

Alexander the Great and his Tomb

By Evaristo Breccia (1930)

Translated by Andrew Michael Chugg (November 2012)

www.alexanderstomb.com

On his return from his expedition to India, the Macedonian Conqueror, following the custom of the Persian Kings, had spent the summer of 324BC in the cooler highlands of Media and then, in late autumn¹, had descended to Babylon where the Ambassadors from the Greek states and even from distant Italy awaited him. The King had been resting for a year after the strain of the long expedition. The policy of conquest was to be resumed again during the next summer, firstly subduing Arabia and extending the borders of the Empire up to the [Atlantic] Ocean. At the beginning of June the army and navy were ready when Alexander suddenly became ill with a fever, and after twelve days he died, at age 33, of which less than thirteen had been spent on the throne. He had implemented, in so short a time, with formidable exploits, the Hellenization of the ancient world and the dream of a universal empire (June 323BC).

Alexander had expressed a desire to be buried at the temple of his heavenly father in the remote oasis of Jupiter Ammon (six hundred kilometers west of the Nile Valley), but his generals, Perdiccas and Ptolemy especially, contemplated other propositions. Perdiccas thought to transport the body back to Macedonia where he hoped to seize royal power with the help of the Queen Mother, Olympias and employing his marriage to Cleopatra, sister of the dead monarch. The construction of the King's wonderful funeral carriage, perhaps slowed by the political intrigue of the court, took almost two years, after which the procession, with the magnificence of a thousand and one nights, began to move from Babylon towards Egypt, under the guidance of Philip Arrhidaeus². The carriage consisted of a vaulted chamber, entirely of gold, decorated externally with four large rectangular tableaux and enclosed by Ionic columns. It was drawn by sixty-four carefully chosen mules arranged four by four in sixteen rows.

The procession had arrived in Syria, when Ptolemy the son of Lagus, satrap of Egypt, met it with all his army. He took over the precious 'convoy', carried the sacred corpse to Memphis and there, in violation of the will of the deceased and decisions of the board of regents, buried it, perhaps with the intention that it should abide there for ever. But his successor, Ptolemy II, moved the coffin, along with the cult already established at Memphis, to the new capital on the shore, Alexandria, properly speaking into the heart of the city, to establish a center of the utmost importance within a purpose-built mortuary temple, which soon became and long remained known under the designations *Sema* (i.e. specifically *the tomb*) or *Soma* (dead body, specifically *the cadaver*).

And therefore it is beyond any discussion that the beautiful "sarcophagus of

¹ Alexander did not arrive at Ecbatana in the "highlands" until October of 324BC and he did not reach Babylon until about April of 323BC.

² This is an error read from Justin, who confused an officer named Arrhidaeus with the king, Philip Arrhidaeus.

Alexander the Great” housed in the Museum of Constantinople and originating from Sidon in Phoenicia could have contained the body the Conqueror.³ According to a report provided by Pausanias, Ptolemy I buried him in Memphis, *according to Macedonian custom*. We need to interpret this as meaning that he laid it in a sarcophagus that was cline-shaped like a coffin, which we can deduce from similar graves from the earliest Ptolemaic period. In fact several Hellenistic tombs from shortly after the foundation of the city provide an admittedly cheap and sketchy but nevertheless very exact idea of the Sema of Alexander. An entrance staircase, carved into the rock, leads into an open quadrangular atrium surrounded by a portico with columns most likely of the Ionic order; from the atrium one passes into a long rectangular room or hall that preceded the somewhat elevated burial chamber. The cell opened out at its base and was largely filled by the coffin. This underground part, the tomb proper, was overlaid by a building open to the sky, the temple for the cult of the deified hero, enclosed by a boundary wall or “peribolos”.

The first Ptolemaic royal couples were buried, perhaps in the same type of tomb, not far from that of Alexander, and so were Ptolemy Philadelphus and Arsinoe (tradition speaks often of the “temenos” or temple of the gods “Adelphi” or sibling deities) and Ptolemy III and Berenice of Cyrene. Ptolemy IV Philopator, the crowned parricide, to expiate or to have us overlook his crime in 215-14 BC reassembled the corpses of his ancestors and the mummy of the the Conqueror into a single large mausoleum. And this must be true, because when the Roman historians describe the visit to the corpse of the heroic founder of the city made by Octavian (Augustus) shortly after his capture of Alexandria, they add that, being invited to inspect those of the Ptolemies, he responded: “I came to see a King and not the Dead.”

