

Interview with Dr. Calliope Limneos-Papakosta,
Director of the Hellenic Research Institute of the Alexandrian Civilization (H.R.I.A.C.)

Dr. Daniela Orzață



Today I have the pleasure of speaking with a remarkable archaeologist, Dr. Calliope Limneos-Papakosta, whose dedication, patience, and scholarly vision have brought one of Alexandria's ancient stories back to light. After more than fourteen years of work at a single site, her sustained efforts were rewarded with the discovery of a remarkable Hellenistic - era statue - an extraordinary find that offers new insight into the cultural richness of ancient Alexandria during the Ptolemaic period. In this interview, we will discuss the story behind this discovery, the challenges of working in one of the world's most archaeologically dense cities, and what this statue may reveal about Alexandria's enduring legacy as a crossroads of civilizations.

- Good evening, Dr. Papakosta. Let us begin with your story. Could you tell us a bit about your background and how your archaeological project in Alexandria was initiated? Why did you determine that the Shallalat Gardens were the appropriate location for an excavation?

Dr. Papakosta: "Thank you for being here. My story is somewhat exceptional, given that I am Greek, and it is certainly not easy for a foreign archaeologist to begin an excavation project in Egypt without institutional connections to local universities or substantial financial support from Greece. I must begin by saying that coming to Alexandria was the dream of my life. I believe I chose to study archaeology because of Alexander's history and legacy, and for me Alexandria has always held profound significance. I first came here in 1996 to participate in a scholarly congress on Alexander the Great and Alexandria. After that congress, when I realized that there were genuine opportunities to undertake a project here, I never stopped returning.



Aerial photo of the Shallalat Gardens excavation.

So, in 1998 I organized together with a professor from the University of Alexandria, Dr. Fakharani, an excavation project in an area known as the Latin Cemetery, where an important monument - the so-called Alabaster Tomb - is located. This monument was not well known to European scholars, nor even to Greek archaeologists. When I first learned about it, I was fascinated, particularly because both professors Adriani and Fakharani had suggested that it might have formed part of the tomb of Alexander.

I was deeply struck by this possibility, and I was able to organize a project from Greece, in collaboration with the University of Alexandria, to conduct excavations in the area. Unfortunately, despite the fact that the Alabaster Tomb is a remarkable monument - entirely constructed of alabaster - my research over many years has led me to conclude that it is not *in situ*, contrary to what had long been assumed. I believe it was relocated to its current position, perhaps in the last centuries. In this sense, I consider it plausible that it originally belonged to the first tomb of Alexander - the tomb commissioned and possibly completed by Ptolemy I and Ptolemy II for the transfer of Alexander's body from Memphis to Alexandria. What is certain, in my view, is that the monument was not originally situated in the Latin Cemetery; it was moved there.

This project, however, did not progress as hoped. My collaboration with Dr. Fakharani was not particularly successful, so I decided to stop it and submitted an independent proposal to Cairo. My application was accepted, allowing me to conduct a geophysical survey in the old Jewish Cemetery of Alexandria. I am quite proud of this initiative, as I became the only archaeologist who managed to enter a Jewish cemetery for research purposes. Because of Jewish religious law, no one is permitted to enter or conduct any kind of intervention around the graves. With the agreement of the Jewish community of Alexandria, I carried out a geophysical survey, and the results were extremely significant. We identified two structures: one located in the middle of the cemetery, covering an area of approximately 1,000 square

meters, and another beginning inside, next to the cemetery wall, and extending outward into the street. To summarize the story, when I subsequently applied to the Jewish community for permission to excavate, my request was denied. I was very saddened and disappointed, as I remain convinced that something of great importance lies there. Precisely because Jewish religious tradition prohibits any disturbance within the cemetery, whatever is below the surface has remained untouched. No one has ever interfered with it. I hope that in the future I will be able to tell you more about it.”

- And what was its exact location?

