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(Warsaw)

Mosque of Amr Ibn al-As in Alexandria.
An Unexisting Monument of Islamic Architecture

The well known book of Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Abd Allah Ibn Abd al-Hakam (805–871 A.D.) is our oldest, preserved in its full extent, authority on early history of Islamic Egypt. Its title *Kitab futuh Misr wa-al-Maghrib* suggests somehow more narrow scope to its contents than it really is because in addition to the Arab conquest of these countries its author was interested in a wide range of questions concerning the social, cultural and political history of his and neighbouring regions. Although the book is relatively late, it relates events which had taken place mainly in the course of the first century of Hijra and relevant information of, for instance, topographical nature roughly of the same date¹. All the collected facts were evidently checked by cross examination of their sources whether written or orally transmitted, then selected and sorted. As it seems, Ibn Abd al-Hakam also heavily relied on the contemporary local Egyptian historical memory extensively using traditions transmitted by the earliest authorities such as Yazid Ibn Abi Habib (died A.D. 745), Ibn Lahi'a (died A.D. 790), Laith Ibn Saad (died A.D. 791) and their informers often listed in the classes of the *Sahaba*, and *Tabi'un*. But a large part of these traditions were preserved by his own family, for a long time settled in Al-Fustat. Some of them certainly came from his father, a celebrated scholar of the Malikite school of law and a historian. Especially the topographical information for which Abd al-Hakam does not name his source and gives no *isnad* to

¹ Main problems concerning this work were analyzed and discussed by the present writer in *Al-Fustat. Its Foundation and Early Urban Development*, Cairo 1987, p. 18 ff. where further references are given.

prove its veracity² might have come as a part of the family knowledge of the past.

Concerning the city of Alexandria in the period immediately posterior to the Arab conquest, Ibn Abd al-Hakam gives in his book the description of five mosques. The list after the second conquest by assault in the year A.D. 645 was increased to six by addition of the Mosque of Ar-Rahma. It was called by this name, i.e. the Mosque of Mercy, because it was founded in the place where Amr stopped the slaughter of the Alexandrians by his victorious warriors.

Thus the list comprises the following names:

- 1) The Mosque of the Prophet Moses (Musa) at the Pharos,
- 2) The Mosque of Solomon (Sulayman),
- 3) The Mosque of Dhu al-Qarnayn which name usually refers to Alexander the Great,
- 4) The Mosque of Al-Khidr (Al-Khadir) — a rather mysterious, legendary sage or prophet, sometimes identified with St. George,
- 5) The Great Mosque of Amr Ibn al-As which concerns us here,
- 6) The Mosque of Ar-Rahma founded after the second conquest.

The location of the Mosque of Amr, as we see, is not given. To locate it within the city complex we have to use indirect evidence, which, by the way, is fairly satisfactory. In order to be on the firmer ground and to be able to discuss in some detail the problems it poses, first we need to establish situation of the five remaining mosques, just to eliminate them from further discussion, especially in the light of later erroneous conclusions, suppositions and misinterpretation of historical data.

The location of the mosque of Moses is given by Ibn Abd al-Hakam so we do not need to give it here again. The name of the second mosque: "Solomon" was probably associated with other constructions of the same name such as the Serapeum, known in the early Islamic town as Qasr Sulayman (Solomon), and with the Bridge of Sulayman over the canal leading to the southern gate, situated somewhere in the vicinity of the said Qasr, sometimes also called by early Islamic sources the Gate of Solomon.³ It seems therefore logical to place the Mosque in

² Ibid., p. 21 and note 19.

³ For the Ibn Abd al-Hakam's list see *Kitab futuh Misr*, ed. Ch. C. Torrey, New Haven 1922, p. 41. References to Alexandrian toponymy connected with the person of Sulayman Ibn Dawud in Arabic sources are many: Ibn Abd al-Hakam, op. cit., p. 176 refers to the Qantara Sulayman; in similar but slightly more detailed version Yaqt al-Hamawi refers to the Gate of Suleyman (see *Mujam al-buldan*, the entry on Qubbat ar-Rahma, cf. O. Toussoun's translation in *La géographie de l'Égypte à l'époque arabe*, "Mémoires Présentés à la Société Royale d'Alexandrie", t. 6, p. 130; on the Hall or the Palace of Suleyman see Abu Hamid al-Andalusi in G. Ferrand, *Les monuments de l'Égypte d'après Abu Hamid al-Andalusi*, "Mélanges Maspero" III, 1935/1940, p. 60, Ibn Rosteh, ed. de Goeje, BGA VII, Leyden 1892,

the same, i.e. and the gate city.⁴

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p. 117, Ibn al- p. 168. In later another monum p. 166, transl. p. (Al-Intisar IV,

