

online features

The Elusive Tomb of Alexander

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Egyptologist and former ARCHAEOLOGY contributing editor Robert S. Bianchi wrote two articles for us on the many expeditions--scientific and fringe--that have tried to find the location of Alexander's final resting place. "Hunting Alexander's Tomb" appeared in our July/August 1993 issue; "Alexander's Tomb...Not" was published in May/June 1995.

Hunting Alexander's Tomb

by Robert S. Bianchi

Alexander the Great, dying at Babylon on the banks of the Euphrates River in June of 323 B.C., was explicit in his last wish. He wanted his body thrown into the river so that his corpse would disappear. In that way, Alexander reasoned, his survivors might perpetuate the myth that he was whisked off to heaven in order to spend eternity at the side of the god Ammon, who had allegedly fathered him. His generals, not respecting the wish, concocted elaborate plans for his burial. According to one ancient account, it took two years from the time of Alexander's death to design and construct a suitable funerary cart in which his mummified body could be conveyed to its tomb. En route to its destination, whether Macedonia or elsewhere is moot, the funerary cart and its entourage were met in Syria by Ptolemy, a Macedonian general in Alexander's army. Ptolemy, who in 305 B.C. would proclaim himself king of Egypt as Ptolemy I Soter and inaugurate the Ptolemaic Dynasty, diverted the body to Egypt where it was buried in a tomb at Memphis.

Subsequently, in the late fourth or early third century B.C. (whether during the reign of Ptolemy I Soter or that of his son and successor, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, is debated) the body of Alexander was removed from its tomb in Memphis and transported to Alexandria where it was reburied. At a still later date, Ptolemy Philopator (222/21-205 B.C.) placed the bodies of his dynastic predecessors as well as that of Alexander, all of which had apparently been buried separately, in a communal mausoleum in Alexandria. By now, Alexander had had at least three tombs in two Egyptian cities. Whenever someone asks where the tomb of Alexander the Great is located, I assume the query refers to the third and last tomb, although admittedly the question might apply equally to his tomb at Memphis or to his first Alexandrian tomb, neither of which has ever been found.

The king's body had been lying in the coffin for six days while everybody's attention had been diverted from the obsequies to forming a government...when Alexander's friends eventually found time to attend to his corpse, the men who entered the tent saw that no decay had set into it and that there was not even the slightest discoloration.

--Plutarch

The literary tradition is clear that the third and last tomb was located at the crossroads of the major north-south and east-west arteries of Alexandria. Octavian, the future Roman emperor Augustus, visited Alexandria shortly after the suicide of Cleopatra VII in 30 B.C. He is said to have viewed the body of Alexander, placing flowers on the tomb and a golden diadem upon Alexander's mummified head. The last recorded visit to the tomb was made by the Roman emperor Caracalla in A.D. 215. The tomb was probably damaged and perhaps even looted during the political disturbances that ravaged Alexandria during the reign of Aurelian shortly after A.D. 270. By the fourth century A.D., the tomb's location was no longer known, if one can trust the accounts of several of the early Church Fathers. Thereafter, creditable Arab commentators, including Ibn Abdel Hakam (A.D. 871), Al-Massoudi (A.D. 944), and Leo the African (sixteenth century A.D.) all report having seen the tomb of Alexander, but do not specify its exact location.

The Egyptian Antiquities Organization [now the Supreme Council for Antiquities] has officially recognized more than 140 searches for Alexander's tomb, and there have been at least four recent attempts to locate it. The first was mounted in 1960 by the Polish Center of Archaeology, whose members continue to excavate an area known as Kom el-Dikka in the heart of downtown Alexandria. Reasoning that the crossroads of the ancient city might correspond to the intersection of modern Horreya and Nebi Daniel streets, they obtained permission to excavate a site bounded by these two streets on which stood the remains of a Napoleonic fort and the artificial hill on which it was constructed. Although they have excavated more than 50 feet below the surface, they have not discovered any remains identifiable as the tomb. Their work has produced, however, extraordinary discoveries, including a marble odeum, or small theater, of Roman Imperial date and a contemporary bath complex, both of which have no parallels at any other site in Egypt.