“It was in Alexandria, in Midan Khartoum, the old Jewish Cemetery. It is the large cemetery opposite the major hospital and the University’s Faculty of Medical Sciences. The area is simply known as the Old Jewish Cemetery of Alexandria. Midan Khartoum is the specific location.

For four years I was unable to proceed. They did not grant permission. Therefore, I applied again to Cairo, requesting permission to excavate anywhere that would not present similar difficulties. I was exhausted. Cairo responded by saying: choose a site, and they would grant the permit, as they also wished to avoid any complications with the Jewish community. At that point, I thought of Shallalat. It was close to the Jewish cemetery, and both the cemetery and the Shallalat Gardens had once formed part of the royal quarter of Hellenistic Alexandria. It was also an open, undeveloped area where excavation seemed feasible. I applied for a small section of the garden, and Cairo replied: “Take it,” as this would also prevent potential conflict with other archaeological missions. In many ways, this was a blessing. I was fortunate: I found myself working in the center of the city, at the heart of the royal quarter, in an area without buildings or major obstacles. I began excavations there in 2007. Of course, the work was not as easy as I had anticipated. One major difficulty was the enormous volume of debris. When Muhammad Ali created the gardens, he transported vast quantities of soil and rubble from other parts of Alexandria in order to shape the landscape. This had accumulated over the entire area.

- Were there any significant delays due to environmental issues - like rising water tables, urban development, or modern infrastructure?

“Yes, the most challenging issue - the greatest problem I faced - was the water table, which appears at a depth of about 7.5 meters. My decision was not to stop, although, as you know, most projects are abandoned the moment water begins to rise. I refused to stop, and this perseverance is, I believe, the reason for my success. I worked with multiple pumps operating twenty-four hours a day, under extremely difficult conditions, to keep the trench dry enough for excavation. Eventually, I reached the Hellenistic layer at a depth of about 10 meters. For many years, I was essentially digging in water, with constant obstacles and complications.”

- In 2009, your excavations led to a remarkable discovery at this site. What exactly did you uncover, and in what ways did this finding shape the course of your professional journey?

“The year 2009 was particularly significant for our excavation. On the 4th of May 2009 - the final day of the season, and at a moment when I had already decided to end my work in Alexandria because there were 14 years of work without any significant result. So it was the

last day of the season and in the morning I announced to my team that I will finish and never come back. And in the final hour of that day, the soil collapsed along the side wall of the trench.

We were working in a small trench of about 15 square meters when the earth suddenly gave way, and a small white marble fragment emerged. The statue revealed itself. We did not discover it through deliberate excavation - it appeared on its own. He found us, and so we started. Of course, it was a shock - you can imagine. A miracle. We then began, slowly, to remove the soil and uncover the statue. It took us about six hours because the statue was standing vertically beneath eight meters of soil, so we had to extract it very carefully, as there was a real risk that the eight meters of debris could collapse on the workers. So we proceeded slowly, slowly to unearth the body. At first, we could see only a portion of the knee. As we continued, the rest of the leg emerged, then the second leg, and eventually the torso. At that moment, the statue was in exceptional condition - an athletic body without a single scratch. But after that, I became ambitious: I wanted the head. As you know, finding a statue with its head intact is extremely rare, since the neck is the most vulnerable point and easily breaks. We often find statue's heads without bodies and bodies without heads. Yet I was fortunate: this body still had its head. When we reached that level, I took the brush myself. I asked the workers to step back - it was my turn. I carefully brushed away the soil covering the face, and what emerged was unmistakable to me: Alexander. That was my immediate impression, and I continue to believe it. The statue represents Alexander in a unique position and posture. The face corresponds to portraits created during his lifetime or in the years immediately following his death, when people still remembered his actual features. The familiar image of Alexander with long hair and an Apollo-like face comes from Roman copies - later, idealized representations made after he had already been deified. Those portrayals show him perfected, imagined as a god or hero, rather than as he truly appeared. I believe that the portraits produced closer to Alexander's lifetime depict him with short hair and with several other features that I will not describe now. I studied the statue thoroughly and published my findings. There were some alternative opinions, but none of them were formally published - people spoke about it, yet no one wrote anything.

