MONUMENTAL TOMBS OF ANCIENT ALEXANDRIA

The Theater of the Dead

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INTRODUCTION

Alexandria is the crown of all cities. . .
– Ammianus Marcellinus XXII.16.7

Despite Ammianus Marcellinus' boast, ancient Alexandria exacted little interest in 1985 when I began my study of the city's monumental tombs. By the late 1990s, however, the venerable city had achieved a renaissance. A symposium at the J. Paul Getty Center in 1993[1] refocused scholarly attention on the city, which concurrently was blossoming with renewed excavations and flowering in the popular press. The *National Geographic* spotlighted Alexandria as the paradigmatic city at the turn to the first millennium CE,[2] and newspaper and magazine accounts of recent finds, television documentaries and their associated videos, and coffee-table volumes in at least three languages[3] directed attention to the ancient city and its monumental tombs. Reports of discoveries of colossal Egyptian statues in the harbor of Alexandria near the Island of the Pharos fired public imagination (see Figure 1 for Alexandrian topography),[4] as did continued media devotion to the undersea blocks designated the "Palace of Cleopatra."[5] If the sensational "discovery" of the "Tomb of Cleopatra" in the Western Desert disappointed those who read beyond initial newspaper accounts,[6] the French salvage excavation of about fifty relatively modest monumental tombs in the western region of Alexandria called Gabbari (Figure 2) – documented in popular archaeology magazines, a picture book, an exhibition, and a video[7] – permitted an international audience a glimpse of ancient Alexandria's ordinary people.

For of all Alexandria's ancient monuments, monumental tombs are the best recorded and preserved and the ones, on current evidence, that best address the city's ancient past. They afford eloquent witness to the fame and glory of ancient Alexandria and the diverse community that inhabited one of the most influential cities of the ancient world. Alexandria's monumental tombs are the single class of monuments that can best provide a social history of the ancient city.

Founded in 331 by Alexander the Great on the narrow strip of limestone that borders the Mediterranean just west of the Canopic branch of the Nile, Alexandria became one of the most important cultural and economic centers of the Hellenistic world. At the beginning of the second century CE, Dio Chrystostom (*Discourse* 32) could say that Alexandria was second only to Rome of all cities under the sun; until the Arab conquest, Alexandria was numbered as one of the great cities of the Christian East.

None of the fabled monuments that distinguished ancient Alexandria remains. The royal palaces that lined the shore, the museum and library that conferred the city's cultural hegemony, and the lighthouse – one of the seven wonders of the ancient world – are still lost.[8] Surviving the destruction of the Roman Empire to become one of the great centers of Christianity, Alexandria finally fell before the victorious army of 'Amr-ibn-el-'Asī, who conquered Egypt in 639/40 and founded Fustat (later Cairo) and who delighted in providing obviously inflated but nevertheless telling figures for the city he destroyed: "I have conquered a city that I cannot describe; but I have found there 4,000 palaces [or quarters] with 4,000 public baths and 40,000 tribute-paying Jews, and 400 places of amusement for the kings."[9]

Alexandria's monumental tombs embody the most articulate testimony to this vanished glory. They provide material evidence for the innovative and iconoclastic spirit

