

PLATEIA, PEDION, “CANOPIC STREET”:
ARCHAEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF THE MAIN STREET OF ANCIENT ALEXANDRIA

ABSTRACT

The street network of ancient Alexandria has been a subject of studies for nearly one and a half centuries, and successive archaeological discoveries throughout the years have enhanced and adjusted its image in different epochs. Even though many new and atypical streets have been discovered, scholars show unceasing interest in the principal longitudinal street of the ancient city, which they conventionally named “Canopic”. Ancient written sources use different terms to refer to it, yet its name is never stated. Ancient texts describe – usually very superficially – the dimensions of the street, its decoration, and the buildings located along its sides, as well as the different events in the history of the city that it witnessed. When archaeological evidence was added to the ancient descriptions, an impressive, nevertheless, ahistorical reconstruction of the appearance of the street was created, as the data from different epochs were matched incorrectly. The division of that evidence into three major periods in the history of ancient Alexandria shows that the first period (Ptolemaic and Early Roman) poses the biggest challenge in reconstruction, and the two which followed (Roman Imperial and Late Roman) have fuller archaeological documentation, even if occasionally difficult to distinguish precisely. The period when the street gradually ceases to be the principal artery of the new, Arabic, Alexandria is a separate scientific question for future study.

Keywords: ancient Alexandria, ancient urbanism, architectural decoration

How many streets were there in ancient Alexandria during its history of nearly ten centuries? This is what archaeology has been slowly and laboriously trying to discover for almost one and a half centuries. Nevertheless, even though so many of them have already been identified, examined and added to the city map which is constantly being reviewed, generally, they all remain nameless as opposed to the streets of ancient Rome. Alexandrian streets are only described by symbols assigned by archaeologists or arbitrary names created on the basis of philological sources, or, less frequently, archaeological context.

The philological sources concerning the topography of ancient Alexandria – generally rather scarce and not spread evenly in terms of chronology – are, due to those reasons, too often unclear and they leave a lot of room for speculation and conjecture. Essentially, they merely mention streets that bore names of deified queens of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, yet the location of those streets (or rather only narrow alleys) remains unknown. Scholars only accept that they could have been associated with sanctuaries, temples or chapels dedicated to those queens-goddesses.

If the major arteries of the city are taken into consideration, the written sources provide only terms that described their role, two of which definitely refer to the main longitudinal street. These terms are as follows:

plateia – found in two oldest descriptions of ancient Alexandria: by Diodorus Siculus (17.52.3) and Strabo (17.1.10);¹

pedion – used to describe the main longitudinal street by Achilles Tatius (5.1.1–5).²

There is also a third term – *dromos* – which, however, poses certain questions: according to some scholars this name replaces the *plateia* in the Roman Period, others suggest that the term could refer to a main transversal street which led from the Eastern Harbour to the port next to Lake Mareotis.³

¹ Calderini 1935: 82; Adriani 1963: 245–246; the term *plateia* is also mentioned by Polybius, but it can refer to a street within the Royal Quarter; cf. Adriani 1963: 227.

² Calderini 1935: 137; Adriani 1963: 234.

³ Calderini 1935: 83; Adriani 1963: 246–247; the term is mentioned in the context of Brucheion in a text from the second century AD, however, in texts from the end of the fourth century and the beginning of the fifth century AD the *dromos* is the principal street of the city, with a similar decoration to the *pedion*.

Pseudo-Callisthenes (1.31.3–5) provides a list of names of channels which were supposed to be transformed into streets of the newly-emerging city and mentions a name which could have been the “proper name” of a street – *dromos tou megalou theou Sarapidos*.⁴

When scholars began to create plans of ancient Alexandria – initially completely imaginary, then later partially and not always correctly based on archaeological data – it was natural to attempt to associate those four “main” terms with particular streets drawn on the maps.

Dromos tou megalou theou Sarapidos was naturally associated with the streets located in the immediate vicinity of the hill occupied by the Serapeion, and the *dromos*, as mentioned above, was sometimes identified with the main longitudinal street, and sometimes with the main transversal street of Ptolemaic Alexandria. The terms *plateia* and *pedion* – due to the topographic clues related to their descriptions – undoubtedly referred to the principal “longitudinal” street, which crossed the city along the southwest-northeast axis.