Three years ago, I organized an international conference. You were there... Yes, you visited for the first time at Shallalat. There were objections, of course, but about 90% of the participants agreed that the statue represents Alexander. Naturally, we cannot be absolutely certain without an inscription. Nevertheless, I believe the evidence strongly favors my interpretation."



- Where is the statue now?

“The statue is now exhibited in the Greco-Roman Museum. I consider it a masterpiece, and I am deeply grateful to have experienced such a discovery. Moments like this are once-in-a-lifetime events for an archaeologist.”

- Could you describe the moment when you first saw the statue - what went through your mind?

“At that time, I was in shock, truly. A video was taken without my knowledge, so my reaction was entirely spontaneous. I remember the moment vividly. I touched the marble - it felt almost soft - and I said, “I have been waiting for this moment all my life.” And that was true. I still feel the same today.

Even if my career had ended at that point, I would have felt fulfilled as an archaeologist. But paradoxically, this discovery made me feel even more responsible - so no, I could not stop afterwards. As you said, it felt like a sign: a discovery revealed on the last day, in the last hour, precisely when I had already decided to stop.

Regarding the condition of the statue when it was uncovered: it was in a remarkably good condition. The face in particular is almost perfect, aside from a small damage on the nose. That is why the nose now appears somewhat “French,” not Greek - just between us... It is simply due to the break in that area.”

What features or details helped identify it as Hellenistic? What makes Hellenistic art distinct from earlier or later Greek styles, and how is that reflected in this statue?

“It is precisely what you mentioned: the dating corresponds closely to Alexander’s lifetime, not several centuries later. I also believe that the statue reflects the typical artistic conventions of the school of Lysippos. Lysippos, the official sculptor of Alexander, established - through his students and his sons- an artistic tradition that continued in Alexandria. His pupils and descendants created a recognizable sculptural school in the city at that time. Naturally, the style of the work follows the principles set out by Lysippos. There are numerous features consistent with his canon. According to the canon of Lysippos, we can clearly identify all the characteristic traits. He worked in the same period as Alexander - he was his contemporary, as you noted. He accompanied Alexander on his campaigns and served as his official portrait sculptor.”

- Did he then live in Alexandria?

“No, he did not, but his sons and students continued his work. After his death, they came to Alexandria and founded a sculptural school. I believe that this statue was produced within that school. The marble is Parian, imported from the island of Paros, and all the stylistic

elements are purely Hellenistic. In my view, these features confirm that the statue is an authentic masterpiece. They also support the conclusion that it is definitively Hellenistic, not Roman. This is especially significant, given that most statues preserved today are Roman copies of Greek originals. In this case, we have an original Greek sculpture.”

- Do you think this statue was intended for public display, religious use, or a private collection?

“As I mentioned, the find spot lies within the Royal Quarter. I will later describe additional discoveries from the area, which include the foundations of a monumental public building. For this reason, I believe that the statue formed part of the decorative program of that public structure. There must originally have been more statues, but the building - and the entire area - was completely destroyed. We are fortunate that at least one of the statues that once adorned this public complex has survived. After several years of interruption - primarily due to the period of the Egyptian Revolution, during which excavations could not continue - we were able to resume work in 2015. We have also uncovered part of the foundation of a monumental Hellenistic public building. After ten years of continuous excavation in the same area, we have revealed the foundation platform of a structure measuring 45 by 35 meters. Although only the base survives, its construction is so substantial that the superstructure must have been very large and imposing. At present, we do not have sufficient evidence to identify the exact function or name of this building. Nevertheless, it was certainly one of the important monuments of the Royal Quarter described by Strabo. We should also remember that this area lies behind the Ptolemaic palaces that once stood along the seafront. I believe that, in antiquity, this zone formed the gardens of the royal palaces.