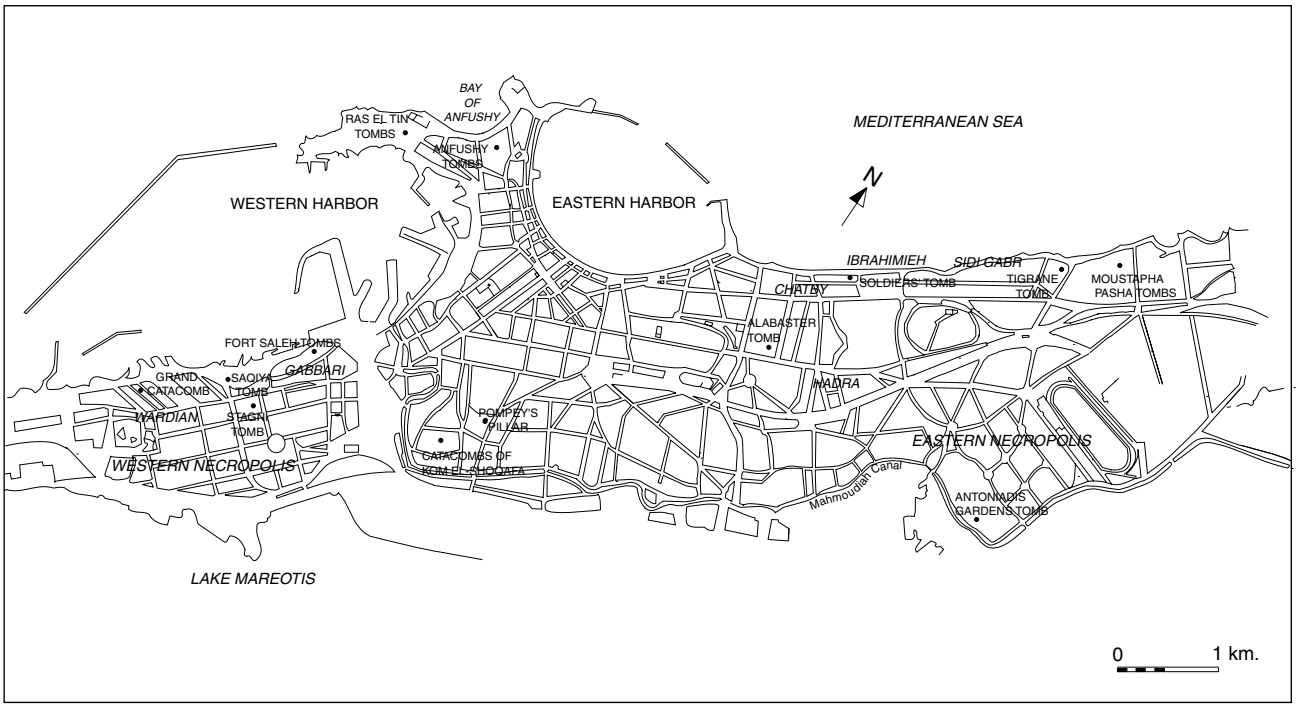

Figure 1. Alexandria (drawn by Mary-Jane Schumacher; courtesy of the Centre d'Études Alexandrines).

transfusing this ancient center, catalogue the contributions to the city's fabric offered by its ethnic groups, and testify to dramatic changes in the communal ethos of its population.

Throughout the 500-year history of Alexandria's monumental tombs, the great majority belonged to persons who, despite their geographic ancestry, aimed culturally to be Greek. Within the cosmopolitan population that enhanced the fabric of the city, individuals may have been native Egyptians, or they may have come from Italy, Cyprus, Thrace, Gaul, Libya, Syria, Judaea, Phoenicia, Cilicia, Ethiopia, Arabia, Bactria, Scythia, Persia, or India, but they actively sought assimilation to the group that held power. They spoke Greek, and adhered to Greek ideals, yet (and this is perhaps ironic) they were buried in tombs that do not proclaim any specific formal lineage that can definitively be defined as Greek, except the architectural elements that from their inception informed them. The dead are laid to rest in monuments that can be described by using a Greek architectural vocabulary but that are discrete to Alexandria, monuments of diaspora reconfigured in a foreign setting.

Throughout the 500 years following Alexandria's foundation, increased familiarity with an attractive Egyptian religion promising a blessed afterlife inspired the city's diverse population to adopt (and adapt) Egyptian elements to suit their own needs. Dependent on the penetration of Egyptian religion into an otherwise aesthetically Hellenic venue, the tombs of Alexandria are unique. They could only have originated in a city with one foot in the Mediterranean and the other planted firmly on Egyptian soil, in a world capital overflowing with wealth and power, and one that was cosmopolitan and materialistic, theatrical, fantastical, and mystical. Alexandrian tombs combine elements from two mutually exclusive cultural aesthetics and two religious systems to create a new vision, which is richer and more profound than either could have been alone.

Styled "the most eminent of all Greek cities" by its most famous modern poet, Constantine Cafavy, and intellectually, culturally, and politically central to the Hellenistic world,[10] ancient Alexandria and its tombs languished archaeologically in more recent times thanks to its marginal location, on the one hand at the edge of Egypt and, on the other, at the periphery of the Greek world. On the lip of Egypt both geographically and culturally, the Graeco-Roman city was ignored during the tidal waves of Egyptomania that swept the West, and the historical neglect of Alexandria is reflected in the history of its excavation. Recent interest in Alexandria witnessed by the underwater excavations at the Pharos and the Royal Quarter and land excavations at other sites stands in welcome opposition to former scholarly and popular indifference to its monuments.