The Sema of Philadelphus was obliged to continue to exist as a cenotaph [empty tomb] for the use of the cult. Then gradually there arose in the surrounding area the tombs of the subsequent Ptolemies - for some of whom the rite of cremation was followed - and a little farther out towards the sea, the tomb of Cleopatra built by Mark Antony and in itself a notable mausoleum, located near the temple of Isis Plusia.

So, in summary, the royal cemetery of Alexandria must have incorporated:

- 1) The Sema built for the Macedonian Conqueror by Ptolemy Philadelphus, transformed under Ptolemy IV Philopator into a cenotaph.
- 2) The Mausoleum built by Philopator for his ancestors and Alexander.
- 3) At least a dozen other graves for his successors down to the last, Cleopatra.

Without doubt the tomb of the deified Macedonian, as is readily appreciated, was of extraordinary magnificence and richness, and we know on the other hand, that the sarcophagus was of pure gold. It is also certain, however, that

³ It is now universally agreed that the Alexander Sarcophagus (so-called because of the sculpted images of Alexander carved into its side panels) was not created for or used by Alexander himself, but more probably for and by Abdalonymus, the king of Sidon, whom Alexander had appointed.

the original sarcophagus has not survived down to our time, not even in fragments. Long ago Ptolemy XI (107-89 BC) carried off the golden coffin and replaced it with a glass case. Later Cleopatra, driven by need, stripped every precious object from the tombs of all her ancestors.

Roman emperors, and even firstly Julius Caesar, showed great reverence for the tomb of Alexander. Those who went to Egypt never failed to visit the precious remains. It is said of Augustus that he inadvertently damaged the mummy making a piece of the nose fall off, perhaps when he wanted to place on the hero's head a crown of gold and covered his corpse with fresh flowers. Caligula did not hesitate to desecrate the holy place, removing the armor belonged to the Hero⁴; Septimius Severus apparently transformed the glass sarcophagus into a kind of secret archive for all the papyri containing mystical or cryptic writings. Caracalla, fanatical about the Macedonian and wishing to imitate him at any cost, deposited in the sarcophagus the cloak of purple, the rings, the belt and every precious thing that he was wearing at the time of his visit. But just half a century later, firstly under Aurelian (AD275) and then under Diocletian (AD296) the Royal Cemetery, during the riots and civil wars that led Alexandria to the brink of complete destruction, suffered irreparable damage. The last mention of the famous tomb from antiquity is to be found in a novel by the Greek writer, a native of Alexandria, Achilles Tatius (around the fourth century); at the end of the fourth century one could no longer see the remains to the degree that John Chrysostom in a homily could talk about it as something impossible to find, in speaking of the vanity of all earthly glory, even the greatest: "Where, tell me, is the tomb of Alexander?"

An incident took place around the year 400 of our era that gives the same impression of complete abandonment and destruction, but nevertheless permits us to know some elements for determining the topography of the cemetery. The donation of a distinguished Roman lady allowed a church to be built by the patriarchate on the desolate uneven area of land that could still be seen, where they collected the relics of the prophets Elijah, John and Elisa. During the excavations "a treasure from the time of Alexander the Great" was discovered. That the discovery of gold funerary votive offerings had actually taken place is very likely, but what is most important is that this discovery would have taken place in a place called Dimos-Demas (a term that is found in Homer, Sophocles and Euripides indicating a body, a dead body, or the dead), that is to say, on the artificial hill, which, however, bears the name of Kom el-Demas (the hill of the dead or tombs). In this same place, until the middle of the sixteenth century, Muslims venerated a small building called "the tomb of the King and Prophet Iscandar."

The Arab historian Ibn Abd-el-Hakam, who died in the year of the Hegira 257 (= AD879), in his work written a decade before, "Conquest of Egypt", enumerates five mosques that would then have existed in Alexandria, and among them that "of Zul Karnein situated near to the gate of the city and to its exit." Now Zul Karnein or Abu Karnein (the lord with two horns) was the epithet with which the Arabs designated Alexander the Great, so often

⁴ Caligula is stated to have worn Alexander's cuirass.

