

## The LIGHTHOUSE in ART: OBJECT or INSPIRATION?

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In the framework of the European project titled: *Holistic Strategy for the Preservation, Restoration and Integration in the Life of the modern societies of Old European Masonry Lighthouses – Pharos* which is moving along two parallel axis, one being that of the restoration of the lighthouse and the other being that of its integration in the life of modern societies we will examine the lighthouses as an object and symbol in art.

In architecture, in the figurative arts, in prose, poem and song, the lighthouse and the people associated with it are objects of inspiration. The lighthouse itself is a twofold symbol, a guiding light and a tower of strength that withstands the buffeting of wind and wave.

The mysterious but endlessly fascinating world of the sea, in calm and in tumult, treated realistically or symbolically, has always attracted the interest of both artists and the public.

The lighthouse of Alexandria, as we know it from contemporary descriptions, one of the seven architectural wonders of the world, with its particular aesthetic figurative interventions ornamenting its exterior aspect, served as an architectural model for buildings of like structural type or intended for like use. As a particular structural type, this lighthouse was a source of elements for treatment and creation to the artisans who worked on it. **Thus it was the object of their art.**

**Sostratus, the son of Dexiphanes, the Cnidian, dedicated  
this to the Saviour Gods,  
on behalf of those who sail the seas.**

Of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, only one had a practical use in addition to its architectural elegance: The Lighthouse of Alexandria.

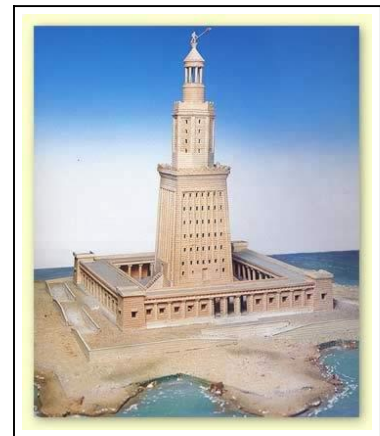
For **sailors**, it ensured a safe return to the Great Harbour.

For **architects**, it meant even more: it was the tallest building on Earth and something else besides, for this monument has been used as a model for many original structures along the shores of the Mediterranean, as far away as Spain.

For **scientists**, it was the mysterious mirror that fascinated them most. The mirror whose reflection could be seen more than 50 km off shore.

The Pharos Lighthouse stood on the eastern point of Pharos Island some distance from the centre of the city of Alexandria.

Shortly after the death of Alexander the Great, his commander Ptolemy Soter assumed power in Egypt. He had witnessed the founding of Alexandria, and established his capital there. Off the city's coast lies a small island: Pharos. According to legend, its name comes from words meaning Pharaoh's Island, but its origin is more likely Greek. The island was connected to the mainland by means of a dyke - the Heptastadion - which gave the city a



double harbour. And because of the dangerous sailing conditions and flat coastline in the region, the construction of a lighthouse was necessary.

The project was conceived and initiated by Ptolemy Soter around 290 BC, but was completed after his death, during the reign of his son Ptolemy Philadelphus. Sostratus, a contemporary of Euclid, was the architect, a Greek from the Asia Minor city of Cnidus, whose name also appears on the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and on Delos. The monument was dedicated to the Saviour Gods: Ptolemy Soter and his wife Berenice, perhaps in 279 BC, when Ptolemy Philadelphus held a festival to honour his parents.

For centuries, the Lighthouse of Alexandria (occasionally referred to as the Pharos Lighthouse) was used to mark the harbour, lit by a great fire at night and reflecting the rays of the sun by day. It was even shown on Roman coins, just as famous monuments are depicted on currency today.



Of the six vanished Wonders, the Lighthouse of Alexandria was one of the last to disappear. Therefore we have adequately accurate knowledge of its location and appearance. Ancient accounts such as those by Strabo and Pliny the Elder give us a brief description of the "tower" and its magnificent white marble cover. They tell us how the mysterious mirror could reflect the light tens of kilometres away. Legend says that the mirror was also used to detect and burn enemy ships before they could reach the shore.