Traces of the route of that street were recognizable as late as in the mid-nineteenth century, perhaps because then this part of the ancient city had been deserted for centuries and was practically free of buildings. It was covered only with palm groves, sparse buildings, ancient ruins which were still visible on the surface in some places, and – marking a short part of the route of the street – monumental columns carved of Aswan granite, which scholars suggested were relics of the magnificent *pedion* colonnade described by Achilles Tatius.⁵

Though it is difficult to establish who used it first,⁶ that street was soon given a different name, “Canopic Street”, derived from the report provided by Strabo (17.1.10) which says that a gate in the city walls was at the eastern end of that street. He called it the Canopic Gate (*Kanobike pyle*), because the road that issued from it led to Canopus.⁷

When Mahmoud Bey began his research in 1866 with the aim to reconstruct the street network of ancient Alexandria on the basis of archaeological evidence, “Canopic Street” was marked as L1,⁸ and this symbol began to be used in literature as an equivalent for “Canopic Street”.

Mahmoud Bey drew his network of the streets of ancient Alexandria based on his exploration of almost the whole city; in some parts he discovered relics of the paving of ancient streets (or only its surface), which he marked with symbols L (longitudinal) and R (transversal). He calculated the length of those streets on the basis of the reports concerning the size of the city written by Diodorus and Strabo;⁹ these two sources were also used to establish the width of the streets.

The network he created is still the basis for the city map of ancient Alexandria, which is still being altered as details are added or corrections made. Mahmoud Bey also located (taking Strabo as the main source of information) several major edifices and monuments of ancient Alexandria. He placed a number of them along his L1 (i.e. “Canopic Street”). Starting from the west, these are: the Mosque of a Thousand Columns, the “grand square”, the church of bishop Athanasius, the “Mouseion” and “Soma”, the “Paneion” artificial hill, the “Gymnasion” and right behind it the “public square”.¹⁰

In the plan which was drawn on the basis of Mahmoud Bey’s network over ten years later, Tassos Neroutzos generally placed a number of buildings along the “Avenue longitudinale”, both the ones mentioned by Strabo, and those whose archaeological remains had been discovered in the meantime.¹¹ He also situated – at the junction of L1 and R5 – the Tetrapylon, the location, chronology and identification of which will be discussed elsewhere.

Mahmoud Bey was conscientious in his description of coordinates which indicate places where he found remains of the pavement or curb of a street, or the relics of a colonnade (in the form of fragments of stylobates, rubble of columns or their separate pieces). Those places were marked several years later (undoubtedly on the basis of the author’s notes) by Heinrich Kiepert,¹² however, he omitted (for unknown reasons) six points along street L1, where Mahmoud Bey had identified remains of the paving.¹³ Five of them were drawn on the map created by Mahmoud Bey only by Jean-Luc Arnaud.¹⁴

⁴ Calderini 1935: 83; Adriani 1963: 246; apart from that, Pseudo-Callisthenes (1.32.A) uses the term *meson pedion*, usually equivalent to the *pedion* described by Achilles Tatius; cf. Adriani 1963: 227.

⁵ They were marked on the map in 1787 (Cassas 1799: pl. 47); for other images and descriptions of the columns, see Tkaczow 1993: 76–77.

⁶ The name is completely arbitrary and it has not appeared in any written sources so far, either literary, or epigraphic.

⁷ Adriani 1963: 235.

⁸ Mahmoud Bey 1872: 18–20.

⁹ Adriani 1963: 22–25.

¹⁰ Adriani 1963: 56–57.

¹¹ Adriani 1963: 59.

¹² Kiepert 1872: 342.

¹³ Mahmoud Bey 1872: 18–20.

¹⁴ Arnaud 1997: 723–724 and 729 (fig. 3).

Further study of “Canopic Street” mainly focused on a description of its dimensions, decoration and function on the basis of written sources. Discussion of its length, width, framing structures and decoration frequently acquired completely ahistorical traits when the description of the magnificence of that street contained mixed data from various types of sources and epochs.¹⁵

The archaeological discoveries which followed throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and the whole of the twentieth century added more objects to the picture of the street; new buildings and monuments, sometimes boldly identified with names listed by Strabo, Achilles Tatius, or in other texts, yet sometimes the scholars were cautious enough to use neutral descriptive names.¹⁶ Nevertheless, certain previously recognized locations needed substantial correction or even erasure.¹⁷

The range of archaeological sources related to “Canopic Street” (or whatever name it was called in ancient times) is still relatively limited.¹⁸ It is however possible to attempt to reconstruct at least a partial picture of that artery in different epochs.

