

Preserving the Greco-Roman Heritage of Alexandria by Reviving Ancient Theatrical Performances at the Roman Amphitheater of Kom El Dekka

الحفاظ على تراث الإسكندرية اليوناني الروماني من خلال إحياء العروض المسرحية القديمة على المسرح الروماني

في كوم الدكة

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Abstract

الملخص

Alexandria flourished as a significant maritime economic center due to its ideal location, which connected the Mediterranean with the Red Sea and facilitated commerce between Africa, Asia, and Europe. Many traders, sailors, and merchants from many parts of the ancient globe flocked to the city's bustling harbors to bring goods, ideas, and civilizations. Alexandria's cosmopolitan setting encouraged a complex tapestry of traditions, languages, and faiths, resulting in a melting pot of many communities. Alexandria had an essential role in the diffusion of various sciences and arts to various parts of the world. Due to the existence of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the House of Science, and the Roman Amphitheatre of Kom El-Dekka. In the heart of Alexandria, Egypt, stands the beautiful Kom El-Dekka Roman Amphitheatre, a tribute to the city's rich heritage and long history. Tourists are enthralled by the Roman-era theater's architectural beauty and historical relevance, which offer a fascinating window into the culture's theatrical and entertainment customs of that period. This study aimed to preserve Alexandria's great heritage by reviving the ancient Egyptian theatrical performances to be performed in the Roman theater of Kom El Dekka.

شهدت الإسكندرية عددًا من العصور المزدهرة والمبتكرة والمتعددة الثقافات خلال وجودها. ازدهرت مدينة الإسكندرية كمركز اقتصادي بحري كبير بفضل موقعها المثالي على البحر الأبيض المتوسط والذي سهل التجارة بين إفريقيا وآسيا وأوروبا. توافد العديد من التجار والبحارة والتجار من أجزاء كثيرة من العالم القديم على موانئ المدينة الصاخبة لجلب البضائع والثقافات والحضارات. كذلك شجعت بيئة مدينة الإسكندرية العالمية نسبيًا معقدًا من التقاليد واللغات والأديان، مما أدى إلى انصهار العديد من المجتمعات. كان للإسكندرية دور رئيسي في نشر مختلف العلوم والفنون في أجزاء مختلفة من العالم بسبب وجود مكتبة الإسكندرية ودار العلوم والمسرح الروماني بكوم الدكة. في قلب الإسكندرية، مصر، يوجد هذا المسرح الرائع بكوم الدكة، تكريمًا لتراث مدينة الإسكندرية الغني وتاريخها العظيم. ينبهر السائحون بالجمال المعماري والمحاكاة التاريخية للمسرح في العصر الروماني، والتي تعتبر نافذة رائعة على التقاليد المسرحية والترفيهية للثقافة في تلك الفترة. هدفت هذه الدراسة إلى الحفاظ على تراث مدينة الإسكندرية العظيم من خلال إحياء العروض المسرحية المصرية القديمة على المسرح الروماني في كوم الدكة.

Keywords: Heritage; Alexandria; Theater; Kom El Dekka.

الكلمات الدالة: تراث؛ الإسكندرية؛ اليوناني والروماني؛ مسرح كوم الدكة.

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Introduction

Due to its advantageous location, which connected the Mediterranean and the Red Sea and facilitated trade between Africa, Asia, and Europe, Old Alexandria served as an important marine commercial hub. Its busy harbors were crowded with traders, sailors, and merchants from various ancient world regions who brought commodities, concepts, and civilizations to the city. Alexandria became a melting pot of various populations as a result of the cosmopolitan environment's promotion of a rich tapestry of customs, dialects, and religions.

Alexandria had a major role in the dissemination of various sciences and arts to various parts of the world since it had the Ancient Library of Alexandria and the House of Science, as well as the Roman amphitheatre of Kom El-Dikka.

The magnificent Kom El Dekkah Roman Theatre, located in the center of Alexandria, Egypt, is a monument to the strong cultural legacy and lengthy history of the city. The magnificent Kom El Dekkah Roman amphitheatre, located in the center of Alexandria, Egypt, is a monument to the strong cultural legacy and lengthy history of the city. The architectural splendor and historical significance of this old theatre, which dates to the Roman era, enthrall tourists and provide an intriguing look into the amusement and theatrical traditions of the time.

