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Alexandria: Library of Dreams¹

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MY TITLE does not intend to suggest that the Alexandrian Library did not exist, but it does point to what I regard as the unreal character of much that has been said about it. 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. After sketching briefly the main lines of our ignorance of the Library's history, I shall talk about three types of dreams that have beguiled commentators ancient and modern: dreams about the size of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina; dreams about placing the blame for its destruction; and dreams about the consequences of its loss.² But there are some positive lessons as well, as I hope to show.

There is no ancient account of the foundation of the Library.³ We

¹ Read 10 November 2000.

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have only brief and glancing references. The nearest thing to even a brief history appears in the preface to a commentary on Aristophanes written by the Byzantine polymath John Tzetzes in the twelfth century. Kinder critics say that Tzetzes “preserves much valuable, though to be sure not always correctly reported, information on ancient literature and cultural history.”⁴ The less charitable call him “copious, careless, quarrelsome” and “extremely inaccurate. . . . His uncorroborated evidence is accordingly viewed with much suspicion”⁵ or “quite unjustifiably conceited about his own attainments.”⁶ Tzetzes, like the ancient tradition generally,⁷ treated Ptolemy II Philadelphos as the king who created the Library. He describes how three men, Alexandros of Aetolia, Lykophron of Chalkis, and Zenodotos of Ephesos, worked with Ptolemy to acquire books.⁸

One might then think that the foundation by Philadelphos was secure. But no. Tzetzes, like other sources, also mentions that Ptolemy collected the books “through” Demetrios of Phaleron. Now this Demetrios, a pupil of Theophrastos and earlier of Aristotle, had ruled Athens for the Macedonian king Cassander for a decade (317–307); after Cassander’s death, he fled to Egypt, joining the court of Ptolemy I Soter, the father of Philadelphos, where he certainly contributed much to the royal project of making Alexandria a worthy rival to Athens. He made, however, the strategic miscalculation of supporting as Soter’s successor the older half-brother of Philadelphos, and when the latter came to the throne instead, the sexagenarian Demetrios paid for his mistake with internal exile, dying soon thereafter.⁹ He is, in short, not a good candidate for collaborator with Ptolemy II.

Demetrios is already present, however, in the earliest surviving text to talk about the Library, namely the curious *Letter to Philocrates*, a work of the second century B.C. that claims to be the work of a courtier of Ptolemy II named Aristeas.¹⁰ As far as we know, there was no such person as this Aristeas.¹¹ Although some competent modern scholars have been at pains to praise Pseudo-Aristeas’s knowledge of the Ptolemaic

⁴ W. O. Schmitt, *Kleine Pauly* 5 (Munich, 1975), 1033.

⁵ *Oxford Classical Dictionary*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1970), 1102 (P.B.R. Forbes, Robert Browning).

⁶ L. D. Reynolds and N. G. Wilson, *Scribes and Scholars*, 2d ed. (Oxford, 1974), 62.

⁷ See Fraser 1:321.

⁸ *Prolegomena de comoedia Aristophanis* 2.

⁹ The major source is Diogenes Laertius 5.75–85 (F. Jacoby, *Die Fragmente der Griechischen Historiker* IIB [Leiden, 1962], 642–43, no. 228 T1).

¹⁰ André Pelletier, s.j., *La lettre d’Aristée à Philocrate* (Paris, 1962).

¹¹ *Prosopographia Ptolemaica* 6 (Leuven, 1968), no. 14588, considers him probably fictitious.

milieu,¹² to the extent that he reflects any reality it is that of the second century, not the third, and the work is full of incredible things.¹³ The court detail is, indeed, “merely corroborative detail, intended to give artistic verisimilitude to an otherwise bald and unconvincing narrative,” as Pooh-Bah would put it (*Mikado*, act 2). It was Demetrios, according to Pseudo-Aristeas, who persuaded Ptolemy II to commission the translation of the Jewish scriptures that we call the *Septuagint* in order to help complete the royal library’s holdings; this story, indeed, is the centerpiece of this piece of Jewish propaganda.