Mahmoud Bey established the width of “Canopic Street” to be 14 m.¹⁹ It is still unclear whether this width changed over time or at different parts of the street.²⁰

The length of the street that he established (5.090 m), and thus the expanse of the city along the east-west axis, was long ago “attributed” to the Roman Period, or more precisely to “Imperial” times (the second and third centuries AD).²¹

It is now accepted that the eastern limit of the Ptolemaic city (and also the Early Roman one – possibly until the end of the first century AD) is indicated by the extent of the eastern Ptolemaic necropoleis.²²

The location of the western end of the street raises similar issues; the western necropoleis which have been examined so far start immediately behind the partially hypothetical line of the channel, yet in this case, archaeological evidence is in conflict with the written authority, i.e. Strabo (17.1.10), who reports that “only a small part of the city is located behind the channel”.²³

The archaeological evidence that has been collected for years is now sufficient to try to outline the appearance of “Canopic Street” in different epochs, even though the description will have many gaps.

Archaeological remains identified along the route of the street²⁴ can be divided into the following groups:

- remains of the street metalling and paving;²⁵
- channels and cisterns;
- relics of colonnades: foundations, rubble of columns, separate columns;
- relics of buildings: foundations, remains of walls, floors.

A separate group consists of movable objects: statuary sculpture, inscriptions and elements of architectural decorations. Drawing final conclusions on the basis of these objects, and also those discovered at a certain distance from the (hypothetical) edge of the street, is rather risky.²⁶ Nevertheless, the finds of fragments of large statues, dedicatory inscriptions and elements of architectural decorations in some places constitute complete sets that could, though still tentatively, be associated with the particular buildings and monuments located along “Canopic Street”.

If, for simplification, the length of the route established by Mahmoud Bey is accepted, certain “sets” of archaeological data identified (starting from the west) on both sides of “Canopic Street” (in some cases, also at a slight distance from the assumed edge) can be distinguished for different periods:

¹⁵ See Haas 1993: 123–128 and 29–31, 81–90.

¹⁶ See McKenzie 2007: figs. 22 and 28: “Doric Stoa” in the place of relics previously identified with the Gymnasium.

¹⁷ Most of all, the location of *Sema* was eliminated.

¹⁸ Not much information has been added for years due to the impossibility of performing excavations; excavations carried out by J.-Y. Empereur are the exception; cf. Tkaczow 2003: 30, n. 40 and fig. 4, point E10.

¹⁹ Mahmoud Bey 1872: 19; cf. Adriani 1963: 56.

²⁰ The narrowing of the streets by filling them with porticos and building extensions is a phenomenon documented, among others, along the following streets: R5 (Tkaczow 1993: Site 40) and R4 (Tkaczow 1993: Site 55).

²¹ Mahmoud Bey 1872: 19.

²² Adriani 1963: 63.

²³ Tkaczow 1982: 343–345; either Strabo was not excessively precise, or the channel followed a slightly different course. It is also possible that Alexandrians did not exactly obey the rule of establishing necropoleis outside the city walls.

²⁴ Numbers of sites and objects are cited further in the article (pp. 28–32); cf. Tkaczow 1993: 76–119 and 183–332.

²⁵ See above, notes 12–14.

²⁶ In this case, good examples include the locations of the temple of Isis Plousia and the quarter of *Beta* reconstructed on the basis of the place where a statue (Obj. 170) and an inscribed column (Obj. 219) were discovered; cf. Adriani 1963: 251, no. 8.