Theatre in Egypt during the Greco-Roman period

Egypt lived for more than 970 years under the rule of the Greeks and Romans. It began with the entry of Alexander the Great in 332 BC, which put an end to the influence of the Persians, and ended with the Islamic conquest in 641 AD. During that long period, The Egyptian civilization was enriched with features from Athens and Rome (Rowlandson,2003) (ابراهيم نصحي، ١٩٩٧).

The Ptolemies were interested in science, the arts, and literature, so they established the House of Knowledge and literature also witnessed great prosperity (Clauss & Cuypers,2010).Ptolemy II established the Library of Alexandria next to the House of Science and took care of it (Erskine,2009). He also established the small library attached to the Serapeum Temple. (Fraser,1972).

The Library of Alexandria became one of the greatest libraries in the ancient world. (Bingen & Karrarah,1988) (MacLeod & MacLeod,2005).Ptolemy II was keen to send missions to Greece in order to bring books (Erskine,1995) and King Ptolemy III issued a decision requiring any scholar coming to the Library of Alexandria to present his books to the library, where scribes copied them and gave their owner an approved copy (Phillips, 2010). The Library of Alexandria continued to play its role in the flourishing of culture until it was destroyed in 48 BC during the Alexandria War, which was the war waged by Julius Caesar against the army of Ptolemy XIII and the Alexandrians. After this fire, the centre of scientific activity moved to the small library in the Serapeum temple until the year 391 AD. (El.Abbadi & Fathalla, 2008)

They also cared about establishing theatres in Egypt as an integral part of Greek architectural planning, and the Romans imitated them in that matter. The Alexandria Theatre witnessed the brightest eras of the city of Alexandria and witnessed the period of literary prosperity in the Library of Alexandria, and it was considered one of the main buildings included in the planning drawn up by Dinocrates. (Milne , 1898)

The ancient Egyptian theatre Scholars differed among themselves on the fact that there was an Egyptian theatre in the sense currently understood, but we find that myths were based on the principle of conflict, which is one of the most important elements of drama, and therefore it is what is suitable for theatrical art when religious rituals were the distinguishing feature. According to ancient Egyptian belief, it does not exclude offering offerings, performing daily prayers in temples, or performing ritual performances that honour the deity. Ancient Egypt witnessed two types of performances that took place in two different ways that cannot be confused with each other: Ritual parties and religious drama, which contain Hidden religious drama and religious drama.(ادوار الخراط، ٢٠٠٣).

Ritual celebrations had no features of drama except for the method of performance, and beyond this, gestures, ritual movements, and sayings that give it a mythical style suitable to be an intellectual drama, which gives them the appearance of gods during the kings' coronation, so the masks that they wear represent the god Horus." It is represented by the head of a falcon, the mask of the god "Thoth" and is represented by the head of an ibis bird and the mask of the god "Set". These three masks begin to bless the pharaoh, and the high priests also wear some masks that represent the gods behind them in ritual ceremonies, such as a mask in the form of a ram's head representing the god Khnum. The lioness's head-shaped mask represents the goddess Sekhmet.(سيرج سونيرون، ١٩٧٥).

Religious drama has two types: hidden religious drama and religious plays. (Schäfer,1944) Hidden religious drama is held in secret in the temples, and the audience of the show was the priests who attended the prayer. Herodotus informed us about the Egyptian religious theatrical stories that were held in Greek literature.(إتيين دريوتون، ١٩٨٨).