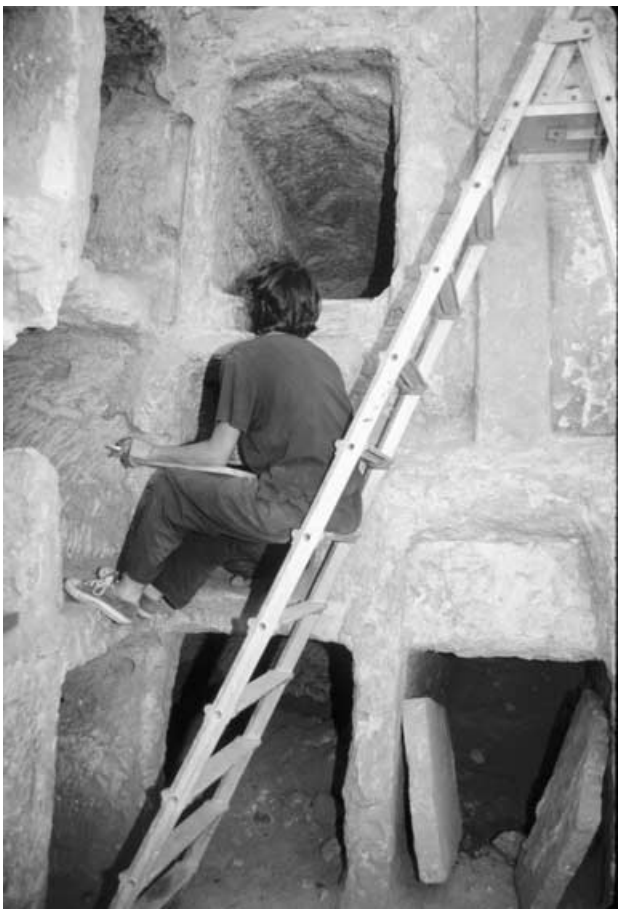

Figure 2. Tombs newly discovered at Gabbari; excavations conducted by the Centre d'Études Alexandrines in the latter 1990s.

In the centuries when sea travel was the preferred mode of transportation, European travelers obligated to disembark at Alexandria sojourned there as briefly as possible before traveling south to see the fabled Egypt of the pharaohs and, perhaps more germanely, of the Bible. James Bruce,[11] an adventurer who sought the source of the Nile, arrived in Alexandria June 20, 1768, admired the city from a distance but found its reality disappointing:

> Indeed from afar Alexandria promised a spectacle deserving of attention. The view of the ancient monuments, among which one distinguishes the column of Pompey, with the high towers and the bells constructed by the Moors, give hope of a great number of beautiful buildings or superb ruins.
>
> But at the moment that one enters the port, the illusion vanishes and one perceives no more than a very small number of these monuments of colossal grandeur and majesty which are distinguished and which are found embroiled with buildings as poorly designed as they are constructed that have been raised by the conquerors who possessed Alexandria in the last centuries.
>
> . . . and now we can say of it, as of Carthage, *periere ruinae*. Even its ruins have disappeared.

Nineteenth-century adventurers and travelers visited "Cleopatra's Needles," and the cisterns (some of which have recently been rediscovered), "Pompey's Pillar" (which they almost universally praised), and "the Catacombs."[12] Typical is Florence Nightingale's reaction to the sights: "We went to the catacombs, which, after those of Rome, are rather a farce; to Pompey's Pillar, through a great dismal cemetery: I thought we were coming to the end of the world."[13]

But the poverty of its visible remains, if not its disappointing offerings as a destination, was actually a blessing, as treasure seekers avoided the city. Mohammed Ali, the early nineteenth-century liberator and khedive of Egypt (who gave one of Cleopatra's Needles to the British nation in 1819[14]) made Alexandria his capital for half the year, but the consuls and other European officials at his court stayed in Cairo and had all Egypt from Cairo south to pillage for antiquities. European Egyptologists also concentrated on the Egypt of the pharaohs, rarely venturing north of Cairo; when they did, they focused on the Eastern rather than the Western Delta. This most eminent Greek city, second only to Rome, attracted few European or American Classical scholars or archaeologists, who concentrated on the Greek mainland and the islands of the Aegean, on the standing temples of Magna Grecia and Sicily, and on the impressive monuments of the western coast of Asia Minor. The modern-period discovery of ancient Alexandria was left largely to those who lived there.