In 1166, an Arab traveller, Abou-Haggag Al-Andaloussi visited the great Lighthouse. He documented a wealth of informative detail and gave an accurate description of the structure, which helped modern archaeologists reconstruct the monument. It was composed of three stages: the lowest square, 55.9 m high with a cylindrical core; the middle octagonal, with a height of 27.45 m; and the third, circular, 7.30 m high. The total height of the building including the foundation base was about 117 m, equivalent to a modern 40-storey building. According to the Moorish travellers, the building was 300 cubits high. Because the cubit measurement varied from place to place, this could mean that the Pharos stood anywhere from 450 to 600 feet in height, although the lower figure is more likely.

The approach to its entrance was by way of a long ramp with vaulted arcades. Within, an apparently large spiral ramp led to some fifty service rooms and also allowed pack animals to bring firewood up to the third tier to feed the fire that acted as the light source. One must wonder how the stonework, which would have supported the cupola, did not crack under the heat of a constant fire. At the top level, the mirror reflected sunlight during the day while fire was used during the night.

Several texts mention a statue that surmounted the lighthouse, and a poet named Poseidippos of Pella, who lived in Alexandria during the third century BC, tells us that this statue almost certainly depicted Zeus the Saviour, though he may have been accompanied by Poseidon, the lord of the waves. Others, however, have suggested that the two statues depicted the Dioscuri, who were the twin sons of Zeus and Leda and protectors of seafarers. A gem which has recently been studied suggests that in fact the beacon on the lighthouse may have been open, and the statue or statues may not have surmounted the building but stood on a lower level.

There is a surprising lack of descriptions by ancient writers, and in fact most come from Arab travellers. Many of these, however, combine precise details with wild flights of fantasy. While they provide some good information on the lower levels of the tower, they tell us little of value about the upper levels and almost nothing concerning the light source. By the medieval period the upper section had already been destroyed.

According to Rear Admiral Emmanouil Lykoudis, a Greek naval officer in charge of lighthouses, the Pharos of Alexandria acquired, in addition to its primary and essential purpose as a guide to mariners, quite a different sort of function, which was to prove decisive for its continued existence as an architectural structure. The Arabs who conquered Egypt in 641 were eager to revive some of their old customs, and the Lighthouse reminded them of their minarets – so much so that they would climb up it to pray. On “Lentil Thursday”, as al-Maqrizi calls it, the Muslim community would flock en masse to the Lighthouse, and whole families would ascend the tower for prayer and pleasure. And so the Arabs took care to preserve the Lighthouse, and used it as a model for the minarets they built in Egypt. The hitherto monotonous uniform cylinder was replaced by a polygonal structure with a cylindrical top section, standing on a square base.

A Moorish geographer from Spain, Idrisi, who visited the tower in 1115, was so impressed with the structure that he numbered all its steps and measured the height of its balconies, bazaars and tower. Fifty years later, another Moorish scholar undertook an examination of the tower; he tells us that the base tier rested on massive blocks of red granite, and that the blocks were joined not by mortar but by molten lead, so as to reinforce the structure against the heavy pounding of the sea.

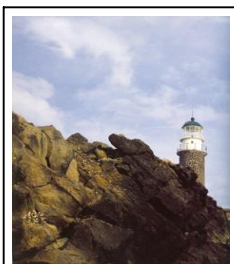
Beacon and statues notwithstanding, many scholars now believe that the Lighthouse was not purely Greek in style. The Ptolemies blended their own and Egyptian culture; and in building the lighthouse it is now believed that they probably borrowed from pharaonic tradition, using Egyptian stone, though it may have been clad with white marble. It must have been a very solid building, for it survived for nearly two millennia (until the fourteenth century AD), withstanding violent storms and even large tidal waves, such as one that swept across the eastern Mediterranean in 365 AD. In the end it was earthquakes that brought it down. Between 320 and 1303, Alexandria was shaken by twenty-two earthquakes severe enough to be mentioned by ancient writers. During this period, we have substantial records regarding the structure's life.