represented on coins with two horns, the symbol of his divine father Zeus Ammon, and as the the Byzantine and Arab boundary walls passed not far from the southern slopes of Kom el-Demas, we must place the recorded mosque in this location. Another Muslim writer, Massudi, who died in AD958, refers in his work full of fantasy “The meadow of gold” to a detail worthy of note. He says: “The sarcophagus was erected on a base of stones and blocks of white and colored marble overlapping. *This kind of pedestal of marble we see today, year of the Hegira 332 (= AD954) in the territory of Alexandria in Egypt where it is known as the tomb of Alexander.*”

Undoubtedly the mosque of Zul Karnein and the monument described by Massudi are the same and must correspond to the building, more or less transformed, of which Leo Africanus, the Arab geographer, born at Granada in 1483 speaks: “The Maumettani [Moslems] affirm that in a certain small house in the form of a chapel amidst the ruins, they look after the body of Alexander, the great prophet and king, as we read in the Koran.” Petrarch, almost two centuries earlier, had already, in the *Syriac Itinerary*, recommended a visit to his friend Giovanni di Mandello. The traveler Marmol, repeats almost verbatim the description of Leo Africanus, but he specifies two significant details, that the tomb of the prophet Iscandar *was in the center of the city and not far from the church of San Marco [St Mark]*, i.e. the current Coptic Orthodox Church of San Marco, which is roughly a distance of three hundred meters from the mosque of Nebi Daniel (Kom el-Demas). The English traveler Geo Sandy (1610) says virtually the same thing.

The tradition must have waned during the seventeenth century, as travelers searched in vain for the next century for news or trace of the famous tomb. But in 1774, the Florentine Sestini was directed to a sarcophagus of Aswan granite covered with hieroglyphics as a tomb of the Macedonian. This had been deposited in the court of the ancient Church of St. Anthony, which had become the Attarine Mosque, half a kilometer to the west of Kom el-Demas. In fact, this sarcophagus, belonging to the Pharaoh Amyrtaeus of the eighteenth dynasty,⁵ was described and illustrated by members of the scientific expedition that accompanied Napoleon and it is to be found today in the British Museum. It was published by Clarke in 1805 in a book: *The tomb of Alexander the Great.*⁶

At the start of the nineteenth century on the site, where Alexander was revered in the past as the King and Prophet Iscandar, there arose or was reconstructed a mosque dedicated to the Prophet Daniel at the behest of Mohamed Ali (1769-1849) founder of the initially Khedivial and now Royal dynasty [of Egypt].

What strikes everyone is the impossibility of establishing any even legendary connection between Alexandria and the great prophet popularly renowned for

⁵ Eighteenth (XVIII) in the published article seems to be an error for 28th (XXVIII).

⁶ In fact, the hieroglyphic cartouches are those of Nectanebo II, the last native Pharaoh, who fled south into Ethiopia a decade before Alexander’s arrival and who therefore almost certainly left his readied sarcophagus unoccupied – this is the subject of Andrew Chugg’s paper on *The Sarcophagus of Alexander the Great?* Published in the Classics journal *Greece & Rome* in April 2002.

the miracle of the den of lions, who lived in the seventh century BC and was buried in Babylon – the legend does not locate the tomb at Susa or Tuotar in Susiana - but we must not overlook the fact that according to a strange Arab tradition dating from the ninth century, which echoes the story of Alexander, a young Israelite, Daniel, expelled from Syria, through the work of the idolaters whom he wished to convert, went into Egypt, where he found many followers.

Here he founded Alexandria where after undergoing happy adventures he died in extreme old age. However for the mosque dedicated to the legendary Daniel, fantasy double of the Macedonian, the hill of Kom el-Demas was certainly chosen on the basis of a celebrated tradition, which has become vague and obscure, but not completely extinguished; and neither is it without significance that very soon the mosque was chosen as the final resting place for some of the leading members of the family of the Khedive (Hussein Bey in 1847 and the Khedive Said in 1863). Even recently around the mosque there have arisen or have been restored mausoleums of princes and princesses apparently by his highness Omar Tussum. In actuality, it all suggests that the current Nabi Daniel Mosque has been raised in the area, where until the end of the third century AD the funerary temples of Alexander the Great and the Ptolemies still stood. What remains of them still preserved in the subsoil is hard to say. Around 1850, a greek employee at the Russian Consulate, a certain Schilizzi, claimed to have entered the cellar of the mosque and that he had peered through a hole in a wooden door and seen within a kind of glass cage and a human body whose head was crowned with a diadem. But clearly this is a story fabricated by the talented Schilizzi with recollections of more or less direct reading from Suetonius or of other ancient writers. Much more valuable are the observations of the astronomer Mahmoud el-Falaki, who around 1866 undertook research and excavations in the vicinity of Alexandria, commissioned by Napoleon III, who was eager to use the results in its history of Julius Caesar. Inasmuch as the observations made by Mahmoud el-Falaki have come down to us through the oral tradition, we must have complete faith in the story that the late scholar, his excellency Jacoub Artin Pasha, reported to our countryman, Count Alessandro De Zogheb, a talented amateur scholar of Alexandrian antiquities, who published it as follows: "During my visit to the crypt of this building, I entered a large vaulted room built on the soil of the old city. From this room there exited, in four different directions, vaulted corridors that I could not entirely get along due to their length and their poor condition. The richness of the stones used in their construction, and many other indications confirmed me in the belief that these tunnels must lead to the tomb of Alexander the Great, so I planned to push further on in my investigations another time, whereupon unfortunately a superior order was given to wall up all the exits."