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the same, i.e. the southern part of the city. Incidentally, it is through this quarter and the gate opened to Amr by treachery that a part of his army entered the city.⁴

Two other mosques, named after two other Islamic prophets: Dhu al-Qarnayn and Al-Khadir are given rather ambiguous locations.⁵ Accordingly, one of them was in the Caesareum⁶ near a group of acacias and the other by the city gate. But he states that it is not known which one was where, moreover no precise data is given, such as the name of the gate by which it stood.⁷ The next passus given on the authority of Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Shurayh complicates the matter since he gives only three names, among them that of the Mosque in Caesareum which was a property subjected to inheritance (no name is mentioned), the Mosque of

p. 117, Ibn al-Faqih, ed. R. Dozy and M.J. de Goeje, BGA V, Leyden 1866, p. 140, transl. p. 168. In later times the Mosque of Sulayman was associated with the Pharos, but possibly another monument of this name was meant; see *Al-Bakri apud al-Himiari*, ed. Lévi Provencal, p. 166, transl. p. 170, but Ibn Duqmaq, on the other hand, places this Mosque in Caesareum (*Al-Intisar* IV, Vollers ed. p. 122).

⁴ On the two mosques: that of Dhu al-Qarnayn who, as is traditionally admitted, represents Alexander the Great, and Al-Khadir (or Al-Khidr) there is in Ibn Abd al-Hakam (op. cit., p. 41) a degree of ambiguity. His relation after listing the Mosques of Moses and of Solomon goes as follows: "[...] and the Mosque of Dhu al-Qarnayn or of Al-Khadir (Al-Khidr), Allah's blessing be upon two of them, and it is the one which is at the acacias in Caesareum and of Al-Khadir or Dhu al-Qarnayn which is at the gate of the city when one goes out from the gate. To each of them there is a mosque only one does not know which one is where". Another information transmitted to Ibn Abd al-Hakam by a certain Abd ar-Rahman Ibn Shurayh (op. cit. p. 42) is even less clear: After repeating the remark that there were five mosques in Alexandria there are listed only three which really present just two of them. The passage, evidently due to an error of the copyists, mentions the Mosque in Caesareum and the Mosque of Acacias (Labbahat) as the two separate ones. In the light, however, of the preceeding passus it apparently means only one and the same and the passus should read: "[...] the Mosque in Caesareum (which is known) as the Mosque of Acacias". After this only the Mosque of Amr is mentioned. Unfortunately, no official name of the Caesareum Mosque is given which leaves us with choice between Dhu al-Qarnayn and Al-Khadir. Exactly the same choice remains for the one at the city gate, only that even its name or location is not given. Evidently any speculations in this respect as for instance those advanced by some Egyptian historians who connect the Mosque of Al-Khadir with much later name of the western city gate "Bab al-Akhdar — The Green Gate" (because of their sense associations) seem to me totally groundless. However, very significant for our further reasoning undertaken in view of establishing the Mosque of Amr's location is the fact that in both cases discussed above it was listed separately and independently of any other early mosque.

⁵ Ibn Abd al-Hakam, op. cit., p. 80.

⁶ Arabic "*Qaysariya*" which is usually regarded to be a common noun with a meaning of a building normally large and solidly constructed used for commercial purpose to hold a branch of trade, particular shops, storage of merchandise etc. In this case, however, we follow Eutychius who uses it to designate the ancient temple of Caesareum (See his *Contextio Gemmarum*, ed. E. Pococke, repr. Oxford 1955, p. 341). In this meaning in relevant contexts it is also accepted by modern Egyptian historians who regard it as a *nisba* of *qaysar* — caesar.

⁷ Ibn Abd al-Hakam, op. cit., p. 41.

Acacias (as a separate one) and the Mosque of Amr.⁸ Since the number of five mosques is in this text also repeated we can safely assume that it is only a copyist's mistake resulting probably from an older imperfect copy in which the Mosque of Acacias had been disassociated from the one in Caesareum and consider it to be the same. It was, as we have seen above, either the Mosque of Dhu al-Qarnayn or the Mosque of Al-Khadir.