According to Strabo, this part of the Royal Quarter included the Museum, the Library, the Temple of Isis, and the Tomb of Alexander. The building we have uncovered must correspond to one of these famous structures. The Library, therefore, was not located where the modern Library of Alexandria stands today. Rather, Strabo explains that the Museum, the Library, and the Tomb of Alexander were within the Royal Quarter, whereas the palaces of the Ptolemies occupied the area along the coastline where the modern library is now situated. The distance between the two zones is considerable. Thus, this area must have contained the palaces of the Ptolemaic dynasty, while the remaining buildings stood behind them. The Royal Quarter extended from the sea southwards to Canopic Street, itself a principal thoroughfare.

Another important discovery from our excavations is a Roman road. We were fortunate to uncover a substantial section of the Roman road designated L2 on the map of Mahmoud Bey El-Falaki. L2 is the first street parallel to Canopic Street, and its identification is a significant find. This led me to the idea of following the line of L2 through excavation in order to locate its intersection with Alexandria’s main north - south artery, the Royal Road - R1 - which had never been found. According to ancient sources, Alexander planned the city on a grid with two broad avenues intersecting at right angles: the horizontal Canopic Street (east-west), still traceable today, and the vertical Royal Road, which ran from the palaces on the north coast toward Lake Mareotis. R1, however, had never been identified archaeologically. Therefore, I reasoned that by tracing the course of L2, we might reach its intersection with the Royal Road. Unfortunately, that intersection had been destroyed by the later Islamic fortification walls. Nonetheless, we continued the excavation, and eventually we uncovered a section of the Royal Road - R1 as

marked on El-Falaki's map. This discovery is extremely important. First, we have now identified the principal road of ancient Alexandria - the artery that began at the royal palaces, along which the kings would travel to reach the lake port. Second, we can finally confirm the intersection between the Royal Road (R1) and L1, the Canopic Street. Why is this significant? Because, according to the literary sources - especially the Greek author Achilles Tatius of the 3rd century AD - the Tomb of Alexander lay only a few stadia from this intersection. He writes that after walking a few stadia from the center of the city, they arrived at the tomb of Alexander. A *stadion* is a unit of length; in this context it means only a few hundred meters."

- So, in modern terms, around which streets would this intersection be located today?

"The intersection corresponds to the area occupied by the National Museum of Alexandria. You were asking whether this means that, if we were to demolish the museum, we would reach the tomb. No - not at all. The intersection was located there, not the tomb. Achilles Tatius states that they walked a short distance - a few hundred meters - beyond the intersection to reach Alexander's tomb. So the tomb must lie somewhere very close by, but not directly beneath the museum."

- Were there any inscriptions or artifacts found nearby the statue?

"In addition to the architectural remains, we have uncovered a large quantity of small finds: hundreds of pottery fragments, hundreds or even thousands of stamped amphora handles, coins, figurines, and a considerable amount of painted plaster. These were recovered throughout the course of the excavation."

- Were they discovered at the same time as the statue?

"No, the finds appeared during all phases of excavation. The trench where the statue was discovered was relatively small - only 3 by 5 meters. The current excavation area, however, covers 5,000 square meters, and from the area of the monumental building we have recovered numerous smaller artefacts, including mosaic fragments and many amphorae. Overall, the excavation has yielded a very rich assemblage.

I must also mention another very important discovery: a tunnel. It is a Hellenistic tunnel that cuts through the foundations of the building and extends both to the north and to the south.

We have followed this tunnel: our first hypothesis was that it served as a water conduit. However, there is no evidence of hydraulic construction - no plastering or water-resistant treatment - so its purpose remains uncertain. We have no clear indication whether it carried water or served another function. In any case, we have entered 32 meters into the tunnel so far. We proceed very slowly because continuous support is required; the tunnel lies 10 meters below the surface, and the structural stability must be secured as we advance. Step by step, with careful reinforcement, we continue.