The Ptolemaic Period and the Early Roman Period (the third century BC – the first century AD)

So far, there are no unquestionable relics of the street's paving. Other archaeological remains are as follows [Fig. 1]:

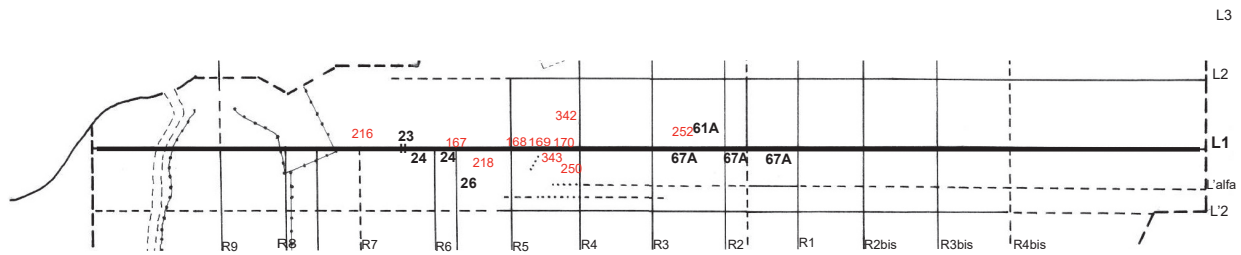


Fig. 1. Archaeological remains from Ptolemaic and Early Roman times identified along the "Canopic Street". Numbers in black and bold – sites; numbers in red – objects; – Ptolemaic and Early Roman streets (drawing B. Tkaczow, digitalisation I. Iwaszczuk and J. Karkowski).

On the northern side of the street:

- Site 17: unidentified ruins (a large granite podium in "Greek style") and "remains of Ptolemaic temples" (in the form of elements of architectural decorations?); this is where Obj. 141 was discovered;
- Site 23: remains of a building constructed of very large limestone blocks, which was later filled with in-built brick structures (see below);
- Site 48: ruins of Early Roman villa; the decoration of this edifice (apart from remains of wall paintings identified in this place) could have included elements of architectural decorations found at the Kom el-Dikka insula (Objs. 58, 59);
- Site 61A: remains of a villa from the first century AD;
- Site 62: piles of very large limestone blocks (Ptolemaic?) and numerous fragments of hieroglyphic inscriptions; this is where Obj. 144, found earlier, could have come from;
- Site 66: possibly secondary accumulation of granite columns and capitals regarded as remains of a decoration of an enormous Ptolemaic edifice;
- Site 67: not described in detail, yet regarded as Ptolemaic "massive foundation walls and overturned columns in great numbers";
- Site 70: relics of a wall built of very large, precisely rusticated blocks, found at a certain distance from the street, are now regarded as remains of walls surrounding the *Basileia*;
- Obj. 19: the head of a statue representing Alexander;
- Obj. 61: a Hathoric capital, reused in the walls of the Rosetta Gate;
- Obj. 140: the *naos* of Seti I.²⁷

On the southern side of the street:

- Site 27: the temple of Serapis and Isis founded by Ptolemy IV; the only remains include the foundation deposit and two magnificent Corinthian capitals (Obj. 57); unfortunately, the dimensions and orientation of the edifice are unknown, neither is its relation with a small longitudinal street of minor importance;²⁸
- Site 45: a curious enclave (surrounded by a wall?) of a street network diagonal in relation to the network identified by Mahmoud Bey;²⁹
- Site 46: probably an integral part of Site 45 – remains of Ptolemaic or Early Roman villa;
- Site 47: these "ruins of a villa" with a mosaic floor could have had a similar orientation; beyond doubt such an orientation is true for "two parallel walls" lying over the mosaic;
- Site 52: remains of a wall built of enormous limestone blocks, parallel to the street, with the end at the junction with R4; possibly relic of an edifice or the stylobate of a colonnade;
- Site 53: junction with R4; a structure built of "massive limestone blocks" later filled with other structures (?);
- Site 54: "Doric stoa"; a fragment of a stylobate laid directly on the bedrock, segments of shafts of three enormous columns³⁰ and a fragment of the floor;

²⁷ Most Egyptian monuments in Alexandria are associated with the Ptolemaic Period.

²⁸ Similar streets have been discovered nearby, at the Kom el Dikka insula; cf. Tkaczow 1993: Sites 34 and 34A; see also Majcherek 2010: 77.

²⁹ Portable objects discovered at this site – including remains of a monumental chryselephantine statue (E. Rodziewicz 1991: 119–130), and copious fragments of revetment slabs, columns, as well as pedestals made of stones of different colours (Tkaczow 2010: 80) – indicate that a monumental building with a rich decoration could have been located along the course of L1. The edifice was probably destroyed at the end of the fourth century AD, and its remains dumped in the "levelling" layer of Site 45; see below, note 41.