Later in excavating the foundations of house No. 28 on Fuad Street in the northern foothills of Kom el-Demas there was discovered a cellar within which was a statue, larger than lifesize, of Hercules in a sitting position, of good quality and certainly from the Ptolemaic era. As the Lagid [Ptolemaic] dynasty regarded Hercules as its ancestor it may probably be inferred that the cellar

was part of a royal tomb of the Ptolemies.

From then on, every attempt to explore the subsurface near the mosque or within the nearby hill of Kom el-Dicka, crowned by a fort occupied by British troops since 1882, collided with insurmountable obstacles. Everything leads us to hope that campaign hours dedicated to perpetrating systematic excavations aimed at shedding light on the possible surviving ruins of the royal necropolis of the Lagids will be crowned with success, since it certainly does not lack, indeed it can be considered assured, the august involvement of the enlightened, educated and dynamic independent sovereign of Egypt, his majesty King Fuad the First, and we can also count on the cooperation of his highness Prince Omar Tussum, scholar and learned author of several geographical, historical and archaeological memoirs. His highness the Prince Tussum indeed is firmly convinced, agreeing in this with the above mentioned Count De Zogheb, that the sarcophagus, which is currently visible, in a tiny room at the bottom of an 18-step staircase, which opens off the interior of the mosque, along the northern side, does not contain, and in any case cannot contain, the body of the Prophet Daniel, but rather *really contains the mummy of Alexander the Great*. The Count De Zogheb was not only convinced of this, but believed also that the adjacent sarcophagus, attributed to Sidi Lohman el-Hakim, contained the corpse of Ptolemy I Soter.