If we leave the Mosque of Amr out of further discussion there remains only the Mosque (or Qubba) of Ar-Rahma. Yaqt al-Hamawi used both names possibly not realizing their identity. At any rate he says that the Qubba (or at least the name of it) survived up till his own time, i.e. until about the middle of the thirteenth century.⁹

It seems that none of these five early mosques has survived till modern times. They disappeared in the course of time, were forgotten or some new ones replaced them. Alexandria, if we give credence to the account of Ibn Jubayr,¹⁰ doubtlessly exaggerated, was particularly well endowed with places of worship and prayer. The Mosque of Amr Ibn al-As in all probability remained longer in substance although its old name was forgotten. It was never mentioned in later times unless quoted from earlier sources. The last to note it was Ibn Jubayr.¹¹

The Mosque of Amr was certainly a principal one in the early Islamic city and doubtlessly held a rank of a *jami* although at first it was simply called *masjid*. (In the first century after Hijra there was allegedly no clear distinction between an ordinary mosque and a cathedral one.) Unfortunately its fate and fortune, contrary to its namesake in Al-Fustat, have never been recorded. It is conceivable that it was in use and kept in good repair at least until the Ottoman conquest in 1517, and then abandoned together with the rest of the walled city in the 18th century, probably in its first part. At the time of the French expedition in 1798 it

⁸ Op. cit., p. 42.

⁹ Op. cit. p. 175. Yaqt in his *Mujam al-buldan* brings important information that the two famous obelisks (*musallatan*) stood somewhere near it which means that it must have been near the sea, and the front of Caesareum (see Toussoun's translation, op. cit., p. 109. For Qubbat al-Rahma see Toussoun, op. cit. It is to be noted, however, that according to Al-Harawi, *Kitab al-ziyarat*, ed. Janine Sourdel-Thomine, Damascus 1953, p. 60, there existed in Alexandria the Mosque at-Tawba wa Ar-Raham with an important *ribat* near the Bab al-Ahdar, i.e. the western gate of the city. Although the information seems genuine enough, at least for the early 13th century where Al-Harawi visited Alexandria, yet in all probability he had in mind entirely different mosque than that called Ar-Rahma or later Qubbat Ar-Rahma founded by Amr and his companions at the time of the second conquest and which possibly the text of Yaqt implies survived up to the same time.

¹⁰ For instance Ibn Jubayr gives the number of 12 000 mosques in the city, see *The Travels of Ibn Jubair*, transl. by J. C. Broadhurst, London 1952, p. 35.

¹¹ Speaking about the Mosque of Amr in Misr (Al-Fustat) he adds that also in Alexandria there is another one of this name of which is used by the Malikites as a place for prayer (*musalla*), see the text Ed. by Wright and de Goeje, p. 54.

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was recorded that "la mosque de Septante" has since a long time not been serving the Muslim cult. However the building itself was still in a fairly good condition.

Of course, all these suppositions and informations are of no value as long as we cannot prove the identity of the early Mosque of Amr with the late Al-Jami al-Gharbi, Al-Jami al-Atiq or, as it was also called — mainly by the European authors — "the Mosque of Septante", already cited, the Mosque of Theonas or the Mosque of Thousand Columns. Certainly, when we take into account all the relevant facts, the identification stands to reason but there is no direct proof.

Ibn Abd al-Hakam's book, our main historical source, does not give, as we have already noted, precise location of the mosque but it brings some useful indications on it. One of them is the epithet "great" in its appellation. It clearly implies a considerable size of the building, possibly indicating that it was bigger than any of the mosques remaining on the list.