After being instructed to see to the body in their traditional fashion, the Egyptians and Chaldeans did not dare touch him at first since he seemed to be alive. Then, praying that it be lawful in the eyes of god and man for humans to touch a god, they cleaned out the body. A golden sarcophagus was filled with perfumes, and on Alexander's head was placed the insignia of his rank.

--Plutarch

The western limit of the Polish excavation site abuts the Mosque of Nebi Daniel, where Arabic tradition maintains the tomb is to be found. In 1991, Mohammed Abdou Aziz of the Arabic Language Department of Al Azhar University in Zagazig directed excavations at the mosque. He contends that Arabic sources, often overlooked by scholars searching for the tomb, offer good reasons for identifying the mosque with the tomb. His activities have been criticized by Faouzi Fakharani, professor emeritus of the University of Alexandria, who claims that he has already explored every inch of the mosque, including its two subbasements, and has concluded that the tomb of Alexander is not to be found there. While the two professors have squared off in a battle of accusations and counter-accusations, religious officials charged with the administration of the mosque have obtained a moratorium on excavation, fearing that further digging might undermine the building's foundations and precipitate its collapse.

Whereas efforts by the Polish Center and Aziz are creditable and scientifically grounded, two more fanciful attempts to locate the tomb have recently been launched by Greek nationals. Liani Souvaltzi of the Institute of Hellenistic Studies renewed excavations at the site of the so-called Doric Temple at El Maraqui Bilad el Rum in the Siwa Oasis in 1989. The structure was described when it was still standing by Frederic Cailliaud (1822-24), Heinrich Minutoli (1826), and Gerhard Rohlfs (1869). Its interior was of an unusual plan, consisting of five rooms, one behind the other. Souvaltzi insists, but without documentation, that she has evidence to suggest that Alexander was buried in the Siwa Oasis because, she claims, "he wanted to be near his father Amun," whose oracle there supposedly proclaimed Alexander his son. She argues that the temple, by virtue of the fact that it is both in Siwa and in the Doric order, must mark the site of Alexander's tomb.

Alexander's body was taken to Memphis by Ptolemy, into whose power Egypt had fallen, and transferred from there a few years later to Alexandria, where every mark of respect continues to be paid to his memory and his name.

--Plutarch

Souvaltzi's theory has been received with skepticism by Egyptologists. She has also managed to alienate the Greek community in Alexandria that steadfastly believes the conqueror is buried in their city. Nonetheless, her contention has received support from Leonardo and Bettina Leopoldo, a Swiss couple, the latter a self-styled ethnologist. The Leopoldos have their own reasons for locating the tomb in the Siwa Oasis—they own a collection of Siwan jewelry and handicrafts that is being exhibited worldwide.

Lastly, there is the claim of Stelio Komotsos, a Greek waiter in Christina Konstantinou's cafe-bar L'Elite in Alexandria. Obsessed with discovering the tomb, Komotsos would save every piaster he earned and, when not waiting tables, go off and dig holes everywhere he could in the city. Now retired and reportedly living in Athens, he is said to have amassed more notes, maps, and documentation on the subject than any scholar. Who knows what secrets are contained therein? Komotsos once offered to share his data with a patron in exchange for a pension in dollars and a new Mercedes. Such a price, mused one starry-eyed graduate student, would be small indeed if the key to the location of the tomb of Alexander was to be found in the Komotsos "archive!"

Alexander's Tomb...Not

by Robert S. Bianchi

In a flurry of media hype exceeded only by that surrounding the O.J. Simpson trial, Liani Souvaltzi, a self-styled authority on Alexander the Great, and her husband, Manos, have once again conned the press into publicizing their latest discovery of Alexander's tomb in the Siwa Oasis, some 330 miles west of Cairo near the Libyan border.