Religious theatrical performances: These plays carry all the elements of theatrics that we know today, as they are simulations of past events based on people, movements, and dialogue. A plate was discovered in Edfu in 1922, dating back to the Eighteenth Dynasty, with inscriptions indicating the existence of plays (ثروت عكاشة، ١٩٩٠).The scholars unanimously agreed that the Egyptian drama appeared before the Greek drama by about three thousand years, as it was believed that the cradle of drama in both its forms (tragedy and comedy) was the source of Greek civilization. "Aeschylus" had begun to appear in his writings in the world of acting composition in the year 499 BC, while in Egypt "acting drama" appeared around the year 3400 BC, "the drama of the city of Memphis." After that, the drama "Victory of Hours" was written in the Third Dynasty, and the drama "Coronation" was written in the early days of the Middle Kingdom around 2000 BC, so the Greek drama was taken from Egypt like other sciences that the Greeks took from them, and the most important evidence for that is Herodotus visit to Egypt in the year 450 B.C. He referred to two performances he saw in Egypt. He said that the worship and performances held in Greece for the god Dionysus were similar to those held for the god Osiris. (Brockett,1977).

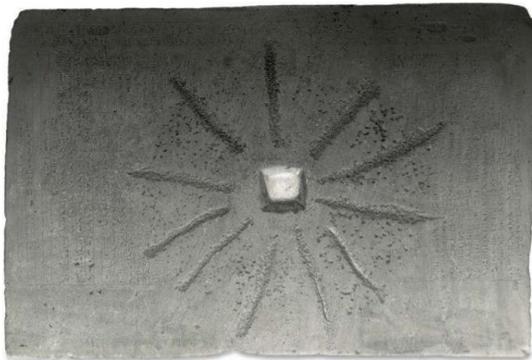
Ritual performances: The ritual performances have many forms; some of them are related to the coronation of the king, some are related to the festivals of the gods, and some are related to the annual events. The priests used to wear masks that represented the gods in order to embody the role of a god in this performance. Masks of jackals and lions had been discovered, which are now in the Egyptian Museum. Masks were also used in other ceremonies.(Schäfer,1944).

Performances in Ancient Egyptian Drama

Most of the dramatic texts found in ancient Egypt's monuments were on religious or political subjects to consolidate and root the system of government and its close relationship with religious beliefs.

However, there were also some dramatic texts affecting human subjects, although they also related to symbolic philosophical subjects, such as the text of dialogue between honesty and lying, between human mind and stomach, and between human beings and their miserable spirits.

One of the examples of these Performances in Ancient Egyptian Drama is The Drama of Memphis, "The Drama of the Beginning of Creation" The texts of this drama were engraved on the surface of a black stone known as the "Shabako" stone, preserved in the British Museum under No. 498, with a height of 66 cm and a width of 137 cm. It was found in Wadi Hammamet. (Bodine,2009) The remains of this stone indicate that the text written on it is a "philosophical representational" dialogue in which priests representing the various Egyptian deities exchanged the process of "creating the world" the cosmic order of created things, and for this reason this dramatic text was called "the representation of the beginning of creation." Other historians called it "The Drama of Memphis City", as the dialogic sentences exchanged by the actors for the roles of the various deities were written in a manner very similar to the traditional methods of writing dialogue in ancient plays and contemporary plays, and the text of this drama includes a monologue. It was delivered by the chanting priest, who played a role similar to that of the narrator, explaining the events and facts of the charade and commenting on the events. (Geraldine,2004) This written text also included a number of guiding instructions for directing and acting performances, similar in some way to the instructions that used to be written by playwrights, both ancient and modern.(Drioton,1954)



The Shabako Stone

Retrieved from:17th July 2023 10:30 PM from (*Stela; Millstone (Re-use) | British Museum, n.d.-a*)

