

Library at Alexandria

Romantic notions are personal fantastic ideals and in most cases are incorrect or skewed when viewed against fact and figure. Myths are different still, in that they are stories accepted by many and used to explain natural or social historical events or circumstances. Legends are stories that grow as they age or as they are handed down from one generation to another and are more fictitious than true. Legends are often made or loosely based from myth or romantic notion. I mentioned these forms of stories and present my romantic notion of the Library of Alexandria.

Prior to attending the MLIS program, I held the Library of Alexandria in pretty high esteem as being the place where great amounts of knowledge had been amassed to the betterment of mankind. I would often think of how civilization would be different had that knowledge not been destroyed. My notions went even further to envision advanced technologies beyond what is available today. I feel pretty foolish about these notions now, but in my defense I had only hearsay and fantasy to form my previous notion and did not take it upon myself to further investigate.

I have recently learned from the various essays in the book *The Library of Alexandria* edited by Roy MacLoud and from related articles¹ that of the myths surrounding the library are mainly based on small amounts of evidence and large amounts of 'educated' speculation. There are three basic myths concerning the burning of books and or the library that seem to stem from small events of destruction that did not destroy everything.² Other myths address the aggressive collection policies of Ptolemy III that seemed to confiscate any book found within the vicinity of Alexandria even though copies were generally supplied in trade.³ And still more myths portray the library as a fully accessible reference for all when its access was actually restricted to those in favor with the king who were paid not only for their services rendered to the university, but allowed them to further their research to certain extents much like a research grant would today.⁴ My own romantic notions have been thoroughly 'busted' with the exception of the legend that the library was once a great center of learning. This legend is based on the rapid growth and accumulation of the collection by Ptolemy I and the drawing of worldly scholars to this collection by Ptolemy II.⁵ Although the Library of Alexandria lasted about 300 years, the early period from the creation of the library, university, and museum to the death of Ptolemy II in 246BC marks the 'golden age' that inspired the legend. Luciano Canfora describes the influence of this period as such:

"...where the memory of the universal library of Alexandria lived on: the story became a myth with multiple variants, and the institution established by the Ptolemaic kings was an invitation to dream and reverie for a literate culture that cherished its own aspirations to the quest for all books and all the knowledge in the world."⁶

The historical aspects of the library that support the myths and give credence to the legend are found in the remaining notations that discuss it directly.⁷ From this evidence scholars have 'rebuilt' the library and speculated on many of its aspects. It is universally accepted that the library was unique and that it had one of the largest collections of its time but it is debated whether or not the information collected was destroyed, disseminated, authoritative, worldly, or even note worthy. MacLoud points out that the

early years of the library may have fostered a period of great learning, but that later years produced a lack thereof:

“...its early philosophers had delivered major theoretical advances in mathematics and natural knowledge, by the beginning of the Christian Era, it had become better known for custodial scholarship than for innovation.”⁸

Concerning ‘custodial scholarship’, MacLoud is supported by Christian Jacob’s account of the encyclopedic nature of works produced in the latter years of the library:

“One type of intellectual work undertaken by the scholars and writers who frequented the Alexandrian Museum consisted in treating the Library’s collection as both the object and the very instrument of their research, in using books as a medium for gathering knowledge and stabling inventories, lists, and collections. Information was selected from books—words, quotations, factual data, astronomical observations, travel measurements—then extracted from its context and brought together in new and artificial texts. The various techniques of compilation made this information transitive: successive thresholds of rewriting transformed it and sometimes modified its status, objectifying it, disassociating it from its original context of enunciation.”⁹

The ‘destruction’ of the library be it through burning, lack of innovative thinking, or simply lack of interest from the ruling family may best be summed up as a collection that answered to the needs of the early ruling Ptolemies in their personal and maybe political quests for knowledge;¹⁰ and when that interest waned through their deaths, the library in due course dispersed. It is noted by Canfora, in an excerpt from the *Ta’rikh al-Hukama* of Ibn al-Qifti, that “These books were always kept and preserved and all the kings who followed and their successors up to our day took care to do the same.”¹¹

My own speculation leads me to consider what wealth can bring and how artifacts are passed down through generations. Ptolemy I, with the help and encouragement of Demetrius, was responsible for building the University, Museum, and Library; and collecting the books within. It was Ptolemy II Philadelphus who was educated to rule (like Ptolemy I and Alexander) and sought to cultivate a knowledge culture; although Ptolemy III made contributions to the collection, the interests of state were turning away from the library and knowledge to wars abroad and internal strife. Barnes states:

“It was only the cultural pretensions of tyrants, kings and emperors which could conceive anything like a universal collection of books. It is no accident either that the Ptolemies restricted access to their library to the comparatively few scholars of the museum, who were all on the royal payroll. ... The dangers inherent in such patronage inevitably followed: the Ptolemies eventually lost interest in scientific and literary pursuits (or at least were forced to spend most of their time defending themselves against internal and external enemies), the funds for the library dried up, and most of the scholars drifted away.”¹²

In terms of personal interests and artifacts, it might have been said over dinner one night: the library was grandpa’s idea, the scholarly crowd dad’s, I (Ptolemy III) am just tying up loose ends and obsessively collecting stuff I don’t have time to read and Jr. is into boats.¹³ In addition, the dynastic lineage of the

Ptolemies marriage practices and murder rates do not support the notion of a 'cultured' environment that lasted for three centuries;¹⁴ rather, the span of 54 years that mark the 'golden age' seems to be a more appropriate and more controllable length of time in which to cultivate a cultural legend.

