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Book review:

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Book Review

Monumental Tombs of Ancient Alexandria: The Theater of the Dead

By Marjorie Susan Venit

Hardbound, 495 pp.

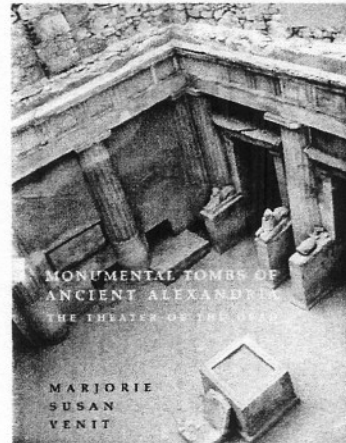
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Despite the label "crown of all cities" given to Alexandria already in Roman times, scholars have given the city concerted attention only in the past few decades. In fact, in just the past few years there has been an incredible rise in the number of books and international conferences devoted to the city. Some attribute this interest to the recent underwater archaeological finds off Alexandria's coast, or to the resurgent interest in Cleopatra as of late. Others credit a shift in archaeological focus from the monumental to the ordinary (none of Alexandria's famed monuments remain today). Whatever the reasons, Alexandria is finally receiving the attention it deserves, and what we are learning as a result is that it is even more fascinating than we could have imagined. The magisterial volume reviewed here offers a case in point.

Susan Venit's book does more than simply document the major tombs of Alexandria. It reveals a cosmopolitan and ever-changing world in which dialogue and cultural exchange were the norm. In a series of accessible and thoroughly researched chapters, Venit demonstrates that from its foundation to its eventual collapse, Alexandria's tombs show no evidence of ethnic or religious segregation. Instead, Alexandrians – whether Greek, Egyptian, Jewish or Roman – often were buried side by side. Moreover, as the tombs themselves demonstrate, it is difficult to identify one group's burial style from another, language and tomb style being no sure representatives of ethnicity. From the start, Alexandrian monumental burials were neither solely Greek, nor purely Egyptian, but a mixture (though Egyptianizing architectural and stylistic motifs gradually become more prevalent and tend to dominate in later times).

All of the major (and some lesser known) tombs that one visits in Alexandria are discussed in full, with attention to the archaeological history, context, and debates that surround them. The book proceeds chronologically from the earliest to latest tombs, but organizes them in each successive period according to the changes in style they represent. Thus, chapter three begins with tombs from the 3rd century BCE (such as



those at Sidi Gabr, Antoniadis Gardens, and Moustapha Pasha), but distinguishes them by the way they begin to introduce elements of Alexandrian theater into their architectural style. As Venit remarks, "For beyond merely an appreciation for the dramatic and an emphasis on illusionism, Alexandrian architecture utilizes specific illusionary

devices that must have been taken directly from theater stage design" (p. 37). In a similar way, chapter four focuses on the tombs of Pharos Island (e.g., at Ras el Tin and Anfushy), but also documents the internal evolution of tomb types "from shaft and pit graves to chamber and gallery tombs to monumental hypogea" (p. 94). It further records the increasing cross-cultural fertilization of Greek and native Egyptian elements. With this thematic and chronological approach, Venit is able to document the transformation of Alexandrian society, the emergence of the individual, the impact of Isis mystery cults on Roman society, and the spread of Egyptian ideas even beyond Alexandria. At every turn, we are introduced to the creative diversity that was Alexandria, and to the ever-increasing appeal of native Egyptian ideas for a Greek and later Roman elite. Throughout, we are shown how cultural diversity and dialogue between ethnic groups created a legacy of tolerance that long outlasted the people of ancient Alexandria.

This work is a must-have for all who share an interest in Alexandria. Its many fine photographs, maps, drawings, and archaeological diagrams, and its copious notes, bibliography, and appendices, make the book a useful research tool, and its clear and well-organized style make it a fascinating read.

– Scott Noegel