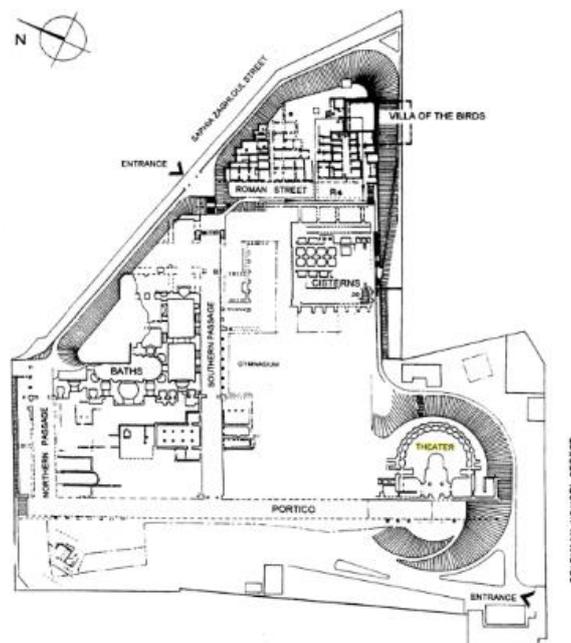
Another example of these Performances in Ancient Egyptian Drama is The Drama of "The Victory of Horus" This dramatic text was engraved on one side of the walls of Edfu's temple (Blackman & Fairman,1942). Historians have called it "the drama of Horus' victory over his enemies." The text of this drama is divided into five parts: an introduction, three chapters, and a conclusion. It takes place around the conflict that has erupted between Horus and his collaborators and Seth and his collaborators. Finally, Horus, who represents good and justice, defeated Seth, who represents evil and injustice. (Naydler,2004)

"The Drama of Coronation" is another example of these Performances in Ancient Egyptian Drama. It is also known as "The dramatic Ramesseum papyrus " . It took its name from the place of its discovery, as they were discovered near the Ramesseum temple, which was built by King Ramesses II, where a box was found with a set of papyrus papers inscribed with dramatic and representative texts of a ceremonial nature related to the coronation of King Sensusret I (Sethe, 1928). This dramatic

text, known as the Ramesseum Theatrical Papyrus by historians and Egyptian archaeologists, is made up of forty-six scenes that are performed by priests, high-ranking government officials, and some members of the royal family (Leach,2007), whose events revolve around rituals performed by the king Senusret I (Rogers, 2014). Some Egyptologists do not agree to describe it as a coronation ceremony; they believe that it is related to the "Hebsed" ritual, which is the ritual of renewing the vital energy of the king and the whole kingdom (Naydler,2004). The dramatic Ramseum papers were divided into scenes, with each scene including theatrical instructions, the plot, the script, and then a movement or action, followed by the interpretation of religious meaning. The author wrote the script in vertical lines and wrote the names of the gods, the scene's subject, and the rituals in horizontal lines (Hartwig,1967).

The Roman Amphitheatre of Kom al-Dekka in Alexandria

One of Alexandria's best-known landmarks is the Roman Amphitheatre. Amphitheatres became widely used during the Roman era. They were in many nations, including Turkey, Greece, and Italy. They are widespread throughout much of the Middle East and Europe. The only structure of this kind in Egypt is the Roman Amphitheatre in Alexandria. "Kom El Dekka" in Arabic means "the hill of benches" or "Mound of Rubble" (Matijašić,2019). It was discovered accidentally in 1963 during the construction of a government structure. They dug into the ground and discovered some solid iron columns. (دينا دياب، ٢٠١١)

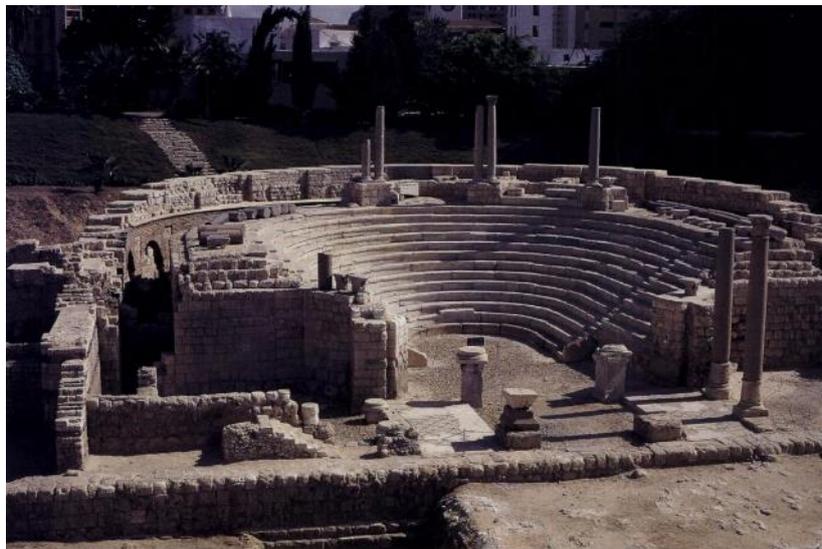


A plan of the site and the amphitheater of Kom Eldekka (Kołataj,.et al, 2007).



