

# The Ancient Library at Alexandria: Embracing the Excellent, Avoiding its Fate

*Gerald Franz*

In the year 331 BC, Alexander the Great stood with some of his advisors in the small Egyptian fishing village of Rhakotis on the Nile delta. Here Alexander decided to found a new city and name it after his favorite person, himself. Those with him had no chalk to sketch the borders and roads, so they trailed a thin line of barley flour from sacks. When birds descended from everywhere to consume the meal, Alexander thought this was a bad omen. Not so, his advisors said. Like the flour to the birds, they prophesied, Alexandria will one day attract many and be a feeder and nurse to the world.<sup>1</sup> And they were correct.

## **The Library at Alexandria**

When Alexander died eight years later, Ptolemy, one of his celebrated generals, was able to secure the part of Alexander's empire that included Egypt. He reigned as Ptolemy I (Soter) and he invited his friend Demetrius of Phaleron to create the best library in the world in this new city of Alexandria. Or did Demetrius suggest that idea to Ptolemy? Either way, both of them deserve the credit for the Library at Alexandria in the early 300s BC. Demetrius had fled from a Greece that did not want him, and it was his goal to build a library that would rival even the one in Athens. Demetrius had been a student of Aristotle, and later his successor and director of Aristotle's school (the Lyceum).<sup>2</sup> Hence, the new library in Alexandria was destined to be more than a collection, but a teaching and learning institution.

There were two parts of this new institution, a Museum (dedicated to the 9 muses, who were divine female patrons and promoters of the arts), and the Library.<sup>3</sup> The Museum served as the educational wing of the Library, with classrooms and study centers, even a communal dining hall. The walls and hallways were well decorated with paintings and statues. The Library held the collection, which was dispersed through several wings and porticos according to different disciplines.<sup>4</sup>

## **The Growth and Development of the Library**

There was plenty of drama concerning the Library, according to the ancient sources. By the time of Ptolemy III, Alexandria required every trading ship in their docks to turn over their scrolls and books for copying. More often than not, the owners received the copies back, not the originals. Athens made the mistake of doing inter-library loan with Alexandria (pressured by a threat to cut off grain shipments), and received only copies back of some of their best texts. Through an aggressive campaign of confiscation, purchase, and copying, the Library grew to approximately 500,000 to 700,000 scrolls.<sup>5</sup>

When Alexandria learned that Pergamum was seeking to rival their Library, they stopped exporting papyri to cut off their supply. This caused translators and scholars to find something else to write on. They came up with cured animal skins made into thin

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*Gerald Franz is Assistant Library Director at Hodges University, e-mail: gfranz@hodges.edu*

parchment. Only this stacked instead of rolled, and so the book became popular.<sup>6</sup> When Pergamum endeavored to procure Alexandria's well-known librarian, Aristophanes of Byzantium, Alexandrian authorities intercepted Aristophanes and imprisoned him for life.<sup>7</sup>

The library directors were scholars themselves, appointed by the king, later by the Caesar.<sup>8</sup> For example, Zenodotus, the director after Demetrius, was a well-known scholar of Homer.<sup>9</sup> They also served as the official royal tutors.<sup>10</sup> The librarians eventually established a few special subject collections in different places around the city (branch libraries of a sort), such as the Serapeion in the temple of Serapis, which held over 40,000 titles.<sup>11</sup>

The Library pulled in copies of the written literature of the past and present from all over the Mediterranean, the Near East, and Mesopotamia, and upon all available subjects. This probably was the first library to be so eclectic in scope.<sup>12</sup> Written in dozens of languages, including Sanskrit, these documents were translated into Alexandrian Greek.<sup>13</sup>

### A Place of Scholarship

This feat was admirable enough, but the Library/Museum accomplished so much more than creating a multi-disciplinary collection in Greek. They wanted the collection to attract scholars from all over the world, and for those scholars to not only access this knowledge, but to create new knowledge, there, in Alexandria. The Library/Museum became a think-tank, observatory and laboratory.<sup>14</sup> However, this was not a public library for the masses. This was for scholars and teachers only, but up to 100 of them at a time would assemble there. Sometimes these scholars studied alone, but often they formed research teams in various disciplines, like mathematics, medicine, literature, physics, philosophy, zoology, geography, astronomy, and poetry.<sup>15</sup> They left behind a fortified image of philology, and their work included "the first textual criticism in the West".<sup>16</sup>