The father of modern archaeological scholarship on Alexandria was Dr. Tassos D. Néroutsos, a resident of the city, who in 1875 wrote the following[15]:

> Whereas Egyptian archaeology enjoys the eminent protection of His Highness the Khedive in all that regards pharaonic monuments, and while the Museum at Boulaq [an early phase of the Egyptian Museum in Cairo] is enriched every day by veritable treasures drawn from excavations undertaken under the auspices of the Government, the city of Alexandria and of the Ptolemies, on the contrary, is not the object of the same solicitude; and no thought is given at all to the few monuments that remain still standing, nor to the undertaking of excavations in order to discover other remains of antiquity that perhaps still lie interred beneath the earth, nor that the modern city, with its new construction, is going to bury them forever.

Néroutsos describes the contribution to the topography of Alexandria made by Mahmoud-Bey el Falaki (the engineer) – astronomer to the Khedive Ismail, commissioned to excavate and catalogue the remains of the ancient city and who in 1866 published a street plan of ancient Alexandria[16] – and remarks on the degradation of the subterranean tombs[17]:

> The only work of any archeological importance executed up to the present in Alexandria are the excavations, soundings, and surveys made in 1866 by Mahmoud-Bey under Government initiative, to the effect of drawing up a plan of antique Alexandria that had been requested by the late Emperor Napoleon III, author of the *Life of Caesar*. On the other hand, the catacombs of the great western Macedonian necropolis are already in a large part destroyed,[18] and what remains is in heaps; the Christian catacombs beyond the Serapeum [the Wescher Tomb[19]], with a funerary chapel and its attached columbarium, had suffered the same fate as all the tombs – Jewish, Christian, and Pagan – of the small Greek and Roman necropolis to the east of the city at the edge of the sea.

Néroutsos deplores the state of standing surface monuments and concludes, "No monument remains standing from ancient Alexandria except the column of Diocletian [Pompey's Pillar], and one of the two granite obelisks of Tutmosis III [given to the City of New York at the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 by the Khedive Ismail and erected in Central Park in January 1881[20]], which, transported from Heliopolis under the reign of Tiberius [actually set up by Augustus in 12 BCE], had been erected in front of the temple of Caesar; the other [the one finally transported to Britain in 1877] lies overturned on its side and buried in the rubble."[21]

Néroutsos' grim picture is reiterated by the British scholar and excavator D. G. Hogarth, who reported on the "Prospects of Research in Alexandria" in 1894/95[22]:

> The perusal of Néroutsos' "*L'ancienne Alexandrie*" is sufficient to inform the reader how little research had been prosecuted up to 1885. No one except Mahmud Bey, court astronomer of the Khedive Ismail, commissioned to make a map for the history of Julius Caesar, by Napoleon III., had worked with any wider purpose than to find buried treasure. Schliemann had nibbled at the fringe of the site in May and June, 1887, and quickly abandoned his borings, discouraged by early ill-success and the disfavour shown to him by the natives. Since 1885, successive Directors of the Service of Antiquities have made tentative explorations, mainly about the Attarin quarter [southwest of the city center; between Cairo Station and Kom el-Shoqafa], but no one has persevered long, or, so far as I know, published any detailed account of what he did or found.

Hogarth's evaluation concerning excavation in the city would have been more optimistic had it been written ten years later. Transforming the face of Alexandrian studies, the Graeco-Roman Museum, founded on October 17, 1892, immediately became the focal point for extensive excavation, clearheaded analysis, and timely publication with the appointment of a succession of brilliant and committed Italian directors. Because few of the above-ground monuments of ancient Alexandria had withstood the erosive combination of unbroken occupation and concomitant indifference, the greatest contribution of these scholars (and of others who were attracted to Alexandria by the formers' early finds) was the excavation and publication of its subterranean tombs. In contrast to all other monuments of ancient Alexandria lost to time and apathy, Alexandria's monumental hypogea (subterranean tombs) remain as a testament to the city's ancient life.