In 796, the lighthouse may have lost its upper level, which apparently went without repair for about a century.

In 950, and again in 956, parts of its surface cracked; to stabilise it, the lighthouse was reduced by some 22 meters in height. In 1272, the famous Sultan Salah el-Din (Saladin) undertook restoration work; but alas, his work was in vain, for on August 8th, 1303, a major earthquake shook the whole eastern Mediterranean. This was to be the end of the Seventh Wonder of the ancient world, as attested to by a maritime map preserved at Montpellier that dates the event and notes that the lighthouse was totally destroyed. In fact, some ruins of the structure remained on the site for decades afterwards. A traveller named Ibn Battuta visited Alexandria twice, in 1329 and again in 1346. On the first visit, he was still able to climb the ramp and reach the door of the tower, but on the second visit, the lighthouse was in such ruins that he could no longer get near it. These ruins remained for just over a century, until the Mamluk sultan Qait Bey finally had them cleared away in

order to construct the fort that still stands there today, apparently using some of the stone blocks from the Lighthouse in its walls.

The story of the Pharos Lighthouse, however, does not end there. In 1962, a young diver searching for fish at a depth of 24 feet spotted fragments of an immense statue, one piece alone measuring more than 20 feet in length. Egyptian naval divers, together with experts from Alexandria's Greco-Roman Museum, were summoned to the area and verified the young man's report; they concluded that the sculpture was a fragment of the colossal statue of Poseidon. Then, in the fall of 1994 a team of archaeological scuba divers under the direction of Jean-Yves Empereur located some very large blocks of stone that are believed to have been part of the lighthouse, though there is a profusion of objects from different periods lying above them. Some of this material came from structures in the Nile Delta and from Heliopolis and may have been used in the lighthouse, though there is a growing notion that the Pharos might have been a part of a greater complex with both civic and religious functions. We do, however, know that, after the Cypriot king, Pierre I de Lusignan, sacked Alexandria over two days in 1365, the Mamluk rulers of Egypt attempted to block the entry to the eastern harbour by dumping rubble from the crumbling ancient city. This might have provided a partial explanation for the wealth of remains lying in this patch of sea, but was not sufficient to account for the presence of certain massive blocks weighing between 50 and 75 tons. Furthermore, the disposition of the largest blocks, running in a north-easterly line from the foot of the fort, firmly suggested a monument of considerable size and height falling into the sea. This has convinced researchers that they have indeed found the remains of the Lighthouse. Some of the remains, including sphinxes, columns, capitals, colossi and fragments of inscribed obelisks, together with two massive segments of the Lighthouse, are now on exhibit in an open-air museum near Kom el-Dikka in Alexandria.

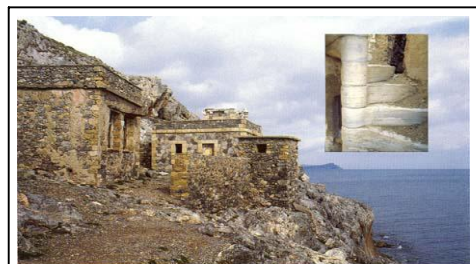


lighthouse of Psathoura,  
Alonnisos, Greece  
photographed  
by Yiannis Skoulas

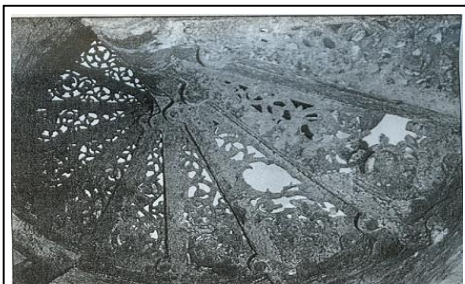
Although the Pharos of Alexandria has not itself survived, it has left its mark on the world in many ways and its very name still means a beacon in many parts of the world.