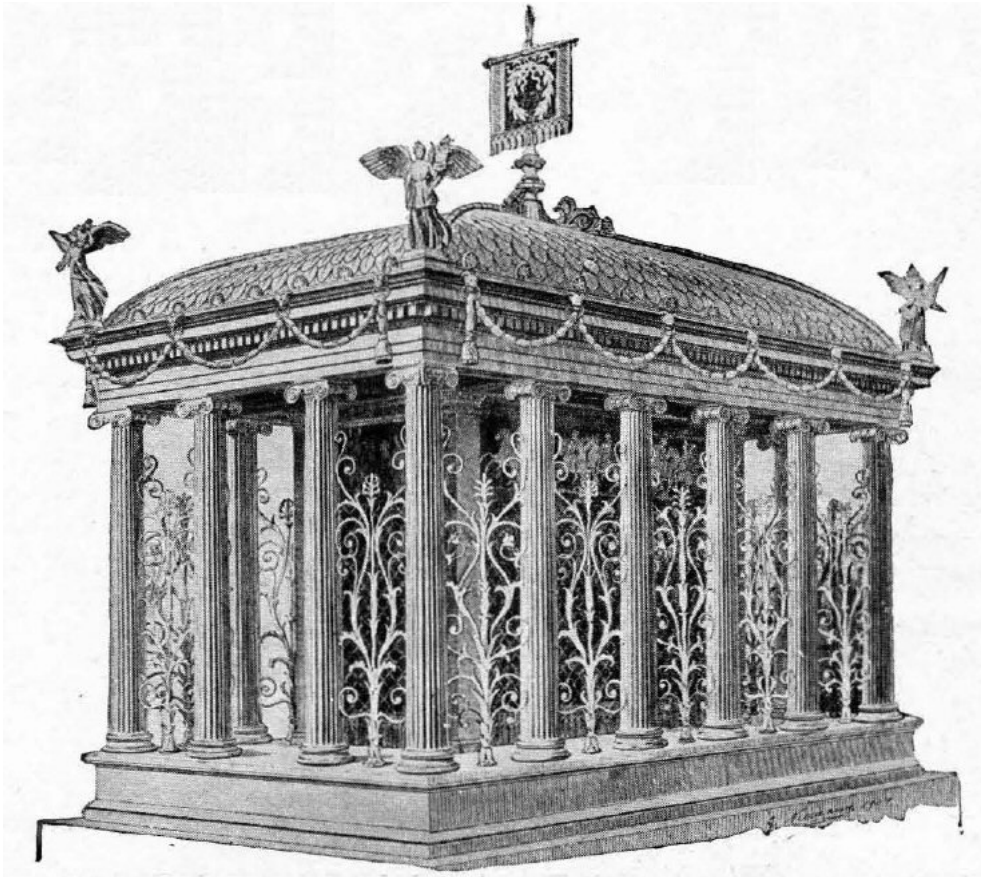
The systematic doubt which is the essential characteristic of scientific labour is too rooted in me for me to be able to free myself from a strong sense of scepticism about the identification, but it is certain that the solution of this preliminary problem is pressing. And there is an easy and safe solution. Just that the religious authorities allow the opening of the sarcophagus, so a commission composed of a few archaeologists and anthropologists with the help of a skilled photographer can carry out an investigation of the the corpse. As the Conqueror was mummified (a rite unknown to the Muslims); since he died at only thirty-three years of age; as he was covered with Greek clothing and because he was of Indo-European race, we have sufficient control elements to determine whether we have his body before our eyes. Whatever the results of this examination, one may then proceed with all due respect to the current religious buildings and burials, to the the opening of trenches and burrows in anticipation of systematic excavation opportunities, which will be indicated by the initial research. The excavations should be initiated with the opening of the walls which currently seal off the tiny vault where the coffin, it is claimed, of Nabi Daniel lies, and that of Sidi Lohman el-Hakim, and then extended and expanded, insofar as is possible in the area surrounding the mosque, but will then ultimately be extended and deepened under the hill of Kom-el Dicka. A German archaeologist, Thiersch, expounded the hypothesis that the famous colossal mausoleums of Augustus and Hadrian in Rome (Castel Sant'Angelo and the "Augusteo") have their model in the mausoleum that we have discussed above, the mausoleum that Ptolemy IV built to gather together the remains of his ancestors and the mummy of Alexander. If this bold, but attractive and not unlikely *a priori* hypothesis corresponds to reality, excavation has yet to bring to light any evidence.

I, who have written a study to demonstrate how and why, in the territory where

it flourished the city that for three centuries imprinted Egypt and, in large part, the Hellenistic world, with a new civilization, and was splendid and most rich for further centuries under the rule of Rome, *etiam periere ruinae*; I, who understand through long experience the subsurface conditions and the negative results of past scratchings; I have to put on their guard those who delude themselves with discovering I do not say the golden sarcophagus or other golden treasures, but the least remarkable architectural remains and least impressive tangible monuments. However still today, as always, I consider the excavation of the area where the tomb of Alexander the Great lay as an inescapable duty for the prosperous modern city that bears his name and has inherited, in part, his glory.