The museum's founder and first director was Giuseppe Botti, who had come to Alexandria in 1884 as the head of the Italian School and, incensed that finds from Alexandria were being taken to the museum in Cairo, argued vociferously for an Alexandrian museum.[23] Botti inaugurated the newsletter/journal *Le Musée Gréco-Romain*, which became *Rapports sur la marche du Musée et de la Bibliothèque*. He was also a founding member of the Société d'archéologique d'Alexandrie, chartered in 1893, and the voice of its *Bulletin*, which published its first annual issue in 1898 and remained for more than a half century the premier journal for Alexandrian studies. Botti viewed himself as "only an epigraphist," but he battled to free Alexandria from its insensibility toward its past and its wanton destruction of its ancient monuments. Writing in the inaugural issue of the *Bulletin de la société d'archéologique d'Alexandrie* (*BSAA*), he acknowledged, "In this city of commerce and of pleasures, where archaeology comes in last place, . . . all effort seems to us futility destined to founder against the force of inertia . . .." In 1894 he noted with dismay in the village of Mafrousa, to the west of Alexandria between the route to Mex and the sea, families living in hypogea that still retained their stucco and their funerary inscriptions written in red or black ink.[24] He published names of quarriers who blasted ancient tombs into powder for lime plaster,[25] and he engaged in numerous excavations in his attempt to save the city's past for the future. Botti is to be credited with establishing the standard of rapid, systematic, and competent publication that was followed by the subsequent directors of the museum.

Botti died in Alexandria on October 16, 1903, a few months after his fiftieth birthday,[26] and he was succeeded as Director of the Graeco-Roman Museum on April 1, 1904, by Annibale Evaristo Breccia,[27] who remained director until October 29, 1931 (except for his war service from 1916 to 1918, when he was replaced by Étienne Combe). Born on July 18, 1876, Evaristo Breccia, an epigraphist like Botti but also an archaeologist, arrived in Egypt in 1903 to excavate at Giza and Hermopolis Magna. In Alexandria he undertook major excavations that he published in the *BSAA*. For yearly reports, he continued Botti's *Le musée gréco-romain d'Alexandrie*, renamed *Rapport sur la marche du*

Service du Musée, and its successor, again named *Le musée gréco-romain d'Alexandrie*, which treated excavations in greater detail and with more copious illustrations.

Archaeological knowledge of mortuary complexes of the ancient city was notably augmented at the turn of the century with the First Sieglin Expedition, under the direction of Theodor Schreiber. The expedition's exploration of the catacomb complexes at Kom el-Shoqafa, discovered by Botti, engendered a monumental publication that includes the imposing three-story hypogeum (the Great Catacomb) and other smaller decorated (and undecorated) catacombs cut into the top and flank of the hill.[28] In 1904, Hermann Thiersch produced a lavishly illustrated monograph on two more decorated tombs, one at Sidi Gabr and the second in the Antoniadis Gardens,[29] and in 1919 Rudolf Pagenstecher published an influential summary and analysis of Alexandrian tombs that has remained a fundamental work.[30] Nevertheless, Hogarth, as Néroutsos before him, was essentially correct when he deplored the lack of modern attention paid to the ancient city.

The greatest advance in the knowledge of the material remains of ancient Alexandria took place under the museum directorship of Achille Adriani (1932–1940 and 1948–1952; he spent the war years as a civil servant in Italy), who excavated or reevaluated some of the largest and most impressive tomb complexes from the ancient necropolises. Like his predecessors, Adriani also inaugurated a journal, the *Annuario del Museo Greco-Romano* (which after Volume One became the *Annuaire du Musée Gréco-Romain*), which was published intermittently from 1932 through 1952, but he also supported the *BSAA* (of which he was editor from 1933 to 1939) with his preliminary reports. Adriani acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of ancient Alexandria, and his catalogue with its regrettably uninformative title, *Repertorio d'Arte dell'Egitto Greco-Romano*, series C, Volumes I–II (Rome 1966), remains the major topographical and bibliographical reference to its monuments. His descriptions, which include the well more than 100 subterranean tombs and tomb complexes known by the mid-1960s, are based on both published and unpublished sources. The formal interconnections he draws between the monuments is profound, and the bibliography he provides for each entry is complete through the date of publication. His catalogue is the single most important source on the monumental tombs of ancient Alexandria.

