



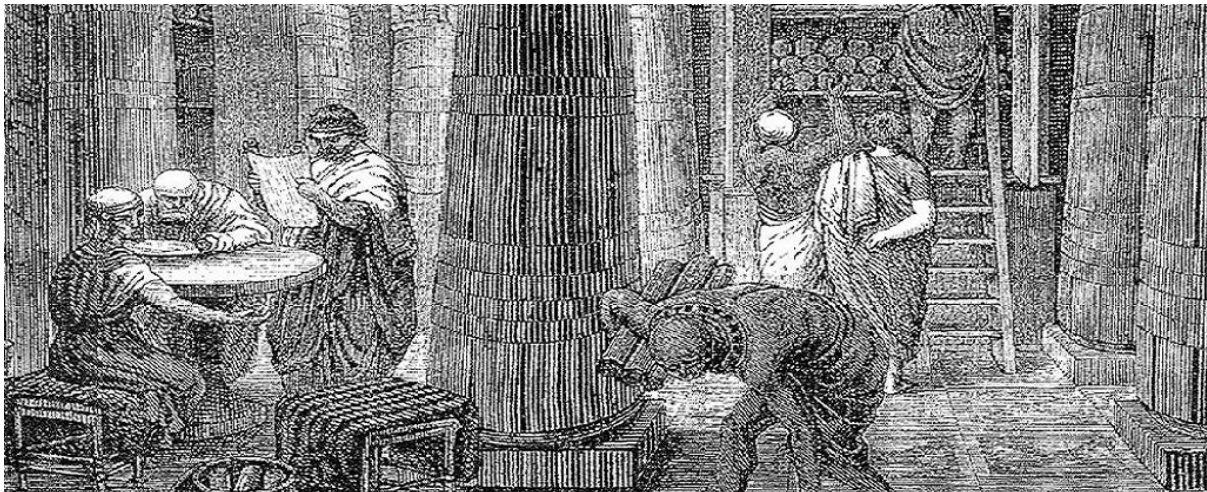
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## THE LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

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*"If the Library of Alexandria was the emblem of our ambition of omniscience, the Web is the emblem of our ambition of omnipresence; the library that contained everything has become the library that contains anything"* Alberto Manguel

### What was the library of Alexandria?

Alexandria, one of the greatest cities of the ancient world, was founded by Alexander the Great after his conquest of Egypt in 332 BC. After the death of Alexander in Babylon in 323 BC, Egypt fell to the lot of one of his lieutenants, Ptolemy.

It was under Ptolemy that the newly-founded Alexandria came to replace the ancient city of Memphis as the capital of Egypt. This marked the beginning of the rise of Alexandria. No dynasty can survive for long without the support of their subjects, and the Ptolemies were keenly aware of this. Thus, the early Ptolemaic kings sought to legitimise their rule through a variety of ways, including assuming the role of pharaoh, founding the Graeco-Roman cult of Serapis, and becoming the patrons of scholarship and learning (a good way to show off one's wealth). It was this patronage that resulted in the creation of the great Library of Alexandria by Ptolemy. Over the centuries, the Library of Alexandria was one of the largest and most significant libraries in the ancient world.

Alexandria was once the centre of the Hellenistic Empire and the hub of scholarship and commerce in the ancient world Greek academics, Roman emperors, and Jewish leaders.

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Fathers of the Christian church, mathematicians, philosophers, scientists, poets and other intellectuals flocked to Alexandria with one of the first stops always being to the Library of Alexandria. Alexandria was the intellectual capital of the world, and its extensive library has been said to have held up to 500,000 volumes of work. The Museum was a centre of research, with laboratories and observatories, and had scholars such as Euclid and Eratosthenes working there.

Alexandria was also a centre for biblical studies. The chief librarian commissioned the Septuagint, which was the oldest Greek version of the Old Testament. Why did Alexandria become a destination for so many people of all races, creeds, and professions? As historian Michael Wood said, "it was the first city of the civilised world in size, elegance, riches, and luxuries," where one could obtain anything imaginable to fill the needs of the body and soul. Just as its famous Pharos Lighthouse was a welcome sight for weary travellers, Alexandria acted as a beacon for merchants, curious tourists, religious prophets and most importantly, the finest intellectual minds of the times.

### The hunt for books

Fabulous stories circulated on the lengths to which Ptolemaic dynasties would go to increase their ever-increasing library. One method which was reportedly used was to search every ship that sailed into the harbour of Alexandria. If a book was found, it was taken to the library for a decision as to whether return it or to confiscate it and replace it with a copy which was to be made on the spot. Another story (reported by Galen in the writings of Hippocrates) reveals how Ptolemy III managed to acquire the original texts of the great dramatic poets Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. The precious texts were safeguarded in the Athenian state archives and were not allowed to be lent out. The king, however, persuaded the governors of Athens to permit him to borrow them in order to have them copied. The enormous sum of 15 talents of silver was deposited in Athens as a pledge for their safe restitution. The king thereupon kept the originals and sent back copies, willingly forfeiting the pledge.