Through this process we have been able to identify all the walls of the building, and we now possess its measurements and a ground plan, traced literally from within the substructure. This is extremely important. We have also recovered numerous noteworthy small finds inside

the tunnel. My hope - my dream - is that we may discover evidence inside the tunnel that reveals the identity of the building; perhaps an inscription or another identifying marker.”

- How large was the team involved in this excavation, and what roles did they play?

“When we began the excavation at Shallalat, our team consisted of about ten Greek archaeologists. Gradually, many of them left, as working conditions were challenging. It was difficult for them to remain in Alexandria for long periods, and they had other professional obligations in Greece. Life in Alexandria was not always easy. At present, I am the only Greek archaeologist permanently on site. I continue to collaborate with other Greek specialists - architects, topographers, and so on - who come to work with me for limited periods. They cannot stay for eight months a year, as I do. Nevertheless, I am content. I represent my country in Alexandria, and on many occasions I have had the honor of raising the Greek flag. I have had the honor of receiving two Presidents of the Hellenic Republic at the site. The Prime Minister visited to see the statue, as did the Greek Minister of Culture. I am pleased - one might say rewarded - by this recognition. But the work continues; it is still in progress, and I hope for further significant results.

At present, my team consists primarily of Egyptian archaeologists. I work with two Egyptian restorers, an Egyptian architect, and specialists in numismatics and ceramology. Our collaboration has been excellent, and I maintain very good relations with the local authorities.

- How one can join your team - what is required and how applicants are selected?

“If you mean bureaucratically, no, the process is not especially difficult. If you’re asking how I choose... I want people to appreciate how fortunate they are to participate in such a project. When I was a young archaeologist, I would have done anything to be part of an excavation like this. That is why I feel disappointed when I see young archaeologists asking me, first of all, how much they will be paid, and telling me they cannot stay more than fifteen or twenty days. For that reason, I do not accept such candidates. They must be motivated by passion. Yes - passion and devotion. That is the essence of archaeology. We are not lawyers, nor doctors, nor accountants. We do this out of love for culture and history. Archaeology is something different - it is not merely a profession or a career. It requires passion and dedication, yes. It demands a lifetime of dedication. And this is not easy to find. I see that many young archaeologists today do not share the same passion. They do not feel it in the same way. I made many sacrifices in my life. I am here, while my family is in Greece. Of course, now I am older, but when I first came I was young, and my children were still there. But I have been fortunate.”

- And now you feel it was deserved?

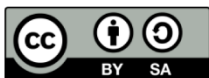
“Yes. Now I feel rewarded. But perhaps this recognition came precisely because I dedicated myself fully to this work. And I believe this is important for anyone - not only for archaeologists. One must follow one’s heart and follow one’s dreams.”

- Would you like to add anything you have not yet mentioned? Perhaps something about your institute?

“Yes, sure. The Hellenic Research Institute of Civilization was founded by me along with other scholars and members of the Greek community in Alexandria. We established it in Athens with a branch in Alexandria, because, in order to apply for an excavation permit, I needed to be affiliated with a recognized institution - an organization that I could represent. Through this institute we have continued our work. From time to time, we organize events; we maintain a library and assist students who wish to consult it; and we hold small conferences. We are not a large public institution, but we are pleased with what we have achieved. Most importantly, it has fulfilled its purpose, supporting archaeological projects over all these years. I serve as the director of the institute, and we continue our activities.

- Dr. Papakosta, thank you for this insightful interview. I hope you will discover many more remarkable findings in the Shallalat Gardens. I wish you all the best, because you have inspired all of us. Your work fills us with enthusiasm for Alexandria, for its history, and for Greek history.

“You are very welcome. Your words – and other people’s words – encourage me to continue. They also make me feel responsible toward those who believe in me, and that is very important.”



© 2024 by the authors; licensee Editura Universității Al. I. Cuza din Iași. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons by Attribution (CC-BY) license (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).