

A Description of Egypt at the beginning of the 18th century by Grigorovich-Barsky

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A STRONG INTEREST in ancient Egyptian monuments has existed for more than four thousand years. Those who lived in the Byzantine Empire, medieval Europe and Russia learned about ancient Egypt from the biblical texts, traveler's notes and rare landscape sketches or drawings of the ruins. More detailed descriptions might be found in the classical literature available until the end of Renaissance, but only for a limited circle of scholars and monks; works of the antique historians remained little-known. Therefore, knowledge of the ancient land was far too sparse.

The 16th-18th centuries are marked with the development of book printing, increasing print runs and the growing interest in ancient manuscripts and antiquities in general. However, until the Egyptian culture became highly popular among the general public, in order to reveal what information on Egypt and its history was available at the end of the 18th century, it is necessary to study traveler's records and essays. At first sight it would seem that this material has already been well-studied. Yet there are still many unmentioned documents remaining in English, French and German periodicals on Egyptology.

The key aim of the present paper is to introduce the travel accounts of the Russian pilgrim Vasil Grigorovich-Barsky² as a historical document, describing Egypt in the second decade of the 18th century. His notes also contain a retelling of the legends attested to the visited places, as well as descriptions of the ancient monuments preserved in different sites of the country (Lower Egypt). Translation of the full text into any European language is not within the scope of the current objectives of this article. I would like, however, to emphasize its relevance.

The language of the historical records is much different from the modern Russian, having grammar forms and vocabulary which became old-fashioned even in the 19th century, and requires the reader to have knowledge of Old Slavic orthography. Similar difficulties of comprehension is also peculiar to the language of the German traveler Arnold von Harff

¹ I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Vittmann (Würzburg) for providing valuable critical comments.

² Vasil Grigorovich-Barsky [Васи́лий Григо́рович-Ба́рский] (1701–1747) was born in Kiev into a merchant family. His ancestors lived in the town of Bar (former Rov, Poland) which joined the Russian empire at the end of the 18th century. The name of that town denoting the family origin composed the second part of his surname, i.e. Barsky is “he is from Bar”. V. Grigorovich-Barsky spent more than twenty years on journeys to Italy and the Middle East as a pilgrim, including Egypt in 1727 and 1730. His travelling notes contain descriptions and rare sketches of the sites he visited. At the end of the 19th century N. Barsukov edited V. Grigorovich-Barsky's travelling records in four volumes. Accounts of his journey to Egypt are included in the first two volumes. Even in the 19th century the original papers and drawings were kept in different archives. Where they are housed today are unknown to me.

(1471-1505), while the French employed by Paul Lucas (1664-1737) is easily understood today. As a result, sad to say, the modern English translation fails to convey the originality of vocabulary, grammar and style typical for the 18th century Russian language.

Travelers

In the early 18th century Paul Lucas published a series of notes on his journeys to Egypt in 1704 and 1714. It should be noted that the voyages were a goal-seeking affair including detailed documentation of the sights and various ruins; having a deep knowledge of the ancient writers the author cited their works describing the visited places. These books and some few others gave valuable information about the country, but having a small circulation and high price they were available only for a limited number of well-educated people. Geographically they were mainly inhabitants of European countries and the British Isles.³

In contrast to Lucas's records, I think it is reasonable to focus on the little-known notes of Grigorovich-Barsky. These reports give the impression of a dispassionate attitude towards the Egyptian sites rich in ancient monuments. It is an absolutely unique presentation of the country in which he spent several months. The experiences of a Christian traveler, for whom Cosmas (Кузьма), the Christian patriarch of Alexandria, was of greater importance, and likewise the various relics and sacred places he beheld there. The reader may realize that the pilgrim saw remains of the pre-Christian buildings around, but did not perceive their originality, as they were not his terminus and he was unimpressed by their view.

He was intent on portraying Egypt as a city (meaning Cairo) and a country (indeed, he did not go far inland), explaining the name variations, recounting the Christian, Catholic and other orthodoxies existing in Egypt, and describing the monasteries and their surroundings.

The traveler spoke of a certain "pharaoh's constructions" and pyramids; but only once did he mention those huge structures; he immediately enthralled readers by depiction of a crocodile, "a snake" not living in his native land.