³⁰ See above, note 16; shaft segments of identical columns were discovered reused in the stylobate of the so-called Theatre-Portico; Tkaczow 2010: 58–59.

- Site 58: a cistern carved in the bedrock (and due to that fact regarded as Ptolemaic, however, it was in use until modern times);
 Site 67A: mysterious “massive foundations” which were found with accumulated rubble of granite columns;
 Obj. 14: a large statue of Heracles sitting on the rock;
 Obj. 171: so-called Hermes Dionysophoros (first century AD);
 Obj. 15A, 15B, 16: pieces of sculpture from the Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka;
 Obj. 17: pair of sphinxes. The base of a statue, Obj. 40, probably comes from the same place;
 Obj. 38: the so-called Block of Dioscorides and other finds in the so-called Villa Laurin³¹ were a long-standing argument in favour of locating the Alexandrian Library in this spot; however, it is possible that it was a secondary accumulation;
 Obj. 56: a pair of a heart-shaped granite pilasters (associated with Site 17);
 Obj. 58: fragments of polychrome limestone architectural decorations from Secondary School;
 Obj. 59: fragments of limestone architectural decorations from the Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka;
 Obj. 60: a capital of mixed (Graeco-Egyptian) decoration.

The discoveries on the southern side of the street seem conclusively to contradict the location of “Paneion” hill – completely hypothetical, yet accepted until recently – between street R5 and R4. The residential buildings uncovered in the Polish excavations at Kom el-Dikka (relics identified so far are dated to the end of the first century BC / beginning of the first century AD until the end of the third century AD) are situated not more than 50 m from the supposed edge of the street, and in some places, the relics of Early Roman buildings are adjacent to the side of the street (sides 47 and 52).³²

The “frame” of “Canopic Street” in that period can (only hypothetically) be reconstructed in several places:

- on the eastern side of the junction with R4 – sparse relics of buildings with a monumental colonnade (Site 54);
- on the western side of the same junction – relics of a monumental building or only a stylobate (Site 52);
- next to the street situated between R5 and R6 – the temple of Serapis and Isis founded by Ptolemy IV and Arsinoe III (Site 27), which was possibly aligned with both its front and side;
- enclave of a curious street network (Site 45) and Ptolemaic or Early Roman villas (Site 46);
- relics of a “private villa” (Site 47) identified at a distance of approximately 5 m from the southern border of the street;
- between R8 and R7 – poorly documented remains of monumental buildings regarded as Ptolemaic (Sites 17 and 23);
- between R5 and R4 – remains of an Early Roman villa with a rich decoration (Site 48);
- at the level of the supposed extent of *Basileia* – poorly documented relics of buildings regarded as Ptolemaic (Sites 61A, 62, 66).

All those elements together do not constitute a coherent whole, and the location of the buildings and places mentioned by Strabo – the “Gymnasion”, “Dikasterion” and “Paneion” – remains hypothetical.

The insula situated on the southern side of “Canopic Street” was suggested as the location of the *Sema* (this concept of its location was abandoned long ago), as well the *Mouseion* and the Library.³³ This suggestion seems to be in conflict with Strabo’s report that the *Mouseion* was situated within the Royal Quarter, however, there is a theory that the *Basileia* reached “Canopic Street” in the south.³⁴

The Roman Imperial Period (second – third century AD)

The following relics can be attributed to this epoch [Fig. 2].

On the northern side of the street:

- Site 23: a brick building and a granite colonnade built within Ptolemaic (?) foundations (see also below, Sites 24 and 67A);
 Site 24: a granite colonnade whose relics survived until the mid-nineteenth century;
 Site 26: brick ruins, which could still be seen in the nineteenth century, located at a certain distance from the street (and also slightly to the south of the Ptolemaic / Early Roman street next to Site 27);

³¹ Including the so-called statue of Kallias (rhetor?); cf. Noll 1986: 41, no. 110.

³² There are still no answers for questions such as what the presumed diameter of the hill base was, or how much space was occupied by the green area that surrounded it.

³³ See above, notes 17 and 31.

³⁴ See, e.g., Theocritus’ *Adoniazousai*, where the protagonists of the story head for the gate of the palace along the main street, and the anecdote about queen Arsinoe III next to the palace gate told by Athenaios (7.2). See also Sites 61A, 62, 66.