Now most philologists, faced with texts full of misinformation and a flat contradiction such as the juxtaposition between Demetrios and Philadelphos offers, would normally be extremely skeptical, or dismiss Demetrios’ role as fiction.¹⁴ Not here, however. Everything reported must be kept in some fashion. So, almost unanimously, the reaction has been to suppose that Ptolemy I was the real founder of the Library, assisted by Demetrios, while Zenodotos was either a subordinate¹⁵ or came to the fore after Philadelphos came to the throne.¹⁶ The only real basis for such a view, other than a desperate desire not to abandon the sources, is a statement of Strabo that Aristotle taught Ptolemy the

¹² Fraser 1:696–704 gives a detailed discussion, dwelling (699–700) on the author’s knowledge of the Ptolemaic court (his picture is clearly that of the second century, after the introduction of court ranks). Fraser dates the work to the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor (180–145 B.C.). Other views differ, but a mid-second-century date is plausible. For recent general discussions of “Aristeas,” see J.M.G. Barclay, *Jews in the Mediterranean Diaspora: From Alexander to Trajan (323 BCE–117 CE)* (Berkeley, 1999 [Edinburgh, 1996]), 138–50 and E. S. Gruen, *Heritage and Hellenism: The Reinvention of Jewish Tradition* (Berkeley, 1998), 207–22, with the discussion comparing them by D. R. Schwartz, *Classical Philology* 95 (2000): 352–54.

¹³ For example, Ps.-Aristeas believes that there are still twelve tribes in Judaea, and he claims that Ptolemy liberated a hundred thousand slaves in Ptolemaic possession by purchasing them from their owners. How Fraser (1:700) can think this is a “genuine document” is mystifying, although he is not alone. The text cited as a parallel, *C. Ord. Ptol.* 22, is, despite some verbal similarities (accepted even by the usually skeptical Gruen [above, n. 12], 211), radically different. Captives taken by Ptolemy I to Egypt were, if slaves at all, in precisely the class (slaves sold by the crown) that the ordinance of 260 B.C. left in the undisturbed possession of their owners.

¹⁴ E. A. Parsons, *The Alexandrian Library: Glory of the Hellenic World* (Amsterdam, 1952), 83–105, in discussing the foundation and building of the Library, recognizes the weakness of Ps.-Aristeas’s evidence and the difficulties with Tzetzes (whom he discusses in great detail), but refuses to give up the information they provide. Staikos, 60–61, also notes the insecurity of the evidence for Demetrios, but by 71, n. 22, he has succumbed to thinking that “the events described by Aristeas cannot be fictitious.” Gruen (above, n. 12), 209, is more consistently critical in regarding Demetrios’ involvement as fiction.

¹⁵ E.g., Blum, 102.

¹⁶ So Delia, 1460. The latest version of this is Casson’s formulation (34): “It was the brainchild of Ptolemy I, even though it may not have come into being until the reign of his son.”

formation of a library.¹⁷ This remark, which can hardly be literally true (Aristotle died in 322), is taken to mean that the idea of such a library, broad and scientific in character, was Peripatetic and came to Ptolemy through Demetrios. That is not unreasonable, but it hardly shows that Ptolemy I took any specific action. And, to be sure, Alexander, Lycophron, and Zenodotos, the trio mentioned by Tzetzes, were active during Philadelphos' reign. So much for our lack of precise information about the foundation and early growth of the Library. It must be added that we are hardly in better shape concerning the famous Mouseion, the relationship of which to the Library is also a matter of speculation.¹⁸

It is to Pseudo-Aristeas also that we owe the earliest surviving figures for the size of the Library. He has Demetrios tell Ptolemy that the Library now has more than 200,000 books, but he hopes to bring it up to 500,000 before long.¹⁹ Tzetzes tells us that the Palace Library contained 400,000 "mixed" (*symmigeis*) books and 90,000 "unmixed" (*amigeis*). He also reports that there was an "external library" with 42,800 books. Although there has been much controversy, it is likely that "mixed" refers to rolls containing more than one work (and perhaps more than one author), "unmixed" to works occupying book-rolls (often multiple rolls) by themselves.²⁰ Later writers give other figures: Aulus Gellius (*Noct. Att.* 7.17.3) says 700,000 rolls (but some "inferior" manuscripts give 70,000). Seneca (*De tranq. animi* 9.5) reproaches Livy for showing regret at the destruction of 40,000 volumes (an excessive luxury, in Seneca's view) in the Alexandrine War; modern scholars, with a bent for gigantism, have suspected this of being an error for 400,000,²¹ on the basis of a figure in the late historian Orosius (*Hist.*