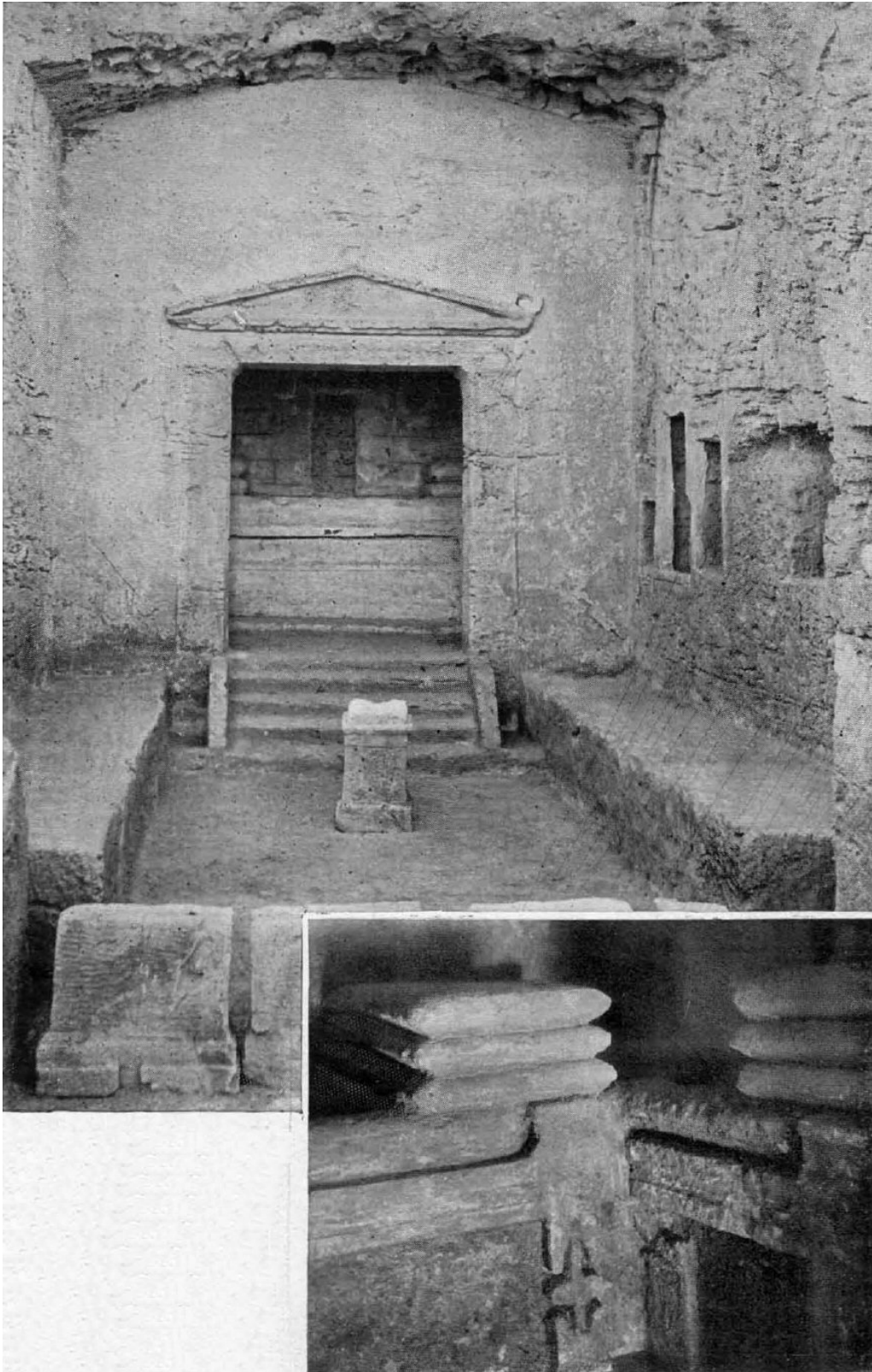
BUST OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT (MUSEUM OF ALEXANDRIA IN EGYPT).



UPPER PART OF THE CARRIAGE THAT SERVED FOR TRANSPORTATION OF THE CORPSE OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT TO MEMPHIS FROM BABYLONIA. (RECONSTRUCTION).



HELLENISTIC TOMB OF ANFUSCI (ALEXANDRIA in EGYPT) WITH EGYPTIANISING ELEMENTS. KIND RESULTING FROM THE GRECO-MACEDONIAN TYPE USED FOR ALEXANDER THE GREAT.



A) TOMB OF THE HIGH PTOLEMAIC ERA OF SUK EL-WARDIAN (ALEXANDRIA), WITH SARCOPHAGUS-BED.
B) TOMB OF THE HIGH PTOLEMAIC PERIOD (SCIATBI - ALEXANDRIA) - WITH SARCOPHAGUS-BEDS.



KOM EL-DEMAS AND THE MOSQUE OF DANIEL. THE REMAINS OF THE TOMB OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT WOULD BE UNDERGROUND IN THIS AREA.



COIN OF ALEXANDER THE GREAT WITH THE SKIN OF AN ELEPHANT AND THE HORNS OF JUPITER AMMON.



STATUE OF HERCULES, MARBLE, NOW IN THE MUSEUM OF ALEXANDRIA, FOUND IN A CELLAR AT KOM EL-DEMAS THAT PROBABLY HAD BEEN PART OF A MAUSOLEUM OF THE ROYAL NECROPOLIS.