

## **Return to Alexandria By Beverley Butler**

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I was quite excited at the prospect of reading this, as the subject matter seemed interesting and different. However by the time I had finished the introduction I was feeling slightly bogged down by the language and writing style. This I have discovered before, when reading books on archaeological theory which makes me think the discipline is at fault. Many books on archaeological theory, and this volume is no different, have a tendency to introduce new words when the English, German or French language does not describe an abstract concept clearly; and the first one to become obvious in this volume is the term "Heritagification"; personally I have always found this practice to be irritating. However, it is not too common throughout the book.

The book is divided into seven chapters, an introduction and conclusion all with somewhat intriguing titles. In the introduction Butler discusses the background of Alexandria and how it was founded and built upon the myth of the Odyssey, and this mythologizing has continued to the modern era. The library and Mouseion were key to this myth, which only intensified once they collapsed and disappeared beneath the waves of the Mediterranean. It was only in 2002 and the building of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina that these myths have once again been reborn, and were used as the focus of the building project; to be a centre of learning as the original library and Mouseion had been.

The volume starts with a critique on the place Alexandria and Alexander the Great hold in the history of Museums and the Western concepts of Museology. Alexandria, described as "By Egypt" rather than in Egypt, was viewed as a place of learning, and homecoming for the Greeks. A centre of learning and of Greek culture and its collapse was seen as a great loss of culture for the Egyptian people which is still felt today. The library had the ambition of holding every book to be written and led to Alexandria being a meeting place of East and West, a magnet for all intellectuals and a "holding place" of all that was Greek. This first museum and archive have set the template for all Museums as timeless archives of the past, both timeless in the knowledge they hold and in the space itself.

The location of a museum in any city, renders it "civilised" according to the Western model, and are viewed as essential in reconstructing a civilised past. Butler discusses how museums and Bibliotheca Alexandrina in particular are constructed as a means of returning to this civilised past; a homecoming for the Egyptians.

However museums are not viewed by all as positive and there is a detailed discussion on the anti-museum theory where some philosophers believe museums to be places of restriction, oppression, and death; a figment of the archivists imagination, and this in itself is presenting a biased view of the past which is absorbed into the culture of the population who visits. Malraux's post-war anti-museum theory, goes one step further and compares museums to death camps! As

places that destroy the soul, rather than as a memory of culture and civilisation. Diop adds to this argument by claiming to lose one's history is to lose one's soul. This argument turns to afrocentrism, which believes the West has ignored the influence of black Africa on the history of the world. The Afrocentrist view is that at one time people flocked to Alexandria for knowledge from the *Africans*. Afrocentrists believe in order for black Africans to find their soul they need to reclaim their history through the reclamation of their past. This has led to Afrocentrist theories where everything African and more specifically Egyptian has been claimed as black heritage. This is generally considered to be as inaccurate as the so-called Western idea of Egyptian history being Caucasian. Rather than the black-African's suffering a sense of loss with the destruction of the Alexandrian Mouseion, and a resurrection of homecoming with the construction of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, Butler asserts it is the Egyptians who have this sense of loss; for their own culture. Some young Alexandrians are unable to articulate their loss or are unable to relinquish this loss, neither of which is a positive outcome.

Therefore the completion of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was viewed as a homecoming; a return to civilisation epitomised by Alexandrians of the fourth century BC. Although the myth of Alexandria is bigger in the west the project had a great deal of Egyptian input, as they could see the importance of it. However some students were opposed to it, believing it to be 'foreign' and indeed the book has emphasised this through the western adoption of the Alexandrian library as a sign of civilisation. However this "foreignness" and "clash of civilisations" caused the opening to be delayed when an anti-American march took place and a student was shot near the new library. This was not the right image to be presented and the rescheduled opening was characterised by high security and a number of foreign dignitaries including the French president.

This inclusion of foreign cultures, at a time of major "clash of civilisations" since the 9/11 attacks, was meant to present Egypt as rising, phoenix-like from the ashes. Most museums emphasise "the other" or "the foreigner", creating a "them and us" scenario. Butler emphasises that it needs to be accepted that "Greek" history is world history and not "Western" which has been perpetuated by the Colonial British and the West. The sense of cultural loss is strongly felt by people in the third world, Egypt included. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina was viewed by some as a statement and a memory of loss; a memory of the past and how things used to be, representing a positive image of the "other", in this case the Egyptians.

This book is complex and very detailed, with the philosophical arguments about the concepts of loss, cultural memory and homecoming outlined in full. Although the ideas are interesting, it is not easy to read and at times it was a real slog. However this book would be an invaluable resource for a student of Museology or Museum Studies, and the content is sound, well-researched and very thoroughly recorded.