¹⁷ Strabo 608c. See Fraser 1:320, on the problems of this passage. As careful a philologist as Hugh Lloyd-Jones, in a review castigating L. Canfora (below, n. 49) for uncritical use of evidence, takes the role of Demetrios as a given (*Greek in a Cold Climate* [London, 1991], 115–22; from *New York Review of Books*, 14 June 1990). Similarly, Robert Barnes, "Cloistered Bookworms in the Chicken-Coop of the Muses: The Ancient Library of Alexandria," in Roy MacLeod, ed., *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World* (London, 2000), 61–77, without engagement of the literature on the subject. It is true that Irenaeus and Clement of Alexandria (more confusedly) indicate Ptolemy Soter as the founder (see El-Abbadi, 79–80), but it is not clear that this rests on any independent tradition; they may simply have recognized the problem of connecting Philadelphos and Demetrios.

¹⁸ See Fraser 1:312–19 and El-Abbadi, 84–90, for accounts of the Mouseion. As with the Library, our accounts of it come mainly from the Roman period. Lloyd-Jones (above, n. 17) correctly reminds us of how much we do not know.

¹⁹ Ps.-Aristeas's account, with figures, is repeated in Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities* 12.13.

²⁰ See Fraser 1:329 on this point. Why Fraser (328) says that Tzetzes is "our only evidence as to the number" I do not know. See Fraser 2:474 n. 108, demolishing the view that Tzetzes' figures come from Callimachus.

²¹ See, e.g., Delia, 1458 n. 38.

adv. pagan. 6.15.31–32), where once again some manuscripts give 40,000 instead of the majority 400,000. Ammianus Marcellinus, writing of the Serapeum, tells us that it contained a library and that “the unanimous testimony of ancient records declares that 700,000 volumes, brought together by the unremitting energy of the Ptolemaic kings, were burned in the Alexandrine war” (22.16.13). He has of course been reproached by moderns for confusing the Palace and Serapeum libraries—more on this later.²² It is reasonably obvious that the ancient sources thought the libraries were enormous but had no good figures to work with.²³ In any case, figures in ancient texts were easily corrupted in transmission and often survive in multiple readings.

We have already seen that Pseudo-Aristeas has that least attractive quality in a source: to be trusted only where corroborated by better evidence, and there unneeded. The quality of the rest of the later tradition about the size of the Library is not much better. But let us turn to asking about the inherent plausibility of the numbers. The basic questions we should ask are, how many books probably existed in the early third century, how likely it is that large-scale collecting continued under the later Ptolemies and the Romans, and whether these figures are at all in line with what we know of other ancient libraries.²⁴

The computer databank of ancient Greek literature, the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae*, contains about 450 authors of whom at least a few words survive in quotation and whose lives are thought to have begun by the late fourth century. No doubt there were authors extant in the early Hellenistic period of whom not a line survives today, but we cannot estimate their numbers. Of most of these 450, we have literally a few sentences. There are another 175 known whose lives are placed, or

²² See J. C. Rolfe's note in the Loeb Ammianus (2:302 n. 1), confidently and precisely informing us that “at the time of the battle of Pharsalia the total number was 532,800 [i.e., 490,000 in the main library and 42,800 in the Serapeum] and it may have reached 700,000 by the time of the Alexandrine war.”