The next information emerges from the narrative relating that the mosque was on the top of a hill which was near the *musalla* being in its turn near to the sea coast. This obviously determines its general situation in the northern part of the town, in proximity to the coast. The same narrative tells that the mosque was situated near the castle which later became the residence of Abdallah Ibn Abi Sarh, Amr's successor in his office of governor and commander of the Egyptian *jund*. Of course, this is our author's anticipation for in the meantime it was to be Amr's lodgings and probably headquarters of the army since he was its commander and a sort of an administrative centre. The term of *dar al-imara*, current at that time for this kind of establishments and residences, was in the earliest Arab period not used. But we hear about it some time later when in the year 44 A.H. (665 A.D.), the governor Utba Ibn Amir gave an order to build up the Old Fortress (Al-Hisn al-Qadim).¹² Here again no location of the Fortress is given but contrary to the earlier notice the Mosque is not mentioned. In spite of incomplete evidence we can probably assume that it is the same fortress Al-Kindi had in mind. More direct information, which to some extent clarifies the situation of the Old Castle, is of a much later date: on the map drawn by Belon du Mans, a 16th century traveller, there are shown two castles: the new and the old one, both adjacent to the western line of the Arab wall of the city. The Old Castle (Château vieux) is near the coast, the New Castle (Château neuf) — in the south-west corner of the enceinte.¹³ If we take also into account that the Arab wall was built not earlier than in the 9th century we can deduct that the New Castle was built after the wall had been erected or at the same time, because

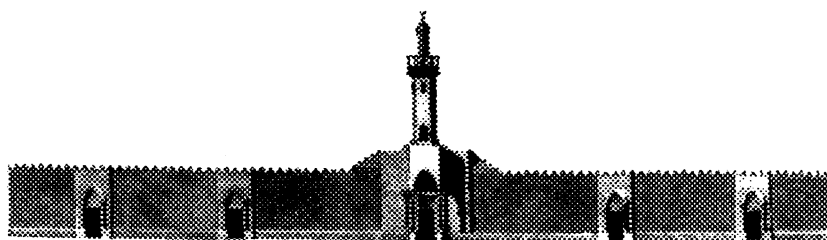
¹² Al-Kindi, *Kitab wulat Misr*, Ed. R. Guest, Leyden 1912, p. 36.

¹³ Pierre Belon du Mans, *Les observations de plusieurs singularités et choses mémorables trouvées en Grèce, Asie, Judée, Egypte, Arabie et autres Pays étrangers, rédigées en trois livres par....* Paris 1554. The plan was also reprinted by G. Jondet, *Atlas historique de la ville et des ports d'Alexandrie*, Cairo 1921, Pl. II.

in this location the Arab wall did not follow the line of the earlier: Roman and Byzantine defences.

On the other hand the wall along the coast and at the ports must for obvious reasons have been constructed following roughly the same course. Therefore it could enclose a later structure. Az-Zahiri, a historian and statesman of the 15th century who for a long time was a resident in the Old Castle as a guest of the sultan Malik al-Ashraf, informs that it was Al-Muqawwis (Cyrus), the last governor of Byzantine Egypt, who built this Castle.¹⁴

I am, of course, aware of the weakness of evidence concerning the historical reality being some eight or nine hundred years old. I present it, however, because we are in want of better and methodologically sounder records. Nevertheless I am inclined to acknowledge their attractiveness and convincing value. It plays a role similar, for instance, to the deeply rooted opinion that the Mosque al-Gharbi was identical, at least with regard to its emplacement, with the Cathedral of the Virgin Mary, better known as the Church of Theonas and its association with the Greek translation of the Old Testament, the so called *Septuaginta*. This view has lead some European scholars in the 18th and 19th centuries to give the mosque the current versions of its name: the Mosque of Theonas or the Mosque of Septante.



Mosque Al-Gharbi. Elevation



Mosque Al-Gharbi. Transversal Section
(After the *Description de l'Egypte*, Antiquités, Pl. 37)

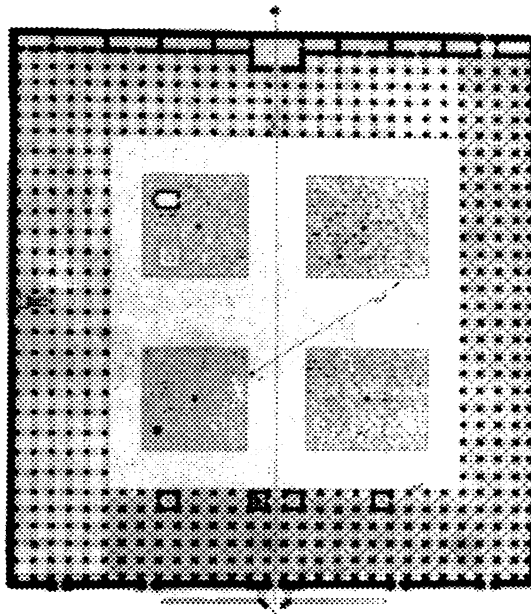
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Mosque Al-Gharbi, Ground Plan
(After the *Description de l'Egypte*, Antiquités, Pl. 37)

I will not enter into tedious argumentation to prove or disprove the above supposition although I do not hesitate to express my opinion that it is totally groundless. A few elements of architecture with Christian symbols and Byzantine decorative motifs discovered by the scholars of the Napoleon's expedition and their followers are certainly not sufficient to advance any theory.