By the time of Ptolemy II, there were resident scholars (perhaps around 30 in number) who enjoyed tax-exempt status, and free room and board in the city. They often taught classes, and under Ptolemy V (205-180 BC) implemented impressive outreach strategies, like games, festivals and literary competitions.<sup>17</sup>

Here in Alexandria, Euclid wrote many of his books on geometry. Eratosthenes of Cyrene (one of

the library directors) believed the oceans were connected, that Africa could be circumnavigated, and that the earth was round. His calendar was adopted by Julius Caesar. Eratosthenes' estimation of the earth's circumference erred by only 50 miles. Here the Jewish scriptures were translated from Hebrew to Greek (the Septuagint). Archimedes invented his famous screw-shaped water pump, created the discipline of hydrostatics, and worked with calculating area and volume. Ptolemy wrote the *Almagest* on the nature of the universe. Here Hypatia lectured on philosophy, until she was killed by a mob in AD 415.<sup>18</sup> Alexandria had become the intellectual capital of the world, and central to this was the Library/Museum.

### The Uniqueness of the Alexandrian Library

All of this can be contrasted with the ancient Roman libraries, which served as repositories of their own Greek and Latin literature, though Tiberius (r. AD 14-37) made sure the library administrators were scholars as well.<sup>19</sup> While Aristotle and Plato (and their successors) organized and ran schools after the museum/library model, the Alexandrian Library was able to implement this on a much grander scale due to the generous patronage of the Ptolemies. Added to this was the Hellenistic appreciation for all knowledge, not just Greek and Roman. Alexandria was ideally located between East and West and became a place where the ideas of the world were debated and discussed. Overall, the Library/Museum (hereafter Library) at Alexandria stood remarkably unique in the ancient world.<sup>20</sup>

### The Demise of the Alexandrian Library

As to the destruction of the Library, there are many opinions, even among the ancient sources. Is Julius Caesar to blame, who in 47/48 BC captured the city, and set fire to the Egyptian ships and docks? The winds fanned the flames so that part of the city was destroyed, and some ancient witnesses date the demise of the Library at that time.<sup>21</sup> Or did the Library end with the many attacks and riots Alexandria suffered in the 2<sup>nd</sup> through the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries?<sup>22</sup> Certainly in this case, the old aphorism that 'the pen is mightier than the sword' proved untrue.<sup>23</sup> Whatever the causes and whenever the end came, one cannot help but wonder at and mourn for all the ancient knowledge that could have been known.

### The Bibliotheca Alexandrina

In recent years, there has been a rebirth of the Library in Alexandria. The Egyptian government, with some help from UNESCO, created the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Alexandria. Inaugurated in 2002, and costing \$220 million dollars, it is dedicated to recapturing the spirit of the ancient Library. In addition to electronic and print resources, there are museums, a planetarium, cultural theaters, research centers, exhibitions, galleries, conference centers, and a Dialogue Forum, which provides the place for the ideas of the world to come together.<sup>24</sup> If only one could bring Demetrius of Phaleron back, that first entrepreneur of the Alexandrian Library, and give him a tour.

### A Final Lesson from Alexandria

When the ancient Library at Alexandria is referenced today, it is usually to make one of two points. First, there is their admirable quest to gather knowledge from all possible civilizations and on all topics, in contrast with the more provincial libraries of the ancient world.<sup>25</sup>

Second, and ironically, the good example of their cosmopolitan collection is related to a negative outcome, namely, when much of the world's knowledge is limited to just a few libraries, the destruction of those libraries would constitute a monumental disaster. Battles writes that "Much of what comes down to us from antiquity survived because it was held in small private libraries... where it was more likely to escape the notice of zealots as well as princes."<sup>26</sup> "What happened to the books of Alexandria?", Battles asks. "Many, many centuries happened to them."<sup>27</sup> Hence, modern preservation and digitization projects are pursued so as to avoid the loss like that of Alexandria.

