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 value 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 confirm 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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The Polyvalent Nature of the Alexandrian Elite Hypogea: A Case Study in the Greco-Egyptian Cultural Interaction in the Hellenistic and Roman Periods

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Abstract: Alexandria, the capital of Egypt during the Hellenistic and Roman periods is often hailed as the ancient cosmopolitan center of Mediterranean par excellence. Since the foundation of the city by Alexander the Great in 331 B.C., several traditions – along with their representatives, mainly Greek and Egyptian – coexisted and interacted with each other, resulting in the most advanced – by any definition – multicultural society. Underground tombs, known also as Hypogea, constitute the most well preserved archaeological discipline of material remains, which reflects such phenomenon. There are several structures of extensive architecture and decoration, which can shed light on funerary customs, religion, arts, and more importantly, the multicultural identity of their «inhabitants», as developed during a period of more than six centuries. Within this context, Greek-ness and Egypt-ness seem not represent absolute ethnic values, but rather gradually become flexible characterizations dependent on the context in which coexist and interact with each other.

Alexandrian Necropolis owes its name1 – City of the Dead – to its extensive size, monumentality as well as function, aspects falling outside the customary Greek funerary context especially in relation to the world of the living. It is comprised by an extensive network of

1 The term «necropolis» is mentioned by Strabo who visited the western cemeteries of the city (XVII.1.10).
underground corridors, rooms and galleries – catacombs – of great variety, all corresponding to Alexandria’s multicultural character and social diversity. Monumental funerary structures, also known as hypogea for the Alexandrian elite, represent not only the most distinct feature of the Alexandrian Necropolis, but also the most well preserved type of the ancient city’s material evidence. Due to their monumental architecture and extensive decoration, consisting of both Greek and Egyptian elements, they can trigger fruitful discussion on various topics, such as art, architecture, religion, funerary customs, as well as social status and cultural identity of the Alexandrian society. In this text several cases are examined representing greatly the inconsistency in tombs’ architecture, decoration and funerary practices, while corresponding to different aspects and periods of Alexandria’s social and cultural history.

In any case, Alexandrian hypogea had a common functional characteristic; they represented both the last residence of the dead and, at the same time, a meeting point between the world of the living and that of the dead – a relationship preserved through extensive funerary and post-funerary rites. Even though both Greek and Egyptian funerary practices and styles were applied, the epithet Alexandrian should also be introduced since varying elements from the aforementioned multicultural structures were used in order to fulfill the diverse needs of the cosmopolitan Alexandrian society over time and place.

THE ORIGINS OF THE ALEXANDRIAN HYPOGEA RECONSIDERED IN THE LIGHT OF NEW EVIDENCE

Most scholars have emphasized the Greek character of these tombs, which reflects the Hellenic identity of their inhabitants and displays their elite social class. Pagenstecher established the «Oikos» model for Alexandrian tombs².

He emphasised their Macedonian origin, reflected in the sequence of rooms from vestibule to the main burial chamber, and assumed that their structural type derived from the form of houses in Northern Greece and elsewhere. Concerning the court of the Alexandrian structures, Pagenstecher suggested that their only function was to host visitors and to provide the inner part with fresh air and light. Adriani, on the other hand, rejected the Macedonian origin of Alexandrian structures based on several differences, and claimed, among others, that Macedonian tombs’ character is more introverted, as result of their covering by a tumulus and lack of court, and more «individual» when compared to the more «collective» Alexandrian hypogea. He also pointed out that these were covered with soil and were left abandoned until the time to reuse them would come. Alexandrian tombs, on the

² PAGENSTECHER, 1919.