Fragments from the notes of Grigorovich-Barsky

The description of Cairo dates to 1727, Alexandria to 1730:

About Egypt as a city and a land [pl. 1]:

Egypt is a very old city, not for its buildings, but for its age, it had existed even before the birth of Jesus Christ and before the Old Testament was given by Moses... The whole Egyptian land and the city are called Egypt: as for the city Egypt it has two names: old Egypt and new Egypt... old... is in decay, the walls and buildings are ruined... demolished and deserted, but a few people are still living...the new city is situated not far from the old, princes and great nobles and rich merchants and many other people live there... Egypt is a Greek word, in Roman it is called Gran Cairo [so in original], in Turkish – Misir [Мисиръ] and in Arabic – Mauar [Мауаръ].⁴ Egypt is located in the plain, lovely and nice place at the famous river Nile... People of different origins, religion and languages live in Egypt... There live also certain Christians called Copts... they have their own patriarch... they do not honor the Greek patriarch and all his

³ Travelers' publications did not reach Russia and Eastern Europe; not until the end of the 18th century, when French literature became popular among the Russian educated public, might P. Lucas's records be read in Russia. Journey records of the native traveler remained unknown.

⁴ A misprint is possible, but cf. the form "Maṣr" (dialect) (G. Vittmann, pers. comm.).

associates as Orthodox Christians...

Egypt is under the rule of the Ottoman sultan, but does not obey him completely and gives tribute only, the pasha who governs Egypt takes instructions from Constantinople.⁵

The river Nile is rich in various kinds of fish. It begins in a lake or pit called Zaira... and when this pit seethes up and brings forth water, then the Nile overflows greatly. A fortress or castle stands on the elevation and is called Cale... Pasha and other headmen live there... copper, silver and gold coins or penyas [пенязи] are minted there, and I saw it with my own eyes. Until now there stand palaces of Pharaoh and Joseph, the good. Pharaoh's palace is a magnificent and high construction made of huge stones. Not far from Egypt, on the opposite bank of the Nile there are man-made mounts, called pyramids by the Greeks, they have four sides... the three highest of them are called Pharaoh's, as the Pharaoh, an Egyptian king in the time of yore, found... and to have an abode there when under the divine connivance the river could flood wildly and inundate all Egyptian fields. Be it also known at last that snakes called crocodiles live in the Nile river, which look like lizards, four-legged, but bigger in size, with skin of beluga or sturgeon, who may live both in water and on land... Be it also known at last that the church texts in the Greek Church in Egypt are read out in two languages: Greek and Arabic...⁶

About Alexandria and its surroundings [pl. 2]:

There is a hill near the chapel of Saint Savva, not naturally occurring, but piled-up after many-year and regular (sand) sweeping from the city, up to the present day the Arabs bury and scatter ashes here and find gold, silver or pearl⁷ or precious stones and dig out ancient seals or some other things... The branch of the Nile starts from Rakhita,⁸ from the village called Phiva⁹ and flows farther through the fields, passes by Alexandria, from the southern land and runs into the sea; it does not flow by its very nature, but people say that the tzar Alexander of Macedon dug a ditch and overlaid the inner side by stone, and provided the water, since there is not any water except for the being supplied. There are many intact stone columns (i.e. obelisks) standing or lying around the city... also inside¹⁰ the city on the north near the chapel of Saint Savva at the seashore there are two great undamaged stone columns called Cleopatra's <pillars>. Back in the day Cleopatra was a famous ancient queen, who erected two magnificent columns as enduring memory of herself... some marks or symbols are deep engraved... many people have seen them, but fail to interpret¹¹.

⁵ The original has "Цариград", i.e. the City of Caesar.

⁶ See N. Barsukov (ed.), *Stranstvovaniya Vasil'ya Grigorovicha-Barskago po svyatym mestam Vostoka s 1723 po 1747 g.* I, St. Pétersbourg, 1885-1886, p. 412-424.

⁷ Both a word "margariti" used by the author or any other modern Russian words with the same root do not denote precious stones or jewels. It is probably a Cyrillic version of the Greek word: μαργαρίτης.