However, there may be another important point of relevance to make, and perhaps the reason this has not been put forward is that the historical information here is not well known. MacLeod notes:

Ultimately, the Library's fortune rose and fell with those of Alexandria itself. By the second century, Rome became less dependent on Alexandrian grain, and less interested in Alexandrian scholarship. The prosperity of the city declined, and so did the reputation of the Library. Its librarians were thereafter less well known; its scholars – with significant exceptions – less distinguished, or at least, less well

known to posterity. Eventually, the word 'Alexandrian' became a metonym for the craft of 'editing', for the practice of consolidating and correcting scholarship rather than creating it – critical, custodial, preoccupied with the purity of old forms, rather than pursuing the new. Its rivals in Pergamum and elsewhere rose in status and celebrity and contested its leadership.<sup>28</sup>

MacLeod words are brimming with relevance for those who understand the current struggles of the academic library. To be pushed backward to just a clerical and custodial role, or to be viewed as marginal, obsolete, or irrelevant, would be devastating to modern academic librarians.

Casson assigns the blame to Roman leadership, who took over Egypt from 30 BC. The gradual slide from the Greek to the Roman model, in the opinion of this paper's author, may parallel the corruption and loss of ideals when the Romans continued the Greek Olympics. Casson notes that membership in the Library was being awarded, not necessarily to deserving scholars, but to men who had ingratiated themselves to the Roman government, namely politicians, military men, and even athletes. Rome was a champion of the patronage system. The same practice may have also been used when the Caesar began appointing library directors, such as Tiberius Claudius Balbillus (1<sup>st</sup> century AD), who was a politician and military leader.<sup>29</sup> Murray notes that the decline included some "corrupt administrators" who helped deplete the collection by stealing.<sup>30</sup>

However, there are some appreciable differences in what the Alexandrian Library faced, compared to the academic library today. At least in the United States, college libraries are not challenged by riots and book burning, or by foreign powers waging war or appointing library leaders. Nonetheless, despite the historical differences, there remains this warning. The academic library must be vigilant not to permit the external competitors and other external forces to drive them backward from their hard-earned positions as thriving centers of learning and scholarship. Likewise, the role of the college librarian must remain that of an academician and teacher, as well as a faculty administrator, and not merely a custodian and clerical keeper of the resources.

The academic library today has a distinct advantage over the Alexandrian Library though. The Alex-

andrian Library hosted and sponsored various academic groups, but they could hardly pull in a group of librarians to help address the bigger picture of their own relevance and mission. The breadth and depth of the great conversation concerning all aspects of library science would stun those few ancient counterparts. As well, the concerted labor and collegiality through all of the divisions, round tables and committees of just ALA and ACRL would certainly strike those solitary librarians in awe.

However, it is important that these research and communication structures are occasionally tweaked in light of inevitable changes that occur in the world. Perhaps it is time for ACRL to more formally tackle and address the issues concerning the future academic library. Certainly there already exists a plethora of voices concerning futures thinking, so that it is not unusual to read on this topic in blogs or listservs, or hear someone address these issues in articles or conference sessions.

A notable example occurred in June, 2010, when ACRL published the excellent study from Staley and Malenfant entitled, "Futures Thinking for Academic Librarians: Higher Education in 2025." These kinds of publications are invaluable. Concerning the study, the authors note:

This report reinforces the notion that academic libraries are part of a larger ecosystem, and librarians should be consistently scanning the environment to look for signs of the changes that may come... We determined that a 15-year horizon would help academic and research librarians see beyond the worries of this budget cycle and the short-term future to consider, instead, what may happen further down the road, to better anticipate the changing context within which academic librarians will operate, and to make more informed strategic decisions.<sup>31</sup>

However, as yet there exists no division, or committee, or roundtable of ALA that comprises big-picture, visionary thinkers who devote themselves entirely to the library of the future. They could serve the wider library community by their insights and recommendations. This entity, in this writer's opinion, would need to be large enough to produce its own journal and/or magazine, and enjoy a conference

presence to communicate to the whole. Ideally, the section should be at the ALA level, with separate divisions for ACRL, PLA, etc. Or the work could begin just at the level of ACRL.

Perhaps it is fitting to make this call from ACRL Philadelphia. When serious challenges faced the American colonies, the delegates of the New Continental Congress first met in Philadelphia in 1774, 236 years ago. They formally addressed their concerns and took appropriate actions, as the cause moved from just home and tavern conversations.

## Conclusion

The Library at Alexandria provides a fascinating and dramatic story of progressive, effective, and well-supported academic librarianship. As the Lighthouse at Pharos shone from Alexandria, so the Library was an intellectual beacon to their world. The dynamic and cosmopolitan city of Alexandria attracted thinkers and ideologues from all over the world. As such, it was the perfect seedbed for the Library.

