

Royal library of alexandria history essay



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The Alexandria Library was the largest and most complete library of antiquity and certainly the greatest before the invention of printing. Only fragments and minor comments in ancient authorities are extant in current times.

However, the history of the Alexandria Library [Library] remains of central importance in the intellectual history of the classical world as it is thought to contain the best-kept collection of classical literature.[1]

With the help of historians and theorists as well as texts and historiographies, it is possible to retrace the founding, patronage, and operations of the Library; relate estimates about number of scrolls housed in the Library; and examine legends of its ultimate demise. The purpose of this essay is to review and synthesize the current knowledge of this most famous Library and reconsider its place in classical intellectual history.

Alexandria, Egypt: Crossroads of Culture

Scholars at the Center of Hellenic Studies at King's College, London, view Alexandria of Ptolemaic Egypt as a city that was multi-cultural from its beginnings and a focal point for international trade and cultural development.[2] Situated between Africa and Europe, the meeting place of all races and creeds, Alexandria was the center of learning in the ancient world. It was a city of Greeks, Macedonians, Egyptians and Jews with the latter group making up about a third of the population. During the height of its power, Alexandria was said to have "most abundant and helpful resources and be a nursing mother to men of every nation." [3]

The Creation and Patronage of the Royal Library of the Ptolemies

After the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BCE, his empire was divided into three parts with the Ptolemies dominating Egypt. Under the rule of the Ptolemies, Alexandria housed a Greco-Macedonian court ruling an Egyptian kingdom. Green explains that the Ptolemaic dynasty ran Egypt as a private estate and at a profit which supported scholarship, mercenaries, processions, etc. The Museum and its library played a fundamental role in justifying the rule of the Macedonian-Greek dynasty over Egypt.[4]The Library and its community of scholars flourished during the Hellenistic era of the Ptolemies. It has been thought to survive through the Roman Empire, but this finding is a source of debate among scholars.

Historian John Marlowe describes how the Library at Alexandria emerged during the period roughly contemporary with Plato's Academy, Aristotle's Lyceum, Zeno's Stoa and the school of Epicurus. Aristotle's school in Athens, the Lyceum, had a shrine of the Muses and a library and promoted a universal concept of studies.[5]The Ptolemies envisioned Alexandria as a meeting place where scholars of the earth should extend the scientific horizons of man, suggestive of the Lyceum itself. Based on research from historian Edward Parsons, the foundation of the Museum-Library is attributed to Ptolemy Soter and/or his son Ptolemy II. The foundation and continuing support of the Museum and Library owed much to the pioneering work that Aristotle, and, to a lesser extent, Plato's Academy, had already undertaken. [6]

The Alexandria Museum (“ Temple of the Muses”) was a gathering of scholars from all over the world. A Museum (Mouseion) was a shrine or center dedicated to the Muses and often associated with literary studies. The Muses been connected with thinkers and philosophers at least as early as the time of Pythagoras. According to Green, by the time of Aristotle a Museum embodied the features of an intellectual community including cult center, residence buildings, common meals, library holdings and research, and surrounding cloisters and garden. Timon of Philus, lampoonist, wrote of Ptolemy’s Alexandrian think tank: “ In the polyglot land of Egypt many now find pasturage as endowed scribblers, endlessly quarreling in the Muses’ bird cage.”

For the first three generations of Ptolemies, at least, relations with the Alexandrians were good. This, then, was the atmosphere in which Ptolemaic scholars, poets, and scientists operated.[7]

History of the Royal Library Operations

Information about how the library was run is subject to speculation.

According to Parsons, scholars do not have a great deal of information about where and how the papyrus scrolls were stored; the dimensions of the collections; what role the other library, the Serapeum library, had in Alexandrian cultural life. Even the information about the demise of the library refers to a space of six centuries, from the age of Caesar to the age of the prophet Muhammad.[8]

It is likely the first Ptolemies acquired and stored papyrus scrolls in the Museum. In order to manage this huge and increasing collection of texts,

scholars devised a way to classify and order them according to various criteria, the most important evidence for which is represented by the work of Callimachus of Cyrene, who was a leading figure not only in the history of the library of Alexandria, but also in the tradition of Greek scholarship.