Buildings whose forms are simple geometric shapes, cylindrical for the most part, or square or octagonal, in which form follows function, without excess, self-sufficient in their configuration and free of

superfluous ornamentation, they are impressive in their sovereign grandeur and the dynamic perpendicularity that tapers to a luminous crown. Disciplined to the materials of the region, they blend with or dominate the landscape. Local artisans work skilfully and the local features they incorporate into the beacons enhance and are themselves enhanced, for these craftsmen know how to decorate them with the purest essentials: piers and lintels carved out of local stone; small windows protecting against strong sunlight and preserving the

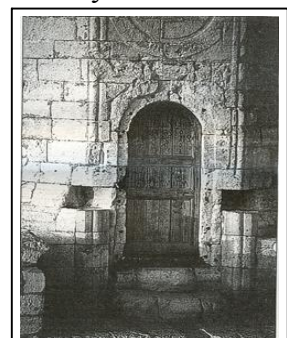


lighthouse of Monemvasia, Greece  
photographed by Yiannis Skoulas



Steel staircase of an abandoned lighthouse , Greece  
photographed by N. Benos-Palmer

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lighthouse door,  
Rethymno's old port, Greece  
photographed by  
N. Benos-Palmer

compact solidity of the bearing structure; spiral stairway, often of iron wrought like lace; the gallery beneath the lantern; and, finally, the lantern itself, where art bows to craft and finds out ways of making it yet more attractive.

The unforgiving world of the sea and the people that live with her, real histories or tales fashioned in the lonely years of the lighthouse-keepers, found expression in literary texts, novels, histories, poems, songs. The lighthouses gave rhythm to the songs with the pulse of



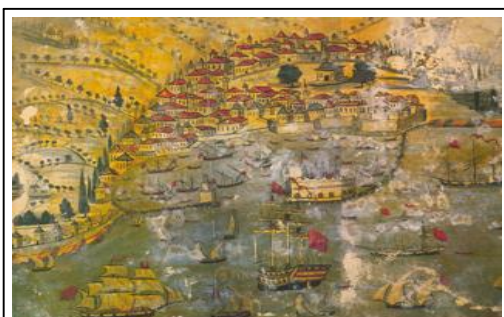
lighthouse of Panormos, Tinos, Greece  
photographed by Yiannis Skoulas

their living heart, gave colour to the pictures from the daybreaks, the sunsets and the moonlight that illuminated the succession of years, gave smell and savour from their saltiness. The luminosity, the sombreness and the colour, the serenity and the noisy raging, and always the salty tang of the sea, imbue the works about them that we watch, we read or we hear. **It is their inspiration, and it will continue to be so for a very long time.**

“There, at the very tip of the island, in the eye of the north wind, in the teeth of the tramontana, standing ever tall and bright with a light that pierces the far darkness, above the waves and above the fear, the beacon sweeps the horizon by night with flashes of brilliance in the blackness, powerful, unsleeping, guide and saviour, ceaselessly keeping watch for the seafarer, the great Lighthouse of Phassa”, is how an awestruck Andreas Embirikos described the lighthouse that marks Cape Caphareus, or Kavodoro, the entrance to the treacherous, storm-tossed strait that lies between Euboeia and Andros.



City of Chios, aspect from the sea,  
beginning of the 19th century  
(Choiseul-Gouffler, Gennadeios Bibliothiki)



The Grand Castle with the lighthouse in its end,  
wall painting in Kalokairinos' house,  
(Historian Museum, Herakleion, Crete, Greece)

In his poem “Brilliance”, referring to the same beacon, Embirikos expresses the fascination the monuments of the sea have for the landsman:

“...Its body directs us  
Its light is a source of strength  
Our heart beats with it  
The reflections that come and go  
Are ships  
And the Sphinx crushes us to her bosom  
In the gleaming silence of the beacon”

In that narrow passage the northerly gales that sweep down the Aegean increase in strength, adding their fearful force to the powerful currents. The Byzantines called this literal ships’ graveyard the “timber-eater”.