²³ See Delia, 1458–59. Only by collapsing antiquity into a single chronological horizon could one say that “contemporary accounts suggest that they amassed as many as 500,000 texts” (*The Economist*, 8 April 2000, p. 92). Staikos, 70, claims that “there is no doubt that the Library did have a stock of several hundred thousand rolls, and when all the reliable contemporary evidence is evaluated it is reasonable to suggest that the highest figure of all—700,000 rolls—does not sound excessive and may even be an exaggeration.” What “the reliable contemporary evidence” consists of is hard to see.

²⁴ Barnes (above, n. 17), 65, oddly cites the library at Pergamon, for which Plutarch gives the (probably unreliable) figure of 200,000 volumes, as evidence in favor of the high numbers of volumes at Alexandria. On the other hand, he also says “it has been suggested” that Alexandria had only 70,000 different titles in the third century (he does not footnote this statement, but Lloyd-Jones [above, n. 17], 117, cites E. G. Turner, *Greek Papyri* [Oxford, 1968] for this assertion, without page number; it does not appear in Turner's discussion of the Alexandrian Library on pp. 102–03).

whose births are placed, in the third century B.C. Most of these authors probably wrote what by modern standards was a modest amount—a few book-rolls full, perhaps. Even the most voluminous authors of the group, like the Athenian dramatists, probably filled no more than a hundred rolls or so. If the average writer filled 50 rolls, our known authors to the end of the third century would have produced 31,250 rolls. We must then assume, to save the ancient figures for the contents of the Library, either that more than 90 percent of classical authors are not even quoted or cited in what survives, or that the Ptolemies acquired a dozen copies of everything, or some combination of these unlikely hypotheses. If we were (more plausibly) to use a lower average output figure per author, the hypotheses needed to save the numbers would become proportionately more outlandish.²⁵

To look at matters another way, just 2,871,000 words of Greek are preserved for all authors known to have lived at least in part in the fourth century or earlier. Adding the third and second centuries brings the total to 3,773,000 words (or about 12,600 pages of 300 words each).²⁶ At an average of 15,000 words per roll, this corpus would require a mere 251 rolls. Even at an average of 10,000 words per roll, the figure would be only 377 rolls. It was estimated by one eminent ancient historian that the original bulk of historical writings in ancient Greece amounted to something like forty times what has survived.²⁷ If so, our estimate would run to an original body of 10,000 to 15,000 rolls. This may be too low, but is it likely that it is too low by a factor of thirty or forty, and that only one word in 1,500 or 2,000 has survived? Again, we would be required to believe that we do not even have the names of the vast majority of ancient authors, or that the Library possessed thirty or forty copies not only of Homer but of every single author.

We cannot save the figures by supposing that growth after the third century, or even after the second century, accounts for the difference. For one thing, none of our evidence for book acquisition is later than the third century, and most of it concerns Ptolemy II and Ptolemy III, the latter being the subject of the famous, but probably unbelievable, anecdotes in Galen about seizing books from passing ships and hijacking

²⁵ H. Strasburger, *Studien zur Alten Geschichte* 3 (New York, 1990), 178–79, lists 32 historical writers for whom we know exact or approximate numbers of books originally produced but now lost. The average is 28.2; it would fall to 24 if we excluded Aristotle (the city constitutions), an altogether exceptional figure. And historians were relatively long-winded.

²⁶ These figures are computed from the files of the invaluable *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* (Irvine); I am grateful to Maria Pantelia for supplying them.

²⁷ Strasburger (above, n. 25), 180–81. He works mainly with Teubner pages rather than rolls in his computations, but the results come to much the same thing.

the originals of the tragedians from Athens.²⁸ It is most unlikely, at all events, that an active acquisitions policy was pursued in the wake of the expulsion of most of the Mouseion's intellectuals in 145 B.C. Moreover, if we are to give any credence to these numbers, why should we not be consistent in our credulity and believe that Demetrios of Phaleron already had amassed 200,000 volumes in the first decade of the third century B.C., as Pseudo-Aristeas says?