⁸ Modern Rashid (Rosetta).

⁹ Modern Fuwwah.

¹⁰ F. Fabri (ca. 1439-1502) confronted by four-sided columns with inscribed hieroglyphs standing outside the city with a column of Pompey (see H.F.M. PRESCOTT, *Once to Sinai. The further pilgrimage of Friar Felix Fabri*, New York, 1958, p. 209-210); so did A. von Harff: "item vur der stat staynt ouch tzwaerode marmelsteynen suylle, der was eyn zo deser tziht neder geuallen" (E. VON GTOTTE, *Die Pilgerfahrt des Ritters Arnold von Harff von Cöln durch Italien, Syrien, Aegypten, arabien, Aethiopien, Nubien, Palästina, die Türkel, Frankreich und Spanien, wie er sie in den Jahren 1496 bis 1499*, Cöln, 1860, p. 78.30).

¹¹ See N. Barsukov (ed.), *Stranstvovaniya Vasil'ya Grigorovicha-Barskago po svyatym mestam Vostoka s 1723 po 1747 g.* II, St. Pétersbourg, 1885-1886, p. 161-162.

About Cleopatra's needles

The author gave quite a true plan of Alexandria with the imposing “needle” (i.e. obelisk) [pl. 3]. It should be noted that the hieroglyphic signs are copied more precisely than those given in Lucas's reproduction,¹² moreover, Grigorovich-Barsky did not make any other drawing: both authors copied the same side.¹³ Today this “needle” is placed in Central Park in New York City. It was originally erected by Thutmose III in Heliopolis, thereafter some few inscriptions were added by Ramses II; at the beginning of the 1st century it was removed to Alexandria together with another monument which fell on the ground and was lying beside (now in London).

There is a remarkable use of the term “Cleopatra's needle” (see captions below the drawings) in Grigorovich-Barsky's notes. Earlier references to the monument under that name are made by Lucas (the orthography of the original is retained):

nous arrivâmes aux deux éguilles de Cleopatre, qui sont constament deux obelisques des anciens Egyptiens,¹⁴

J'examinai avec le même soin L'Aiguille de Cléopâtre.¹⁵

In the old days the Arabic writers called those pillars “pharaoh's needles,”¹⁶ but Lucas and Grigorovich-Barsky might have heard the impression including Cleopatra's name independently of one another, most likely from the citizens of Alexandria.¹⁷

Demotic inscriptions show (similar examples are missed in hieroglyphic texts) that Cleopatra VII (and earlier Cleopatra V) had a title *t3 pr- ʒ.t* with the feminine article *t3* and ending *-t* added to the masculine noun *pr- ʒ* “pharaoh.”¹⁸ Presumably, it might be an oral tradition to call Cleopatra “pharaoh” lasting for centuries. Accordingly, the original term “pharaoh's needle” used in Alexandria was applied namely to Cleopatra VII, and the two travelers heard that particular interpretation from the locals, i.e. it was not a made-up term occasionally written down by Lucas and became popular in Europe.

As Alexandria had remained a large Mediterranean seaport in the ancient world, as well as the medieval and modern periods, “needles” were one of the city's popular attractions. Travelers described and depicted¹⁹ the obelisks over eighteen centuries; never venturing farther inland, explorers and pilgrims gazed at the columns and learned more about Egyptian culture. However, the mass export of the antiquities to Europe and America broke with that tradition. Before concluding my paper, I would like to cite Vladimir Golenischeff, who visited

¹² See P. LUCAS, *Voyage du sieur Paul Lucas fait en M.DCCXIV, &c. par ordre de Louis XIV dans La Turquie, L'Asie, Sourie, Palestine, Haute & Basse Egypte, &c II*, Rouen, 1724, p. 24.

¹³ Cf. J.-Fr. CHAMPOLLION, *Monuments de l'Égypte et de la Nubie IV*, Paris, 1889, pl. CCCCXLIV, n. 2.

¹⁴ See P. LUCAS, *Voyage du sieur Paul Lucas au Levant I*, Paris, 1704, p. 41.