The Roman Amphitheatre of Kom El-Dekka in Alexandria (عزت قادوس، ٢٠٠٨)

The construction of Kom El Dekka dates back to the third century AD and has passed through the Roman, Byzantine, Christian, and Islamic eras. Throughout its long history and various eras, the amphitheater served a variety of functions. It served as odium during the Roman era, hosting musical performances (Dwidar & Abdelsattar, 2019). The orchestra section and the former dome over the stage were two of the many components the theatre at that time had to offer a flawless performance. In the period of the Byzantines, the theatre served as a conference hall for meetings of the government. The Roman amphitheater was probably ignored during the early Islamic era and after until it was rediscovered in the middle of the twentieth century. (Kołataj.,et al, 2007).



The Roman Amphitheatre of Kom El-Dekka in Alexandria

(McKenzie, J., & Moorey, P. R. S. (2007).

The researchers believed that Kom El Dekka is not a theatre because, in comparison to theatres in Egypt and the states of the Roman Empire, the theatre's space is small and the "stage" can only accommodate a small number of performers (دينا دياب، ٢٠١١), it seems to be an "Odeum" (Sear,2006), meaning a music hall, or an "auditorium," meaning a lecture hall. (دينا دياب، ٢٠١١)



The Roman Amphitheatre of Kom El-Dekka in Alexandria

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The amphitheatre consists of the auditorium, the stage, and the orchestra. The audience area is made up of thirteen rows of European white marble and has a diameter of about thirty-three meters (دينا) (دياب، ٢٠١١). A portico made of granite columns from Aswan makes up the topmost portion (Hemeda,2013). Roman numerals and letters were used to label the thirteen rows of Alexandria's Roman amphitheater in order to control audience seating on various occasions. Additionally, there were five sections at the top of the audience area where prominent figures and wealthy businessmen sat during performances. To shield the audience from the sun and rain, these compartments once had dome-shaped ceilings supported by substantial granite columns. These domes were additionally used to amplify music and chants during various performances. Unfortunately, the earthquake that struck Alexandria in the sixth century AD completely destroyed all of these buildings. (عزت قادوس، ١٩٩٩)



The Roman Amphitheatre of Kom El-Dekka in Alexandria

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The Roman amphitheater's stairs and rows are built on top of a substantial wall made of white limestone that is encircled by yet another wall. A sequence of arches, a design element of Roman architecture from the second to the fourth centuries, was used to connect these two walls. The orchestra space, where musical concerts once took place, is located in the heart of the building. Some of the most exquisite Roman floor mosaics may be seen in this area, which is supported by two substantial marble columns (McKenzie & Moorey,2007).

Conclusion

Although researchers noticed that the Roman amphitheater was not a theater compared to the Ancient World theaters in Athens and Rome, we can use this amphitheater to revive Alexandria's great heritage in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. It is possible to replicate ancient performances on it in order to revive Alexandria as a beacon of art and literature.

The Roman Theatre of Kom El Dekkah is a striking reminder of Alexandria's illustrious history and provides a fascinating view into the artistic and social customs of the Roman period. For both history buffs and culture lovers, it is a must-visit location because of its stunning architecture and historical significance. We are reminded of the eternal ability of art and amusement to transcend time and link us to our common human heritage as we follow in the footsteps of the ancient spectators.

This study suggests that Theatrical performances will be performed on the Roman stage of Kom El Dekka, Talented actors will be selected, and masks will be worn. The same types of music and musical instruments (orchestra) will be used. The narrator recounts some of the events to the audience as they were happening in Alexandria in the Ptolemaic and Roman periods. A schedule with the dates of the plays to be shown will be made and notified to tourism companies. The media has a role in the marketing of Roman theatre. To make the Roman theatre a more popular destination, a digital marketing strategy is created. A smartphone application for the amphitheater of Kom el Dekka that tourists can use to book the performances they want to see during their visit based on the schedule.

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