The 'golden age' of the Library of Alexandria, was evidenced by the list of scholars that were invited to the library, by the work that was ensued and added to its core, and by the universal nature of the collection and the scholars. Beyond the work, Mostafa El-Abbadi states that it was the process of examining the evidence that laid the foundation for academic discourse as we know it today:

"The enormous wealth of books at the disposal of the scholars of the Mouseion proved to be a necessary tool in their hands and what a tool that was which combined the intellectual experiences of both classical Greece with that of the ancient near East! But more important was the critical attitude taken by the earlier Alexandrian scholars towards these books, for no written authority however great, was accepted on trust. For a final estimation, their faith was on experiment, mathematical proof and arguments based on evidence. It is no exaggeration to say that for the first time, the principles of scientific methods of research were developed in the various disciplines, with impressive results in mathematics, physics, medicine, astronomy, geography, etc., as well as in textual criticism. The names of Euclid, Herophilus, Aristarchus, Ctesibios, Eratosthenes, Zenodotus, Callimachus and many others immediately come to mind. ... In one singular aspect, it fostered and developed a high standard of scholarship based on a thorough study and understanding of the past heritage, a heritage deemed of eternal value and worthy of preservation. ... It was due to the Alexandrians that textual criticism became the basis of all serious linguistic and critical studies."¹⁵

The universal nature of the library's collection and its scholars or staff is partially evidenced in the *Letter of Aristeas*, the first documented "extended discussion" of the library.¹⁶ Although widely contested, this document described the translation of Jewish scriptures into Greek by Jewish Scholars in residence at Alexandria. MacLoud presents his account of the library as 'the first to underwrite a programme of cultural imperialism,... for prestige, for cultural intelligence, and for the practical purposes of administration and rule.'¹⁷ He goes on to state "the new Library was to be universal. It would aim for complete coverage of everything ever written. ...Thus ... was launched an industry of learning."¹⁸

The two factors listed above have contributed to the status of the Library of Alexandria to that of a cultural symbol that inspires others to the same greatness. As mentioned earlier by Canfora, the Arabs were inspired and actually continued the learning tradition that helped preserve much of the early literature that was thought to have been lost with the 'destruction' of the Library of Alexandria. The library has reached even further into the present day to inspire the new library, the Bibliotheca Alexandria as "an institution capable of creating a tradition of serious scholarship motivated by a spirit of the scientific humanism that guided a number of the great scholars of ancient Alexandria. This is no mean ambition and it can only be achieved in an atmosphere of freedom of thought and enlightened humanism."¹⁹

In the years following the 'golden age', the innovative scholarship that characterized its height was in decline and the work being done at the library had shifted significantly from the creation of new works

to establishment of editions, compilations or encyclopedias, catalogs and textual criticism that became the forerunner of the textual hegemony experienced in today's western culture. MacLoud see this shift as both positive and negative, the positive expressed in his agreement with Christian Jacob's view that "Book compilation and the resultant production of new texts in the form of catalogues reflect a particular stage in the development of a literary and learned culture. They attest to the need for a new visibility of information, for new modes of access to the objects of knowledge."²⁰ And the negative expressed by Michael Ryan in that "Alexandrian scholarship had become dominated by literary criticism. As a center of knowledge, it resembled the thin neck of a very large bottle—in protecting its precious contents, channeling and letting little new knowledge flow."²¹

Considering the lack of interest later Ptolemies showed in the library, it can be speculated that they 'wanted the Royal Road' to information.²² This may have inspired the 'new way of seeing' and helped bring about the authoritative text edition, the commentary, the glossary, encyclopedias, compilations, bibliographies, lexicography, grammar and advances in catalogues.²³ Jacobs goes on to explain that "Philological work on texts (the establishment of an edition) therefore provides a unifying thread leading to new journeys through the stores of the Library, ushering in a new phase in the mobilization of knowledge."²⁴

Roy MacLoud's, *The Library of Alexandria*, is a perfect example of the textual hegemony that flowed from Alexandria. It is not only a compilation of essays by various authors; its goal is to shed light in commentary fashion upon a possible greater impact of the Library of Alexandria on the world. In this regard, I feel he falls short of his goal and is thus the victim of his own comments considering that:

"Alexandria was a place where what could be known of Babylonian, Egyptian, Jewish, and Greek thought was strenuously collected, codified, systematized, and contained. Alexandria became the foundation of the text-centered culture of the Western tradition. The disciplined life of collection and classification and an emphasis upon erudition were essential to academic professionalism. But the Library failed to maintain the quest for deeper knowledge that had distinguished its early philosophers. Where the written word conflicted with empirical observation, the life of books could prove misleading and obscure an understanding of the world."²⁵

The essays collected in this book do indeed enlighten on various aspects of Aristotle, medical, theatrical, and philosophical history but these particular essays have scant evidence to tie their thesis to Alexandria and do not really shed any 'deeper knowledge' in to the issues. The essay by Potts on archives of the Near East can be considered pre-Alexandrian lineage, but the fictional walk through the town by Wendy Brazil could have been omitted. I found the articles by Canfor, Jacob and Womack to be more enlightening as to the nature of the Library of Alexandria, what went on there and its greater contributions to an 'enlightened humanism.'

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13. Ptolemaic Dynasty, <http://www.phouka.com/pharaoh/pharaoh/dynasties/dyn33/01pto1.html>, accessed July 5, 2008.

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17. Ibid, 3.
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21. Michael Ryan, reviewing Marc Baratin and Christian Jacob (eds.), *Le Pouvoir des Bibliothèques*, (Paris: Albin, Michel, 1996) as cited in Roy MacLeod, "Introduction: Alexandria in History and Myth," *The Library of the Alexandria*, edited by Roy MacLeod, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 7.
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