During the Second World War, from 1941 to 1949, Alan Rowe, a British subject, assumed the position of Director of the Graeco-Roman Museum and, in addition to other projects, published a major article on his reassessment of the Kom el-Shoqafa tombs that had been excavated by the Sieglin Expedition at the turn of the century.[31]

In the second half of the twentieth century – and especially its last quarter – excavations undertaken by Polish, Egyptian, German, and French missions unearthed important sections of the ancient and Byzantine city as well as new complexes of tombs, all of which have greatly enriched our knowledge of the city.[32] Most extensive excavations of the city's necropolises were conducted in the 1970s by Michael Sabottka at Gabbari that uncovered part of the western necropolis,[33] including the reexcavation of a tomb that Breccia had previously published, and those in the 1990s by the Centre d'Études Alexandrines, directed and published by Jean-Yves Empereur and Marie-Dominique Nenna, undertaken when pylons for an overpass intended to connect the western harbor with the desert road to Cairo exposed a series of tombs contiguous to those excavated by Sabottka.[34]

Yet, despite continued excavation of the tombs, their innovative and influential status, and their grandeur, three major reasons conspire to keep Alexandrian monumental tombs almost entirely unknown beyond the few scholars who excavate in Alexandria or those who take particular interest in its monuments. First, now as in the nineteenth century, Egyptian archaeology primarily focuses on the splendor of Egypt's more easily visible and more exotic pharaonic past. Second, most tourists and the great majority of scholars arriving by air directly in Cairo find it even more convenient to avoid the city than did their nineteenth-century sea-dependent counterparts. Third, despite recent archaeological activity, the greatest number of Alexandrian tombs were excavated before World War II and, aside from the tombs at Chatby published by Breccia,[35] those at Kom el-Shoqafa that comprise Schreiber's monumental work,[36] and those excavated in the 1930s at Moustapha Pasha published by Adriani,[37] they exist only in difficult-to-access preliminary reports.

The purposes of this volume are threefold. The most elementary is to call scholarly attention to the monumental tombs of ancient Alexandria, all of which deserve a wider audience. Those that remain easily conjure up a lost world, enveloping visitors today almost precisely as they did visitors in antiquity; few buildings of the ancient world are as completely preserved as the Great Catacomb at Kom el-Shoqafa, for example, or have so immediate and powerful an impact. As monuments alone, whether preserved on paper or in the earth and independent of their meaning, these tombs are remarkable creations.

The second purpose of this book is an act of conservation – to preserve precious monuments that can no longer

speak for themselves. Despite the relatively few remaining tombs, most exist only in the pages of moldering journals and antiquarian tomes, the greatest number of which are published in Alexandria and the others in Europe during the past century and a half. Few libraries in the United States own any of these volumes, and none owns all of them. Crucial volumes are not held in any American library. For this reason, description that might otherwise be considered superfluous may be given at detailed length because, aside from the fact that many of the tombs are lost, the volumes in which they were published during the last half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth may very soon have joined them in demise.

The third goal of this volume permits the rationale for the other two and provides the content. The intent of this book is to focus on monumental tombs to present an image of the centrality, diversity, iconoclasm, and influence of the people who inhabited ancient Alexandria. The volume aims at the explication and interpretation of selected tombs that can serve as typepieces for the genre, utilizing all known tombs that retain painted or sculpted figural decoration and almost all those known that are outstanding in any way, as well as selected tombs that are paradigmatic of more ordinary complexes. It addresses specific Alexandrian monumental tombs as social documents and, accepting their singular but mutable form, assesses how these tombs reflect cultural and political change in the religious history and communal ethos of the city. As a coda, it assesses the legacy of Alexandrian tombs, demonstrating how the Alexandrian tomb type, when exported, influences tomb development in other lands throughout the Greek and Roman landscape and finally in the Early Christian world.

The chapters are arranged thematically but, with the exception of Chapter 1, which provides an overview of the tombs, they are also organized in a roughly descending chronological scheme. That is, generally, the earlier chapters treat earlier tombs, the later, the more recent, but some tombs (like the fabulous tomb from the Antoniadis Gardens) are inserted where they make the best thematic sense, even if chronology has to be bent to that purpose.

Spanning the life of the ancient city almost from its inception in 331 BCE through its transformation into a Christian metropolis, Alexandria's monumental tombs record the city's life more completely than any other class of monuments. They document its infancy and celebrate its maturity, as they indicate social changes in its population. The monumental tombs of ancient Alexandria provide the stage on which both the city's continuity and its changing passions are played out. They provide a visual testament to its social history.