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“Mapping Augustan Alexandria” – an Interdisciplinary Project at Penn

The famously splendid cityscape of ancient Alexandria in Egypt still proves elusive, despite two centuries of international archaeological research and spectacular recent finds. Existing maps of the city offer little more than schematic sketches, and thus the only Mediterranean city to rival Rome in size and grandeur remains widely unknown. Beginning with a graduate seminar at the University of Pennsylvania, and now drawing on no less than three departments and five graduate groups, the “Mapping Augustan Alexandria” project was established in 2006 with the goal to create a comprehensive study and annotated map visualizing Alexandria at a moment of epochal change in its history: the decades after the Roman takeover under Octavian/Augustus in 30 BC. When complete, this endeavor will address a long-standing lacuna in the scholarship of Greco-Roman history and urbanism. Already our research has shed new light on thorny problems of Alexandria’s geological and physical topography, ancient toponymy, canal systems, traffic connections, street patterns, urban development, city walls, and tombscapes. Moreover, the dramatic transformation of the Ptolemaic capital into a megalopolis of the Roman empire becomes tangible in its scale and clout, ranging from Augustus’ revitalization and expansion of the Alexandrian waterways to the ground-breaking introduction of Rome’s Augustan neighborhood organization to Alexandria. Incorporating the latest geoarchaeological research, we will present a selection of our collaborative results on the basis of a new, detailed topographic map that marks the first attempt to visualize “the premier city of the civilized world” (Diod. 17.52, c. 30 BC) in a specific period of its ancient existence.

(255 words)

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