“ ... the sailors, far out on the briny depths,  
see high on the mountain the glimmer of the flame... “

This passage is perhaps the oldest reference to a fire that served the purpose of a lighthouse. In it Homer describes a beacon intended to reduce the hazards of travel by sea

in those far-distant days. The tongues of flame that pierced the darkness of the night were a symbol to the seafarer, speaking of a human presence and the safety of solid ground, signalling the sweet day of homecoming to the weary traveller, the smoke that Ulysses longed to see rising from his palace in Ithaca. But what sort of safety did it really offer ships and those who sailed in them?

It was there, we are told, at Cape Caphareus, that the mythological hero Nauplius, a veteran of the expedition of the Argonauts and of the Trojan War, sought vengeance against the Greeks for the loss of his son, Palamedes. There, according to Apollodorus, at the tip of the island of Euboeia he lit a fire on the reefs at night in order to deceive the ships bringing the Greek warriors home from the Trojan War; and there, indeed, many of the Greek ships were wrecked.

In a passage by Greek painter/writer Photis Kontoglou we find the following description: "... the sun set. The sea darkened, blue turning to lead. Slowly everything was lost to view, save the stars and the sky ... Suddenly from far across the sea there shone out a powerful light; it blinked on and off, like an eye opening and shutting ... Lighthouses are a consolation to the sailor, as a wayside church is to a wanderer in the mountains ...". And again (in the collection *Θάλασσες και καΐκια και καρaboκύρηδες* [Seas and ships and those who sail them]): "... While I was in France I used to like to talk to the sailors I met in the summers when I went down to Saint-Malo and Brest and Le Havre and thereabouts. In Le Havre I heard stories about a beacon that stood near the mouth of the Seine that the Bretons called Gorlebella or La Vieille (the 'Old Lady'). (Here Photis Kontoglou is wrong because this story is referred not to the mouth of the Seine but to Raz de Seine nearby Brest). It is one of the most dangerous lights, because the sea around it is always very turbulent, with strong currents (which the French call *raz*) and countercurrents, especially when the tide is running ..." and he continues with a true story that a sailor friend recounted to him: in December 1925 "... a great gale blew up, and what a storm that was! Unless you know the Raz de Sein – that is, the tidal bore of the Seine – you cannot imagine the lamentations that haunt those furiously boiling waters, where day and night one current battles another, rearing up in fearful waves that set the heart a-trembling ..... The storm raged for a month and a half. Once the gale had blown itself out, a sea fog settled over the waters, and the light could not be seen ... As for the Old Lady of Gorlebella, she had taken a terrible beating. One of the great iron posts on the side where the crews disembark had buckled under the pounding of the seas. The whole area around the door was in ruins, and the steps that had been carved out of the rock were reduced to rubble. The windows, the tiles on the first floor, the roofs, everything was smashed. The top storey was laid waste by great seas that leaped up to that height and poured inside ..."

For Rear Admiral Emmanouil Lykoudis, the legally trained naval officer in charge of the Lighthouse Service we have already quoted, a position as lighthouse keeper is an excellent opening for a retired seafarer. In his own words, "there the sailor revisits his storm-tossed past, the bittersweet memories passing through his mind in endless series. And when the sun, fiery red with its last light, slips quietly beneath the waves ... and when the first glimmering lights of evening appear in the still bright firmament, he climbs up the tower to the beacon and safeguards its ability to shine out and by its light to save, a guide and consolation for those at sea". This idyllic description of a lighthouse, any lighthouse, expresses a fascination with these maritime monuments felt first and foremost by the author himself, as a land-bound sailor.

Such fleeting glimpses of these coastal structures are found in many of the literary journeys

penned by modern Greek writers, story-tellers and poets.