These unorthodox methods of collection were supplemented by the purchase of books from other sources around the world, especially from the cities of Athens and Rhodes which housed the largest book markets at the time. The Ptolemaic rulers also encouraged Egyptian priests to accumulate records of their past traditions and heritages and to render them available for use by Greek Scholars.

### Notable achievements produced in the library

The Ptolemies wholeheartedly supported and financed the scholars who were working at the library so much so that many of the most famous academic revelations in history happened within the library. Some of the prominent scholars who studied there, and their achievements are:

- **Aristarchus of Samos** – a Greek astronomer and mathematician presented the first heliocentric model of the solar system, placing the Sun, not the Earth, at the centre of the known universe. This was a full 1800 years before Copernicus!

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- **Eratosthenes** – a Greek mathematician, poet, geographer and astronomer was the first person to use the word "geography" and invented the discipline of geography as we understand it. He also invented the system of longitude and latitude and was the first person to calculate the circumference of the Earth with incredible accuracy. He was the first one to prove the Earth was round.
- **Hipparchus** – a Greek astrologer, geographer, astronomer and mathematician is considered the founder of trigonometry. By some, he was the greatest overall astronomer of antiquity. He compiled the first comprehensive star catalogue of the western world and, calculated the length of the solar year accurately to within 6.5 minutes.
- **Callimachus** – a noted poet, critic and scholar is responsible for producing the catalogue of all the volumes contained in the Library of Alexandria, becoming the father of library science.
- **Euclid** – a Greek mathematician, is often referred to as the "Father of Geometry". He wrote "Elements", one of the most influential works in the history of mathematics, which was a textbook of geometry for 2300 years.
- **Herophylus** – a Greek physician, was the first scientist to perform scientific dissection of human bodies systematically and is deemed to be the first anatomist. He identified the brain, not the heart, as the controlling organ of the body and the seat of intelligence.
- **Dionysius of Thrace** – is attributed with writing the first extant grammar of Greek, "Art of Grammar".
- **Hero of Alexandria** – was a Greek mathematician and engineer, considered the greatest experimenter of antiquity. He is the inventor of gear trains and steam-powered engines. One of his most famous inventions was also a windmill, the earliest instance of wind harnessing on land.
- **Archimedes** – a mathematician, physicist, engineer, inventor and astronomer, is one of the leading scientists in classical antiquity. He was the greatest mechanical genius until Leonardo da Vinci, was a visiting scholar at the Library of Alexandria, too.
- **Claudius Ptolemy** – astronomer, mathematician and geographer established a geocentric model, which was although incorrect, almost universally accepted for 1500 years.
- **Zenodotus** – was a native of Ephesus, a Greek grammarian, literary critic, the first librarian and superintendent of the Library of Alexandria. He wrote basic works on healing and anatomy, which dominated until Renaissance.
- **Galen** – a physician, surgeon and philosopher, and the most accomplished medical researcher of antiquity lived and worked at the Library of Alexandria. He wrote basic works on healing and anatomy, which dominated until the Renaissance.
- **Erastitratius** – founded a school of anatomy in Alexandria and was the first to distinguish between veins and arteries, and was very close to the discovery of the circulation of blood.
- **Hypatia** – who taught at the Library of Alexandria, was considered the first notable woman in mathematics, and also taught neo-platonist philosophy and astronomy.

### The fate of the Library of Alexandria

The fate of the great wealth of books remains a controversial topic. For centuries the main point of contention was whether or not the library survived the Arab conquests in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. Although, with an ever-increasing advanced degree of technology, scholars are now able to conclude that the library of Alexandria was not destroyed just in one singular event but instead, experienced a steady stagnation.

One of the more famous stories of the library's destruction occurred in 48 BCE. Julius Caesar became involved in a civil war in Egypt between Cleopatra and her brother Ptolemy XIII. Caesar sided with Cleopatra and as a result, was besieged by Ptolemy's forces within Alexandria by land and sea. Caesar realised his only chance to lift the siege was to set fire to the enemy fleet and in doing so, gained the upper hand in the conflict. An unforeseen consequence of this was the partial destruction of the library of Alexandria which led to thousands of volumes of work being lost. After a visit to Alexandria, Plutarch explained that "Caesar was forced to repel the danger by using fire, which spread from the dockyards and destroyed the great library". Equally indicative is a statement by Greek Historian Strabo who on an extended visit to Alexandria, twenty years after the events of the civil war between Cleopatra and Ptolemy XIII expressed sorrow and regret to the loss of the great library that had once supplied Eratosthenes and Hipparchus with the original reports of earlier discoveries, sources that were no longer there for him to consult.

The conclusive end of the library came about during the reign of Emperor Theodosius I. In his zeal to wipe out all vestiges of paganism, he issued a decree in the year 391 AD which stated that all pagan temples within Alexandria be destroyed. Empowered by this decree, Theophilus, Bishop of Alexandria, led an attack on the serapeum (the daughter library of Alexandria), and he gave the first blow to the cult statue of Serapis. His frenzied followers ransacked the serapeum which led to their eventual destruction, and as a testament to the changing times, a church was built on the remains of the library.

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