In antiquity and in middle ages all builders were using older elements in their works. Much more trustworthy, in my opinion, is the evidence brought by Ibn Abd al-Hakam and Al-Kindi, already referred to, who defines the name of the Mosque as "big" and brings about it significant topographical and historical data.

Certainly there has never been in Alexandria a bigger mosque than that recorded and showed on the plans of the city drawn during the research of the French expedition. It is unlikely that a mosque of a comparable size could have ever existed in Alexandria without slightest trace in sources being left. The often used appellation of this mosque Al-Jami al-Atiq, the Ancient Mosque, is also rather significant especially since it was confirmed by Al-Harawi who mentioning it under that name noted that it had been founded by the *Sahaba* — the Companions of the Prophet.¹⁵

¹⁵ Abu l-Hasan Ali Ibn Abi Bakr al-Harawi, *Guide des Lieux de Pèlerinage*, I texte, Damascus 1953, II traduction annotée, par J. Sourdel-Thomine, Damascus 1957, see the text, p. 47.

The defficient source material, the absence of any serious, modern archaeological fieldwork, and, first of all, the enormous enthusiasm of the 19th century Egyptian rulers who thoughtlessly modernised the city bringing about almost total destruction of vestiges of the glorious Arab past are reasons for which even theoretical reconstructions of once existing monuments are hopeless. In the case of the Mosque of Amr in Alexandria we are in a slightly better position. Direct information or, more frequently, indirect or circumstantial but rationally sound data allow to advocate for its uninterrupted history and identity with later incarnations of the same establishment not withstanding the periodical changes of its customary names. Our acceptance of the fact that it continued to perform spatial, political and social framework permits us — although not without certain reservation — to reconsider the description and drawings prepared by the members of the engineering and scientific corps of the French *Armée d'Orient* published in the invaluable *Description de l'Égypte*.

The ground plan, one transversal section and the drawing of the front facade in addition to a short description by Gratien le Père provides the only reliable and scientifically accurate record of the mosque as it was about the end of the 18th century. Of course we know nothing of the shape and spatial arrangement of the original structure conceived at the time of its foundation around the year 641. We also have no idea about its hypothetical links with its alleged predecessor, the Church of Theonas, which are quite unlikely.

This hypothesis is especially incredible in the light of Sophronius information that the Church existed as late as the 8th century.¹⁶ Also R. Guest in his excellent article on Alexandria declares that it was not destroyed until the 9th century.¹⁷ Unfortunately no basis for this statement is given. At any rate, in the present state of our knowledge any discussion of the matter would be nothing but sheer academic speculation.

Description of the mosque given by Gratien le Père is lamentably short and imprecise. It is also at variance with the plan of the mosque since it includes its companion, the transversal section. The measurements given there after checking them with the plan prove to have been taken internally. External measurements made by me in comparison with the plan and the scale give figures some 3 metres greater and they amount to 120×129 meters. It means that the walls were ca. 1.50 m thick, rather much if one considers that they were built of stone or of a sort of *opus emplectum*.

It appears from the above that the mosque was almost square, a rare occurrence in Islamic architecture. One example is for instance the Mosque of Ibn Tulun in Cairo which is almost square and has a comparable size: 122 by 140 m, but the walls are slightly less thick. When we, however, take notice that it

¹⁶ Sophronius Patriarch, SS Cyril et Joannes mirac. 12 in *Patrologia Graeca* 87, col. 3460–3461.

¹⁷ R. Guest, *Encyclopedia of Islam* 1st ed, (1913), sub voce *Al-Iskandariya*.

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was built of bricks, not of stones, we arrive at the conclusion that the Alexandrian construction was much stronger. Its courtyard is practically square, since it measures 80×82 meters. In Ibn Tulun the proportion is 91.87×92.35 m. In both buildings, regular square shape was evidently intended.