¹⁵ See P. LUCAS, *Voyage du sieur Paul Lucas fait en M.DCCXIV, &c. par ordre de Louis XIV dans La Turquie, L'Asie, Sourie, Palestine, Haute & Basse Egypte, &c II*, Rouen, 1724, p. 23.

¹⁶ See E.A.W. BUDGE, *Cleopatra's Needles and Other Egyptian Obelisks*, London, 1926, p. 18-19; E. IVERSEN, *Obelisks in Exile 2, The Obelisks of Istanbul and England*, Copenhagen, 1972, p. 95.

¹⁷ Cleopatra's name was not added until the 16th century, Arnold von Harff did not associate the two pillars outside the town, one of which had fallen down, with the Egyptian queen.

¹⁸ Cf. M. PANOV, *Documents on the History of the Priestly Families from Memphis and Letopolis in the Late Period*, 2nd ed., Novosibirsk, 2017, pp. 21, 191, 208, 210, 214, 216, 223, 231.

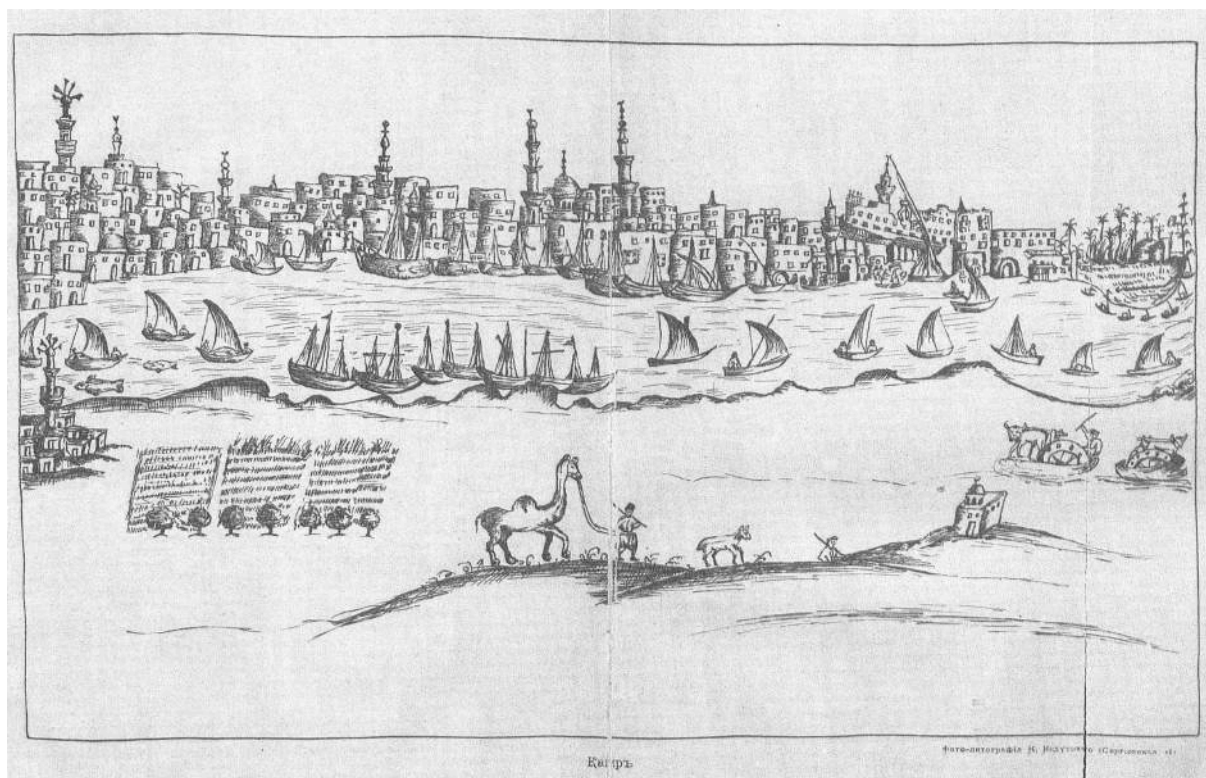
¹⁹ See view of Alexandria of 1552 (H.F.M. PRESCOTT, *Once to Sinai. The further pilgrimage of Friar Felix Fabri*, New York, 1958, p. 198).