However, as has been seen, the city was also a magnet for trouble, from foreign powers because of its trade and strategic position on the Mediterranean, and from within, because of its political, religious, and racial diversity. As a result, the Museum and Library fell victim on many occasions to both foreign and local violence.

What should command the attention of librarians today is the internal erosion within the ancient Library. (And American librarians possess much more internal control than what the Alexandrian Library could boast, given the later Roman selection of their leaders).

The challenges that face the contemporary academic library may be just as formidable as what faced Alexandria, though on the exterior, less barbaric. Librarians would do well to empower some of their best to regularly scan and interpret the environment, and provide insight and guidance for our future. Creating structures within ALA and ACRL to support this would be a giant step to this end.

## Notes

1. Justin Pollard and Howard Reid, *The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: Birthplace of the Modern World* (New York: Penguin Group, 2006), 3; Max Rodenbeck et al., "In Search of Lost Time: Snohetta's Alexandria Library," *Architecture* 90, no. 10 (October 2001), <http://search.ebscohost.com/>

login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN+5411643&site=ehost-live (accessed August 19, 2010).

2. Peter Brush, "The Alexandrian Library As It Once Was," *American Libraries* 31, no. 4 (April 2000), <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN+2981777&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 16, 2009); Diana Delia, "From Romance to Rhetoric: The Alexandrian Library in Classical and Islamic Traditions," *American Historical Review* 97, no. 5 (December 1992): 1449, <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=a9h&AN=9302160069&site=ehost-live> (accessed November 16, 2009); Roy M. MacLeod, *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World* (New York: I. B. Tauris, 2004), 2.

3. Delia, 1449–1450.

4. Delia, 1458–1459; Andrew Erskine, "Culture and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Museum and Library of Alexandria," *Greece & Rome* 42, no. 1 (April 1995): 38–39; MacLeod, 4.

5. Brush; Delia, 1457; Daniel Heller-Roazen, "Tradition's Destruction: On the Library of Alexandria," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 141; MacLeod, 4–5.

6. Delia, 1457; MacLeod, 5.

7. Luciano Canfora, *The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World*, trans. Martin Ryle (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990), 44; Erskine 46.

8. Erskine, 39.

9. Heller-Roazen, 137.

10. MacLeod, 4.

11. Brush; MacLeod, 5.

12. MacLeod, 3.

13. Brush.

14. MacLeod, 7.

15. MacLeod, 3.

16. Heller-Roazen, 136, 151.

17. Brush; Delia, 1452; MacLeod, 4.

18. Maria Dzielska, "Learned Women in the Alexandrian Scholarship and Society of Late Hellenism," in *What Happened to the Ancient Library of Alexandria?*, ed. Mostafa El-Abbadi and Omnia Mounir Fathallah (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 138–141; MacLeod, 2–6; David Whitehouse, "Library of Alexandria Discovered," BBC News, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/3707641.stm> (accessed November 16, 2009).

19. George W. Houston, "Tiberius and the Libraries: Public Book Collections and Library Buildings in the Early Roman Empire," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 43, no. 3 (2008): 259–260.

20. MacLeod, 3.

21. William J. Cherf, "Earth, Wind, and Fire: The Alexandrian Fire-storm of 48 B.C." in *What Happened to the Ancient Library of Alexandria?*, ed. Mostafa El-Abbadi and Omnia Mounir Fathallah (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 59–61.

22. Delia, 1460–1464; MacLeod, 8–9.

23. Delia, 1467.

24. "The Bibliotheca Alexandrina," The BA Overview, <http://www.bibalex.org/English/Overview/overview.htm> (accessed November 16, 2009).

25. Michael H. Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World*, 4th ed. (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 47.

26. Matthew Battles, *Library: An Unquiet History* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 31.

27. Battles, 32.

28. MacLeod, 9–10.

29. Lionel Casson, *Libraries of the Ancient World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 47.

30. Stuart A. P. Murray, *The Library: An Illustrated History* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2009), 17.

31. David J. Staley and Kara J. Malenfant, *Futures Thinking for Academic Librarians: Higher Education in 2025* (Chicago, IL: Association of College & Research Libraries, 2010), 3.

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