When looking for further analogies with the mosque of Ibn Tulun we find still another one, and being very significant: the arches in both mosques, Al-Gharbi and Ibn Tulun, are slightly pointed, two-centred. However here the similarity ends. The supports in the Alexandrian Mosque are of course made of reused ancient columns. They were evidently selected to match the required height which was 5m 40 cm. Together with the height of the bases, capitals and arches they add up to the height of about 10 meters from the floor to the ceiling, or rather to the tops of intersecting vaults covering the colonnaded space of the mosque. The plan and elevation show five main entrances. Another four auxiliary ones were in the western wall and still one, evidently for the use of the governor, was leading to his castle and is to be found near the south-western corner, in the *qibla* wall. The plan does not show *mihrab* but along the *qibla* wall instead of the customary back aisle wall there is a row of chambers, ca 5 m wide and from 10 to 15 m long. The central one probably functioning as the *maqsura*, measured about 10×12 m.

The most characteristic features of the mosque which brings to mind plans of early Iranian oratories is its consequently centralized plan. The court is in the center and not as usually in the frontal or foremost part. There was no distinct hall of prayer at the side of the *qibla* wall but all side *riwaqs* or porticos and the front *riwaq* were enlarged to the width of the *qibla* part which we can call the proper prayer hall or sanctuary, the *haram* of the mosque. The eastern *riwaq* was supported by 5 rows of columns exactly as the prayer hall; the same 5 rows had a frontal *riwaq*. Only the eastern one was a narrower one having only 4 rows of columns. This disposition required more supports in comparison with other mosques of a similar size. The Mosque Al-Gharbi had 452 of them which lead to the popular name of "The Mosque of 1000 columns".

The last question which should be determined is the approximate date of the structure which survived to the times of the French Expedition. Since the façade and the *minaret* over the central entrance were probably late medieval constructions, it is the shape of the arches and the general spacial, centralized disposition of the interior which give us some indications. If we compare both these features with other large mosques of various periods, we come to the conclusion that they point to a rather early epoch. The second half of the 9th century, i.e. the Tulunid times are the most likely. The generally favorable economic situation of the country and the personal interest of the founder of the dynasty, Ahmad Ibn Tulun in Alexandria and its affairs also support this hypothesis. To prove it conclusively we need, however, some additional evidence.

A few words about the further fate of this interesting monument: At the time of the French occupation justified by the alleged long desertion of the mosque

which was not used any more for religious service, the army's commanding body decided to repair its walls and use it as an artillery park.¹⁸ Later in Muhammad Ali's times, it was turned into a military hospital, and then into barracks.

Afterwards when the town commenced to grow and space for construction became scarce, a part of it was pulled down and the land sold. The part was purchased by the Fathers of Holy Land and in the northern part of it where the minaret stood before, a small church of St Francis¹⁹ was built. But shortly before the year 1905 in the same city quarter, next to the then Arsenal, in the locality called "Schouna-el-Melcha" (evidently a sort of a store for salt) bough about that time by a certain Ahmad Suktan, there still survived 153 columns. They were of marble, granit and also of porphyry and with their capitals. Some of them were standing and formed a double portico on the east side of the "immense" courtyard. The portico was "de style grec et byzantin."²⁰ Today, regrettably, no trace of it remains and it even disappeared from the memory of the local people.

¹⁸ Gratien le Père, *Memoirs sur la ville d'Alexandrie in: Description de l'Egypte, Etat moderne*, t. II, 2-e partie, p. 287 and pl. A, vol. V, planche 37, cf. also Saint-Genis, *Description des antiquités d'Alexandrie et ses environs*, ibid. "Antiquités", t. II, ch. XXVI, pp. 92 ff., cf. also E. Combe, *Notes sur les forts d'Alexandrie et ses environs*, Bull. Soc. Roy. Arch. d'Alexandrie 34, 1941, p. 94.

¹⁹ H. de Vaujany, *Recherches sur anciens monuments situés sur le grand port d'Alexandrie*, Alexandria 1888, pp. 62ff.

²⁰ Max Debbane, *À propos de deux colonnes attribuées à l'église de Theonas* and a note by E. D. I. Dutilh reprinted by him in the Appendix, since a long time out of print: *Deux colonnes de l'église de Theonas* originally published in "Bull. Soc. Arch. d'Alexandrie" 7 (1905), pp. 55-57, Soc. Arch. d'Alexandrie, Bull. N° 42, 1967, pp. 81 ff.

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