In a characteristically descriptive passage from Alexandros Papadiamandis' short story "To Christ in the Castle", we read that "...as the priest came out of the sanctuary singing the "O come, ye faithful, for Christ is born", shouts were heard outside the church.... The shouters were a goatherd and a woodcutter, who happened to be sitting by the bonfire to the east of the little chapel; and their shouts were in answer to some cries that had come to them out of the darkness, from the direction of the sea .... they reverberated in the silence of the night, magnified by the echoes, cries of trouble and distress, like those of men in danger or sailors in confusion. The men hastened to throw all the wood they had onto the fire, swelling the blaze to greater volume, for they had no other means of assistance to hand....

The vessel that had lost its way was Captain Konstantis Limniaraios' schooner ... which two days earlier had been snugly nestled in at Dafni, the southernmost harbour on the Athonite peninsula; but a northerly gale had sprung up behind it, the force of the wind snapping its anchor chains, and in a trice had blown it ten miles out to sea ... and the disabled schooner, after vain attempts to bring it under control, was carried helplessly by the tempest towards the islands, where on that Christmas Eve the hapless mariners suddenly saw, like a beacon shining out to guide them, the light of the bonfires that had been lit by the rough herdsmen in front of the little church of Christ ..."

Andreas Karkavitsas, in a short story entitled "Goblins", tells a grim tale: "...the skies, heavily overcast and black as pitch, descended into the rigging and enveloped everything in a thick blanket of fog. The deck was as slippery as soap ....

– You, there!

I didn't like what I was seeing. I told them to batten down the hatches and sent Kritsepis to take over the helm. Dead ahead glowed the fiery beacon of Stromboli.

– Welcome to Davy Jones' locker! came a shrill voice from behind me .....

.....  
... But the Santa Mavra, as if nothing was the matter, still danced over the waves, heading straight for the volcano... A sudden lurch and the Santa Mavra was on the shoals. I leaped out onto a rock and what did I see? The volcano, like a wounded giant, was shedding rivers of hot blood and answering with thunderous roars the sighs of our little vessel. And suddenly terrible lamentations, foam-red and haunting, rose from the rocks, engulfing the ship and taking the Santa Mavra to the bottom with all its goblin crew, and their companion Lambros Kargas with them."

Poet Nikos Kavvadias often uses images of lighthouses, as in "Offshore Squall" (from the collection Pousi [Sea Fog]:

".....  
The sailors have wearied of the helm,  
One of your eyes has rolled into sleep,  
The right keeps watch and remembers  
The beacon that is beaten but not bowed.  
....."

and, from "Coaliers" (in Marabou),

".....  
Proudly they traverse the waters of the Atlantic,

Following the lighthouses and their sirens,  
Skipping lightly across the waves –  
The crews of the freighters call them ballerinas.  
.....”

and again, in “To the Poet Caesar Emmanuel”

“.....  
When the thick fog would shroud us,  
we wanted to hear the lighthouses wail  
and we would hear the ships, invisible,  
sounding their horns as they sailed by.  
.....”

Dionysis Tsaknis, too, sings of lighthouse keepers, in his collection “Tell, heart of mine, your own story”, with lyrics by Marianna Kriezi, Manos Eleftheriou, Tasos Livaditis and the artist, set to music by Mikis Theodorakis.

The unmistakable silhouettes of lighthouses also feature in murals, oil paintings and copper-plate engravings from Rhodes, Crete, Chios and Cephalonia, on maps and in seascapes depicting historic events that took place in those seas and that the folk artist, known or unknown, wanted to commemorate.

Great is the sea that enfolds Greece’s shores in its embrace, many and hazardous are its precipitous coasts, and ships must sail in safety through the darkness by night and the tempest by day. Great is the sea that encircles the whole earth and the need for all men to voyage safely, and since words were first committed to writing we have been learning how to use fire to warn of danger. And through all those years men have sung and painted their sorrows, have recalled and narrated their adventures, their yearnings and their joys, that, kneaded with the water and the salt of the sea, take on something of her sweetness, her fascination and her wildness. They build strong towers for her, monumental structures that will stand firm against wind and wave, and they decorate them without effusiveness, without superfluous ornamentation, seeking to render them worthy of her. That is how lighthouses are made, at once the inspiration and the object of an art that seemingly will live as long as their own life endures.

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