look at Ammonios in light of the sources, she considers his students Heraklas, Origen, and Plotinus in constant interaction with relevant ancient testimony. Martin Bommas offers a chapter on Isis in Alexandria arguing that the origins of Hellenistic Isis draw from personal religion rather than interests of the ruling class. Bommas also presents the primary sources for both Egyptian and Hellenistic Isis. Stefan Schmidt closes out the section with a chapter on the Serapeum, a further cultural center of education and philosophy in Alexandria. Schmidt looks more specifically at the importance of pagan idols in Alexandria in late antiquity.

The section on Jewish Alexandria is by far the longest, its nine chapters taking up 225 of the total 574 pages. Anna-Maria Schwemer begins the section by examining foundation legends about Greek cities and traditions about Alexander in Greco-Roman literature. These examples are then compared to the legends of the foundation of Alexandria presented by both Greek and Jewish authors. Reinhard Kratz contrasts what he calls “biblical” and “non-biblical” Judaism, particularly as represented in Alexandria and Elephantine.