Alexandria shortly after the “needle” in question left Egypt; in 1889 he described the later changes that took place in the country:

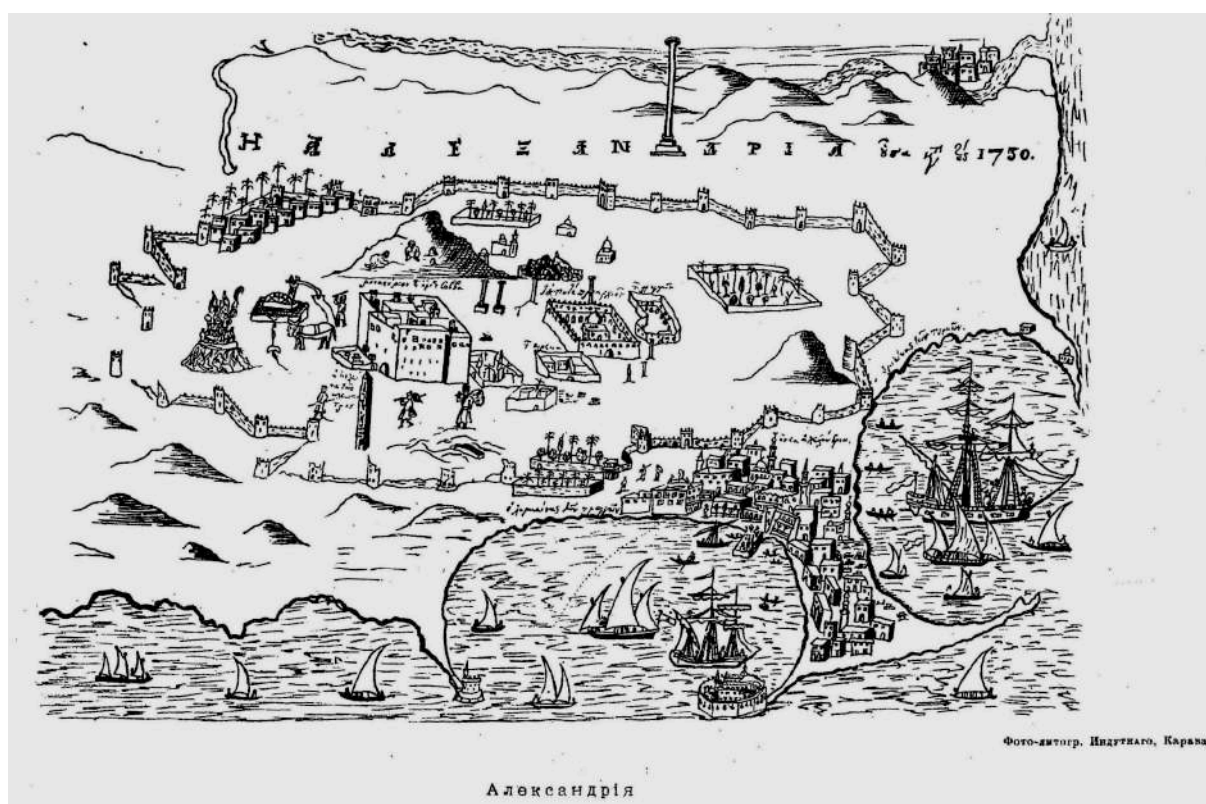
What happened to the chapel, turned into a stone quarry, makes one think glumly regarding other monuments of the ancient Alexandria, inexcusably neglected both by local and European archaeologists. The beauty of Alexandria — the obelisk towering grandly on the seashore has been imported to America; place... where every excavation work might provide a fair number of interesting findings... now is being developed for a new city block; the ancient Christian chapel is in decay...²⁰

On the one hand, it is strange to read such words written by a person who also exported, albeit carefully, ancient objects and amassed a collection outside Egypt; on the other hand, the account of the altered cityscape was striking, as described by the contemporary witness.