Historian Roger Bagnall has described that despite volumes of scholarship, both the historical evidence and archaeological remnant of the Library and Museum at Alexandria are rather scant:

“ The disparity between, on the one hand, the grandeur and importance of this library, both in its reality in antiquity and in its image both ancient and modern, and, on the other, our nearly total ignorance about it, has been unbearable. No one, least of all modern scholars, has been able to accept our lack of knowledge about a phenomenon that embodies so many human aspirations. In consequence, a whole literature of wishful thinking has grown up, in which scholars – even, I fear, the most rigorous – have cast aside the time-tested methods that normally constrain credulity, in order to be able to avoid confessing defeat.”[9]

The position of Demetrius (ca. 384-348) of Phaleron is more secure, as he was a prominent figure in the foundation of the Museum and Library.

Aristeas, writing 100 years after the library's inception, records that Ptolemy I handed assigned Demetrius the job of gathering books and scrolls, as well

as letting him supervise a massive effort to translate other cultures' works into Greek.[10]Demetrius recommended that Ptolemy gather materials on ruling in the style of Plato's philosopher-kings. An estimated 30-50 scholars were probably permanently housed at the Museum, funded by the royal family, and later by public money.[11]

Demetrius had been a pupil of Aristotle and Theophrastos at Aristotle's Lyceum. The practice of getting the best scholars or poets to educate the crown prince was something that Ptolemy had had occasion to observe in Macedonia, where the young Alexander had been taught by Aristotle himself. It became a common practice for the Librarian also to serve as royal tutor: Apollonius and Aristarchus certainly did so.

Parsons describes Demetrius as an orator and philosopher who dyed his hair blond and rouged his cheeks and "...anointed his person with Eastern salves." He ruled Athens for ten years "...with moderation and without disaster is an achievement." His critical judgments of ancient texts were much admired.[12]Green describes the responsibility that Demetrius had to the Library which included a strong sense that the literary heritage of archaic and classical Greece was in danger of being lost through indifference and neglect.[13]Looking at the subsequent history of the transmission of texts, the fear seems well justified.

According to Green, the scholars who staffed the Library saw their mission as the rescue of past Greek literature, and set themselves to obtain copies of every known work. Royal purchasers combed the book marts of the Aegean and Asia Minor, the best of which were located in Athens and Rhodes. It was

inevitable that numerous forgeries began to circulate. With such an influx of material, the Librarian's first major task was to organize accessions and cataloging.[14]In about 25 BCE Vitruvius writes about how Aristophanes of Byzantium earned the job of librarian after memorizing most of the Library's contents[15].

Parsons describes how the Ptolemies and their agents ransacked the Hellenic, Mediterranean and Asian cities for literary manuscripts and records. At the port of Alexandria, vessels were searched and books that were found were confiscated with copies made for their rightful owners.[16]These rolls, known as " the salvaged material," were not (says Galen) delivered directly to the Library, but consigned in the first instance to warehouses, where they were stored " in heaps" a description.[17]Based on sources from Ellis, Ptolemy III wrote a letter to all the world's sovereigns asking to borrow their books.[18]Legend has it that when Athens lent Ptolemy the texts of Euripides, Aeschylus, and Sophocles, he had them copied, returned the copies, and kept the originals. Another of the Librarians' responsibilities was the establishment of sound texts purged of scribal errors made during the process of transmission.[19]

The librarians were reputed to include some of the great figures of ancient scholarship. Bevan refers to the first recorded librarian in Alexandria as Zenodotus of Ephesus, holding that post until 245 B. C. E. His successor Callimachus of Cyrene, may have been Alexandria's most famous librarian, created a subject catalog in 120, 000 scrolls of the Library's holdings.[20]The Greek alphabet with less than thirty symbols was learned by almost everyone. An improvement took place in handwriting and developed a more

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elegant, flowing script, which made both for easier copying and quicker, and more comfortable reading.[21]

According to Marlowe, librarian Eratosthenes (275-194 B. C. E) amassed a catalog of 44 constellations complete with background myths, as well as a list of 475 fixed stars. Eratosthenes, drawing on Egyptian and Near Eastern observations, deduced the length of the year to 365 1/4 days and was the first to suggest the idea of adding a “ leap day” every four years.[22]The last recorded librarian was Aristarchus of Samothrace, the astronomer, who took up the position in 180 B. C. E. during dynastic struggles between two Ptolemies. From that time onward no librarians are mentioned by name in any historical record.

