

ST. ATHANASIUS: HIS LIFE AND TIMES

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St. Athanasius: his life and times by R. Wheler Bush

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R. WHEELER BUSH

**ST. ATHANASIUS:
HIS LIFE AND TIMES**

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The Fathers for English Readers.

ST. ATHANASIUS:
HIS LIFE AND TIMES.

BY THE

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ST. ATHANASIUS.

CHAPTER I.

THE BIRTH-PLACE OF ATHANASIUS.

ATHANASIUS—the great defender of Christian truth against the heresy of Arius—was bound by the closest ties to Alexandria. In that city he was born, and there he lived and died. The principal events in his checkered career took place there. It was a city which could not fail to exercise a powerful influence on the mind of an intelligent and thoughtful man. Its noble halls and lecture-rooms, its pillared shrine of Serapis, its vast libraries of priceless value, its countless palaces, its broad and far-stretching avenues, its spacious harbours, its immense granaries and docks, its storied pharos, its grand amphitheatre and stadium, its innumerable baths, its motley population, its protecting sea on the north and its wide lake on the south—all these varied and striking objects could not fail to impress any reflective and serious mind with admiration, and to excite the imagination and charm the fancy of all who beheld them. Well did it merit the title of “Beautiful” which was freely bestowed upon it; nor is it wonderful that Ammianus described it as

the "crown of all cities," and that Strabo named it the "greatest mart of the world." In the same laudatory style of language Philo, and Theocritus, and Gregory of Nyssa indulged, when they wrote or spoke of Alexandria.

The attention of Alexander the Great, when he was proceeding along the shore on his journey from Memphis to the shrine of Jupiter Ammon, was, we are told, forcibly arrested by the admirable site for a great city which the sea-coast that lay opposite to the island of Pharos presented. He foresaw how the trade from the East and the West might be concentrated there, and that the situation was eminently fitted to render the city built on that spot the emporium of the commerce of the world. And accordingly, with the promptitude that characterised him, he immediately, with the skilful aid of his architect Dinocrates, proceeded to lay with consummate ability the plan of the city which was to be called after his own name.

The city in which Athanasius lived and had his being stretched for nearly five miles in length from east to west, whilst in depth it scarcely exceeded a single mile. Its figure, therefore, was oblong, and Strabo and Pliny have compared its shape to that of the riding-coat or chlamys worn by the Macedonian cavalry. As was the case in the famous city of Antioch, the principal streets of Alexandria crossed each other rectangularly, and were broad and spacious, some of them being more than 200 feet in width. Two grand avenues adorned with colonnades, along which Athanasius may have often walked, intersected each other, reaching to and from

the four main gates of the city. The longer one ran its course of nearly five miles from the great hippodrome on the east to the necropolis on the west ; while the shorter one extended from the Gate of the Sun in the south to the Gate of the Moon in the north. The Mediterranean Sea formed the northern boundary-line of the city, and the Lake Mareotis—whose shores were planted with olives and vines, and where the famous papyrus grew—constituted its southern limit. The island of Pharos sheltered the city from the violence of the Etesian or north winds that swept across the Mediterranean Sea, and the narrow, jutting promontory of Lochias kept off the eastern gales. On the south of the city the Lake Mareotis—the waters of which at one time washed its walls—was connected by many channels of communication with the valley of the Nile and the Red Sea.

We can readily perceive, therefore, that in a strategical point of view, the city was admirably placed. Its harbours—the only serviceable ones from Carthage on the west to Phœnicia on the east—were not only deep, ample in extent, and capable of containing large fleets, but also so formed that they were entered by narrow inlets which could easily be defended. The projecting tongue of land called Lochias, protected by a fort named Acro-Lochias at its extremity, formed one side of the royal port, in which the king's ships of war lay, and where the royal docks, and the palace standing in the midst of trees and gardens, were situated. Between the peninsula of Lochias and the Great Mole (called the "Heptastadium" or seven-furlong bridge)

which ran out from the northern line of the city across to the island of Pharos, nearly a mile in length, lay the greater harbour, lined with quays and dockyards; while on the western side of the Mole the harbour formed by this barrier and the island of Pharos, was named the "Haven of Fortunate Return"—*Portus Eunostus*. This harbour was connected with the Great Canal, which led in one direction to the Lake Mareotis, and in the other to the Canopic mouth of the Nile. Along the whole line of the shore from the Temple of Poseidon to the Mole were built the broad granite quays—resembling in some degree the Embankment on the Thames—along which Athanasius might have seen the largest vessels riding at anchor, and finding sufficient depth of water to prevent the necessity of landing in boats. Here, too, he must have noticed the vast warehouses and docks in which were stored the riches of the East and West; and his eye could also have rested at the western end on the famous granaries which rendered Alexandria so important to the Romans. The long, narrow island of Pharos must have often attracted his attention, its white, chalky surface of rock rising up like the white cliffs of our southern coast—a conspicuous object from all parts of the city, the principal houses being so built as to overlook the island and the blue waters of the Mediterranean, while at the eastern extremity of the island the famous lighthouse or pharos, constructed of white marble, at the cost of 800 talents, towered to the height of full 400 feet.

It was a remarkable feature of Alexandria that the city was marked off into three distinct regions.