Alexandria endures in our imagination as the first model of cultural interaction – of cosmopolitanism, to use both classical and contemporary terminology – and as the cultural and intellectual capital of the ancient world. The intermingling of races and beliefs, and the exchange of ideas, undoubtedly produced the knowledge that modern scholarship still celebrates.

This book is a testimony that the values embodied by Alexandria and its Library continue to inspire noble-minded scholars whose pursuit for knowledge transcends boundaries and time. The breadth and scope of the papers presented do credit to the spirit of Alexandria – its multiculturalism, and its passion for science and scholarship. The book in our hands confirms that the multiculturalism of the Ancient World, rippling out from Alexandria to extend throughout the Hellenistic period and beyond, is as valid now as it was then – perhaps more so today, when globalization has given a new meaning to the internationalism envisioned by Alexander the Great centuries ago. Now, with the “clash of civilizations” dominating our discourse, it is pertinent to remember the lesson Alexandrea ad Aegyptum taught us: that the interaction between cultures can only lead to the betterment of the human condition and carry us to heights unimagined.

Ismail Serageldin
Librarian of Alexandria

The excellent contributions gathered in this book dedicated to the city of books, Alexandria, are undoubtedly traced along the lines of Amr and John’s dialogue. Intolerance, which is borne almost always out of ignorance, threatens continuously the peaceful meeting and coexistence of peoples and cultures nowadays. Alexandria, its people and books remind us that the search for dialogue, the reflection on the forms of unity in diversity are at the same time our greatest heritage and the most dramatically pressing agenda.

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ON THE TRAIL OF ALEXANDRIA’S FOUNDING

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Abstract: This article tries to portray Alexandria’s profile at the time of its foundation, using literary testimonies such as those of Herodotus – principally his descriptions of the territory where the new city came to be established – and other Hellenistic biographers, historians and geographers.

To follow the trail of the Alexandria’s founding by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C. is, above all, to consider what Herodotus, the greatest narrator of Egyptian wonders, can tell us about what this region was like about a hundred years before the event itself. Of all the regions of Egypt, none of them merited as much attention and interest on the part of the Greeks as did the Delta, given its accessibility and the continuing presence of colonies there. For some, as seems to be the case of the geographer Hecataeus of Miletus, Egypt was confined to the Delta and did not extend below the city of Cercasorus. Herodotus repeat-

1 Intense Greek commercial activity increased in the Delta beginning in the 8th century B.C. Naucratis, for example (cf. Str. 17.1.18), is a central case, founded at the Canopic river mouth during the period of Psmmetichus I at the beginning of the 7th century B.C. by the Milesians. Hdt. 2.178-179 tells us that Amasis concentrated the innumerable Greeks dispersed around the Delta in Naucratis, which greatly expanded the city’s commerce (cf. also 2.154).

2 Cf. BROWN, 1965: 68.

3 Cf. Hdt. 2.15.1.

4 A little more than a dozen miles to the north of Cairo; cf. Ach. Tat. 4.11.3.