Marlowe maintains that the Museum excelled at producing great geometers by assembling the geometric principles of earlier Greek mathematicians, and had access to Babylonian and Egyptian knowledge of geometry.

[23]Archimedes was one of the early Alexandria scholars to apply theories of motion to mechanical devices. Among his discoveries were the lever and- as an extension of the same principle- the “ Archimedes screw,” a hand-cranked device for lifting water.[24]

In the second century C. E., Galen drew upon Alexandria’s vast researches and his own investigations to compile fifteen books on anatomy and the art of medicine.[25]Herophilus, both collected and compiled the Hippocratic corpus at Alexandria. There has been some conflict about the fate of Aristotle’s books, once thought to be at the core of the collection, may have been carried off to Rome by Sulla[26].

Size and Scale of the Library at Alexandria

Alexandrian scholars were provided with a library containing a huge collection of papyrus scrolls and entrusted them to explore every field of human knowledge. The Library may have been reserved for scholars of the Museum - just as many modern research libraries are closed to people not affiliated to a scientific or academic institution.

In addition to the great Library, located in the Bruchion district of Alexandria, there was a smaller library, called a "sister" or "daughter" library that still existed at the time of Caesar and was situated inside the temple of Serapis.

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The manuscripts gathered by Demetrius and his successors were bundles of writings forming high piles in the Museum warehouse. Mixed rolls must have contained many duplicates. Parsons reports that there were 532, 800 rolls, of which 132, 800 single rolls were considered premier finds. The sister library may have contained 42, 800 rolls, probably copies of the writings shelved in the bigger library. The brittle and frail paper of Egypt was "... fragile media indeed on which to confide the precious knowledge and wisdom of the ages." They were subject to damage by fire, water, rodents, and worms.[28]

Johnson describes the physical stacks which consisted of pigeonholes or racks for the scrolls, some of which were wrapped in linen or leather jackets. From Roman times manuscripts were written in codex (book) form, and were often stored in wooden chests called armaria.[29] According to Bevan, Callimachus cataloged 400, 000 mixed scrolls of multiple chapters and 90, 000 "unmixed" scrolls.[30]

Bagnall has studied the size of the Alexandrian library, and he concludes that either more than ninety percent of classical authors are not even quoted in the surviving Greek literature, or that the Ptolemies acquired a dozen copies of everything, or some combination of these unlikely hypotheses.[31] Seneca quotes Livy that over the 40, 000 volumes were housed in grain depots near the Alexandria harbor, which were supposedly incinerated when Julius Caesar torched the fleet of Cleopatra's brother and rival monarch.[32]

However, Hannam argues this would likely be the number of papyrus scrolls and many of these were needed to make up an entire book. He believes that Seneca's figure of 40, 000 is more reasonable and still makes the Royal Library much larger than any of the later classical or medieval libraries.

[33] Using Gellius as a source, the figure reaches 700, 000 books. It is clear that ancient figures vary by wide margins.[34] The higher numbers have been accepted by many modern scholars, in spite of the fact that "lacking modern inventory systems, ancient librarians, even if they cared to, scarcely had the time or means to count their collections".[35]

How the Royal Library was destroyed

In 48 BCE, Caesar was pursuing Pompey into Egypt when he was cut off by an Egyptian fleet at Alexandria. Outnumbered and in enemy territory, Caesar ordered the ships in the harbor to be set on fire. The fire spread and burned down part of the city where the great Library stood. The earliest account of the destruction of the Library in *The Civil Wars* by Julius Caesar who states he had to set the fleet in the harbor on fire "for his own safety" and that some ports arsenals also went up in flames. Plutarch, writing his *Life of Caesar* at the end of the first century CE, refers that the renowned library

was burnt down by the fire Caesar.[36]Aulus Gellius, a second century author, included in his Attic Nights a brief passage about libraries where the destruction of the Royal Library is mentioned as taking place by accident during the Romans' first war against Alexandria when auxiliary soldiers started a fire.[37]

In a later book The Alexandrine War 1, Caesar does not mention setting fire to Alexandria but does state that the city was made of stone and would not burn.[38]Some scholars argue that Alexandria burns as well as any city and perhaps Caesar was attempting to hide his actions.[39]Cicero is silent on a fire in Alexandria in his Philippics.[40].