All competent authorities agree that the great conqueror's final resting place was in Alexandria, although the whereabouts of his tomb has perplexed scholars for centuries. This much is known: After Alexander's death at Babylon in 323 B.C. the Macedonian general Ptolemy, who in 305 B.C. would proclaim himself king of Egypt, transported the body to Memphis. It rested there until the late fourth or early third century B.C., when it was taken to Alexandria and reburied, either by Ptolemy or his son and successor, Ptolemy II Philadelphus. Toward the end of the third century, during the reign of Ptolemy IV Philopater, the body was moved to yet another tomb in Alexandria.

Several creditable expeditions have recently looked for the tomb in Alexandria, all without success. The Souvaltzis appear driven to discover it in the Siwa Oasis. According to numerous classical sources, including Plutarch, who included the "Life of Alexander the Great" in his biographies of famous personalities, Alexander visited Siwa in 331 B.C. to consult a famous oracle of the god Ammon, which, tradition maintains, proclaimed him son of that Egyptian god. Six years ago, suggesting that Alexander had always wanted to be buried near his god/father, Liani Souvaltzi began excavating at El Maraqui Bilad el Rum in the Siwa Oasis and "discovered" a Doric temple there. She promptly proclaimed it to be the tomb of Alexander the Great, and reported her discovery at the Sixth International Congress of Egyptology in Turin, Italy, in September 1991. Her paper was immediately challenged by the academic establishment. Her alleged tomb was in fact a temple erected in Siwa during the Greco-Roman period. Still standing in the mid-nineteenth century, it had been described by at least three scholars of the day.

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In the face of such opposition, the Souvaltzis turned their attention to the so-called Oracle Temple, where, according to Plutarch and others, Ammon's oracle had presided. To prove their new case they cited as evidence the text of the Romance of Alexander, an enigmatic work written ca. A.D. 300 by an unknown person. The Souvaltzis had trotted out this same mixture of history and legend in trying to prove the Doric temple was the tomb. To support their new contention, they also reported finding three tablets

inscribed in Greek, and a 16-pointed star (an emblem of the Macedonian royal house). One tablet, allegedly written by Ptolemy, claimed that Alexander had been poisoned and that his body had been brought to Siwa.

The Souvaltzi announced their "find" at a press conference so carefully orchestrated that all major media attended. The presence of high officials of Egypt's Supreme Council of Antiquities, which regulates archaeological missions in Egypt, encouraged the media to view their claim as a legitimate one. As soon as the sound bites had aired, critics besieged Egyptian officials. This was, after all, the second discovery of a tomb of Alexander the Great at the same place by the same people within five years. Greek archaeologists drove out to Siwa to investigate, but were refused access to excavation records. The Supreme Council of Antiquities quickly called a press conference to distance itself from the Souvaltzi and to dismiss their claim. It reminded the press that, according to ancient historians, both Augustus in 30 B.C. and Caracalla in A.D. 215 had visited the tomb in Alexandria, where they reported seeing Alexander's mummy.

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One wonders about the Souvaltzi repeated attempts to find this tomb in the Siwa Oasis. Liani Souvaltzi claimed to have "received mystical guidance in her search, in part from snakes," according to a report in *The New York Times*. She now insists that she was misquoted, and that her guidance came from "saints." Perhaps more to the point was an article in the Cairo newspaper *Le Progrès Égyptien*, which characterized Souvaltzi, a Greek national, as an ultra-patriot of extreme political views. According to the article, she believes in the prophecy of an authority identified by her only as "Aristander," who allegedly promised that whoever possesses the mortal remains of Alexander the Great shall rule over a stable and prosperous realm. Accordingly, should a Greek secure Alexander's body, the Greeks might well gain control of Macedonia, Alexander's homeland, which they maintain was, is, and forever after ought to be within the borders of their modern nation-state. Greece would thus no longer be forced to share the designation "Macedonia" with Skopje, a province of former Yugoslavia.

The efforts of the Souvaltzi to find the tomb of Alexander appear to be transparent attempts to politicize archaeology. NBC and other media outlets that broadcast or published the "discovery," in some cases without reservation, should be more cautious the next time the Souvaltzi call a press conference to announce yet another discovery of Alexander's tomb...particularly if it is again in the remote, albeit picturesque, Siwa Oasis.

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