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Japan

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Sunken Treasures

James B. Cole

I visited the Sunken Treasures of Egypt Exhibit (*Umi no ejipto ten* 海のエジプト展, www.asahi.com/egypt), held in Yokohama from June 27 to September 23, 2009. The Egypt of the great pyramids is well known, but there is another Egypt that is much more relevant to modern civilization: Hellenistic Egypt, centered on Alexandria. Due to natural forces, parts of Alexandria and several other cities sank under the sea about 1300 years ago. Artifacts from these places have recently been brought up and restored for display. The exhibition was very well done. The objects, their history, and context were well explained. A book about the exhibition is available in both English and Japanese (*Egypt's Sunken Treasures*, Franck Goddio, Prestel Publishing, 2006). I spent three hours to see everything.

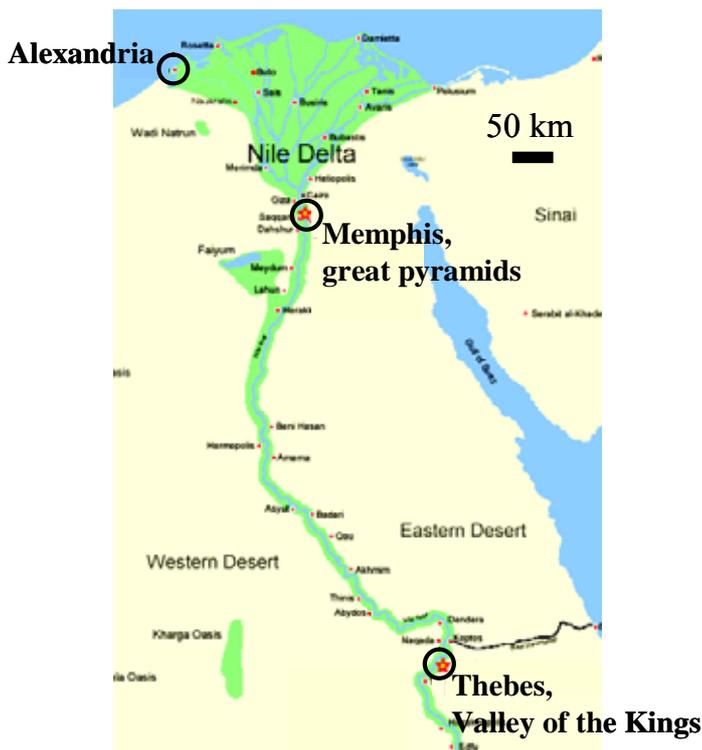


Figure 1. Egypt and Alexandria. Parts of Alexandria and nearby cities were submerged.

Egyptian civilization arose about 3000 BCE (= before common era, replaces “B.C”). Ancient Egyptians developed one of the earliest writing systems, and their engineers and architects built not only the great pyramids, but also hundreds of other amazing

monuments that still stand. After the reign of Ramses the Great (1279-1213 BCE), civil wars and invasions from outside weakened the country, and native Egyptian civilization began to decline.

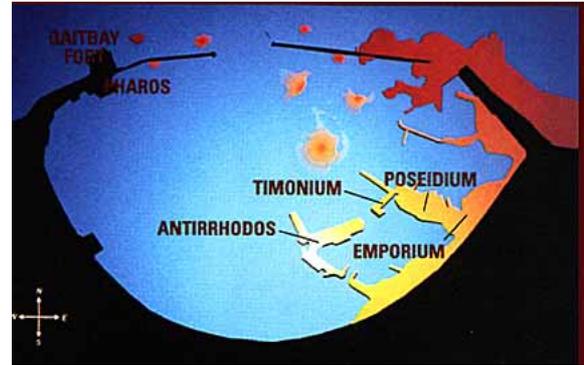


Figure 2. Ancient Alexandria: Sunken areas in color; modern shore in black. An area of about 75 km² was submerged.

Alexandria was founded in 332 BCE by Alexander the Great who conquered Egypt after defeating the Persians, who had occupied Egypt. After Alexander’s death, one of his generals, Ptolemy, became the ruler of Egypt with Alexandria as his capital. One of Ptolemy’s first projects was to build a temple to the Muses (Greek goddesses of culture) called the “Museon” – from whence comes the English word “museum”. The Museon was not only a temple, but also a large library and the world’s first university. Many important scientific discoveries were made by the scholars who gathered in Alexandria. Alexandria was a cosmopolitan center of international trade and culture, where people from all over the world mingled together. At its height, Alexandria was the largest city in the world.

In 365 CE (= common era, replaces “A.D.”) a tsunami badly damaged the city, and an earthquake in the 700s CE caused parts of Alexandria and several other cities to sink beneath the sea. Many things that might have otherwise been destroyed or looted were thus preserved in the mud of the seabed. In the 1990s systematic studies and excavations

Cole, J. B. (2009). Sunken treasures. *OTB Forum*, 2(2), 30-31.

were begun by the European Institute for Marine Archaeology. It is the objects recovered by these investigations that were exhibited. I wonder, when the archaeologists of the future find our sunken civilization, what will they exhibit in their museums. Or is it too optimistic to assume that there will be museums?



Figure 3. Artifact recovery: Undersea environment preserved artifacts from natural disintegration and looting.

At the entrance to the Minato Mirai Station (みなとみらい駅、東横線) in Queens Square, lines from the great German poet Friedrich von Schiller are displayed in German. One of them reads, “Der Baum treibt unzählige Keime, die unentwickelt verderben, und streckt weit mehr Wurzeln, Zweige und Blätter nach Nahrung aus, ...” [The tree fosters innumerable seedlings, many of which die undeveloped, and sends out more roots branches, and leaves than it needs for its

sustenance...]. Hellenistic Alexandria vanished, but from some of its seeds sprouted Western civilization. Our civilization too may one day vanish beneath the sea, but perhaps thousands of years from now some seeds will survive and grow into a greater civilization than ours.

About the author: *I was born in Chicago, USA during the Cold War. One of my very first childhood memories is (former Soviet Premier) Khrushchev’s famous speech at the United Nations in which he slammed his shoe on the podium (but didn’t throw it) and shouted, “We will bury you!” This sparked an interest in buried civilizations, and I avidly visited (and still do) museums to see remnants of their former greatness. I was simultaneously interested in physics, and soon realized that the study of history can be dangerous if one has the “wrong” opinions. Examination question: “What was the turning point of World War II?” My answer: The “Battle of Stalingrad”. Teacher’s answer, “U.S. entry into the War.” I decided to concentrate on physics. After Peace Corps volunteer service in Ghana, I finished the PhD in particle physics. Later I drifted into computational physics. At a conference in 1993 I was invited to visit Japan for one year; arrived in 1994 and wound up staying. I now teach numerical simulation in the Department of Computer Science.*