The second story of the Library's destruction is more popular, thanks primarily to Gibbon's The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire. Theophilus was Patriarch of Alexandria from 385 to 412 CE. During his reign the Temple of Serapis was converted into a Christian Church, and it is likely that many documents were destroyed then. Legend has it that Hypatia, a fifth-century scholar and mathematician of Alexandria, was dragged from her chariot by a mob of monks who burned her upon the remnants of the old Library.[41]

One of the most famous legends about the Great Library is that of it being burnt down on the instructions of the Caliph Omar after Alexandria had been captured by the Arabs. However, Edward Gibbon reports this is not true. [42]In 640 CE the Moslems took the city of Alexandria although this story is attributed to a Christian who spent a great deal of time writing about Moslem atrocities without much historical documentation.

Unfortunately most of the writers from Plutarch (who apparently blamed Caesar) to Edward Gibbons (blamed Christians) to Bishop Gregory (who was particularly anti-Moslem, blamed Omar) may be biased. It is possible that the collection ebbed and flowed as some documents were destroyed and others were added. For instance, Mark Antony was supposed to have given Cleopatra over 200, 000 scrolls for the Library long after Julius Caesar is accused of burning it.

It is likely that even if the Museum was destroyed with the main library, the outlying “ daughter” library at the Temple of Serapis continued on. Many writers seem to equate the Library of Alexandria with the Library of Serapis although technically they were in two different parts of the city.[43] Historian Canfora is skeptical and her interpretation is that Plutarch’s passage is an interpolation[44]. Hannam interprets Plutarch as merely reporting a list of slanders against Antony made others.[45]

Hannam maintains that the Royal Library of Alexandria was not standing during the Christian era. It is his theory that a major library was founded at the Serapeum during its rebuilding in the second century CE and that this library became confused in the minds of various writers with the Royal Library of the Ptolemies that had disappeared over two centuries before. The Serapeum ceased to be when a Christian mob tore it down to the foundations under the leadership of the orthodox patriarch Theophilus after he had received word from the Emperor Theodosius. The year this happened is generally fixed to AD391 and it is one of the best attested events in late antiquity. The Serapeum library was probably founded as an adornment to the new Roman temple. Although there are no details as to its size, it would

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have been quite large enough to be confused with the earlier Royal Library.

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The Library is often portrayed as the repository of all ancient wisdom and that its loss meant that science would progress at a much slower pace.

Hannam believes the truth of the matter is that the Library was an important institution in the history but that its destruction in the first century BCE did not spell the end of ancient scholarship. In fact, Alexandria remained the Mediterranean's intellectual capital for seven centuries afterwards due to the library in the Serapeum and patronage of Roman Emperors. Hannam goes on to explain that in the final analysis, the Arab invasion ended the story of the Alexandria library. At that point, the cultural inheritance from the ancient world would be preserved in Constantinople and Baghdad.[47]

Historian Luciano Canfora explains that placing the Library's disappearance in the first century B. C. E., as opposed to four centuries later or even later at the end of the seventh century, "...necessarily alters our perception of the quality of the Greek literature that has come down to us". Canfora recounts the major theories: the catastrophe is blamed either on Julius Caesar (48/47 B. C. E.) or on the fanaticism of the Arabs who conquered Alexandria in 642 A. D. Canfora supports the latter theory because the flow translations from Greek flowing through Egypt came to a halt at the end of the seventh century.

Roger Bagnall's theory is that the disappearance of the Library is the result of the end of the impetus and interest that brought it into being and of the lack of the kind of sustained management and maintenance that would have

seen it through successive transitions in the physical media by means of which the texts could have been transmitted. The library of Alexandria began to disappear when the community of scholars for which it had been created was broken up; or when, as Bagnall says, the generative impetus of the first centuries ended.

Conclusions

Repeatedly rebuilt, modified, and burned, the few facts that can be determined about the Library's long history convey its semi-legendary status. Delia has underlined the literary and romantic character of these traditions, which are not more reliable, from a historical point of view, than the novel.[48]

The central place of the Alexandrian library in Western cultural memory derives from a combination of several factors: the foundation project; the connection between the library and the Museum; the capability of the Alexandrian library to generate knowledge, and not only to accumulate it; its destruction, a symbol of countless similar tragedies. Each of these elements concerns the present and future of our civilization, no less than its ancient roots.