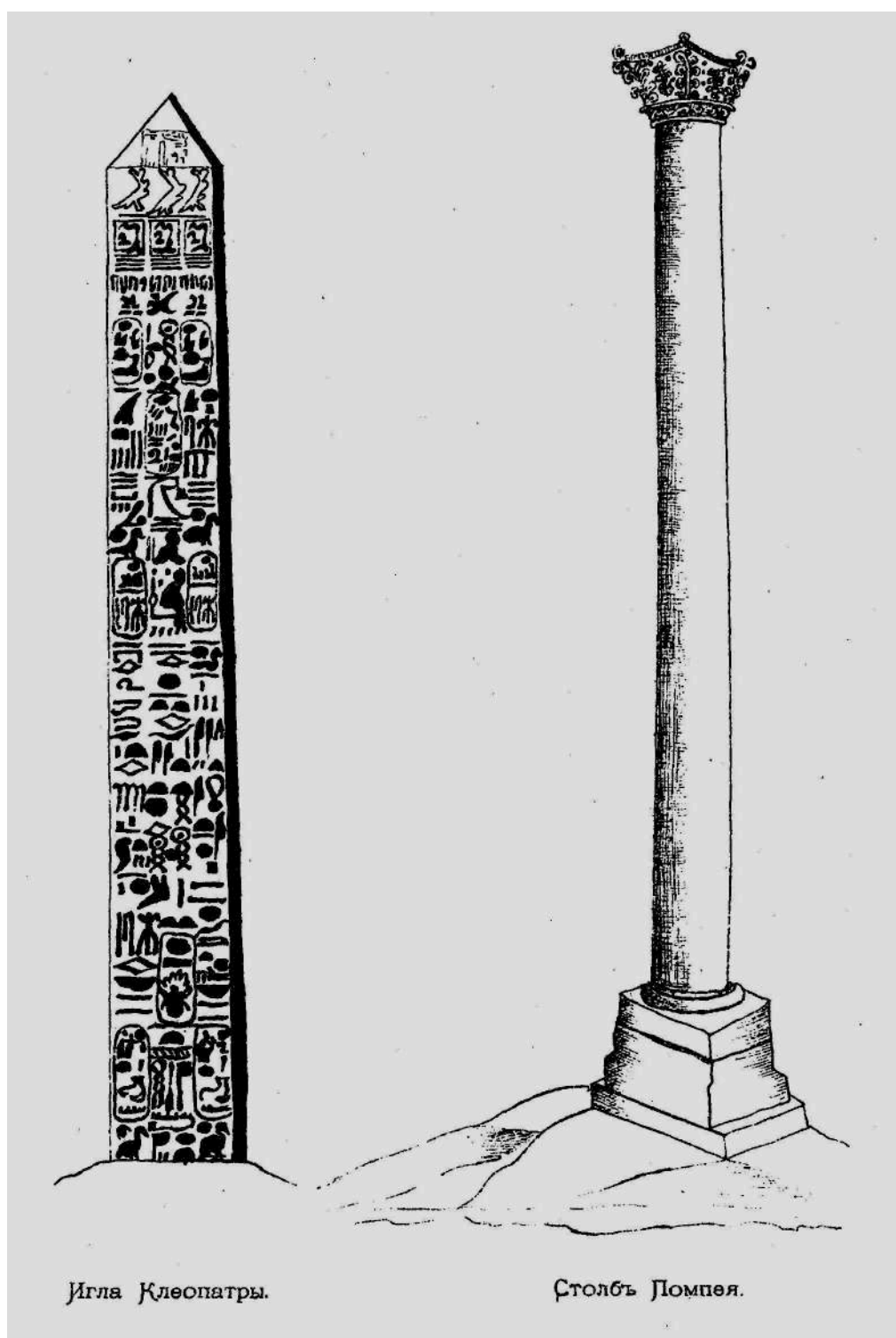
²⁰ See V. GOLENISCHEFF, “Archeologicheskie rezultaty puteshestviya po Egiptu zimoy 1888-1889 g.”, *Zapiski Vostochnago Otdeleniya Imperatorskago Russkago Arkheologicheskago Obshchestva* V/1, 1890, p. 4.



Pl. 1. Cairo, drawing of Grigorovich-Barsky (I, 412f).



Pl. 2. Alexandria, drawing of Grigorovich-Barsky (II, 160f).



Pl. 3. Obelisks in Alexandria, drawing of Grigorovich-Barsky (II, 162f).