An amusing sidelight to such reflections is provided by a block of granite, in the top of which is a hollowed-out space measuring 19.5 by 23 centimeters and 8 centimeters deep. Found in 1847 and now in Vienna, it has the legend "Dioskourides, 3 rolls" inscribed on its face. It has generally been seen as a storage container for three papyrus rolls; because it was found near where the Library is thought to have been located, it was quickly identified as part of the Library's equipment.²⁹ Although others rejected this identification, almost everyone has agreed that it was indeed a book-storage device. A library of a half-million rolls would have required 166,667 of these containers. It is not easy to imagine a structure and shelving system in which such granite containers would have stood; there is no lid, either. No wonder one scholar hastily assures us, although without any evidence, that "only rare manuscripts would have required such custom-made stone bins for their preservation."³⁰ Actually, there is no reason to think that it held papyrus rolls at all. Its traditional depiction in drawings (Fig. 1) no doubt helped encourage such ideas, but a sober look at the real thing (Fig. 2) shows that only a small fraction of the block consisted of this hollow space.³¹ It was in fact surely a base for a statue or bust.

In sum, the ancient figures for the size of the Library or the number of volumes lost in the Alexandrine War do not deserve any credence.³²

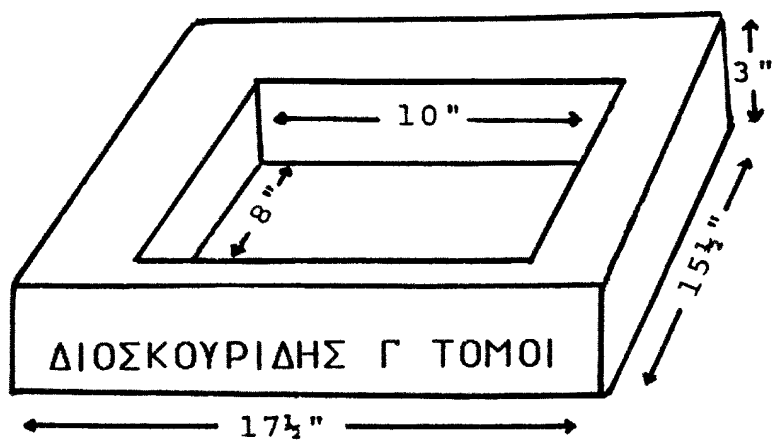
²⁸ These are quoted in every treatment of the subject; cf., e.g., El-Abbadi, 73–102; more briefly, Barnes (above, n. 17), 65–66. Hardly anyone has ever suggested that they might not be factual.

²⁹ The actual location in the palace quarter is unknown, but it has been argued that it was in the area near the modern Nabi Daniel Street and north of Horreya Avenue. For the history of the question, see Mieczyslaw Rodziewicz, "A Review of the Archaeological Evidence Concerning the Cultural Institutions in Ancient Alexandria," *Graeco-Arabica* 6 (1995): 317–32.

³⁰ Delia, 1455.

³¹ For a comprehensive bibliography, see now E. Bernand, *Inscriptions grecques d'Alexandrie ptolémaïque* (Cairo, 2001), 167–69, no. 65, but even he merely reprints a drawing of the nineteenth century. I am grateful to Dr. Alfred Bernhard-Walcher of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, Antikensammlung, Vienna, for the photograph printed here and access to the original in April 2002. I discuss this object in detail in an article forthcoming in the *Bulletin de la Société archéologique d'Alexandrie*.

³² Blum, 107, is one of the few scholars to doubt the ancient figures.



magnitude.³³ The Library of Alexandria, however comprehensive for its time, was not on a scale comparable with the great research libraries of the twentieth century.

Indeed, how could it have been? One has only to imagine the difficulties involved in cataloging such a collection. Book-form catalogs, even with all the advantages of the large codex, ceased to be useful when modern libraries started to reach the kinds of middle six-figure sizes imagined for Alexandria, and had to be replaced by the card catalog, unknown in antiquity. My own university's library grew from 20,000 volumes in 1856 to 100,000 in 1889 and 362,000 in 1903.³⁴ Even the giants did not reach the middle six digits until the middle of the nineteenth century, precisely the point at which the card catalog started to come into use. The British Museum had only some 200,000 volumes in 1830, reaching a million a third of a century later.³⁵ Callimachus's famous *Pinakes*, a systematic listing of genres, authors, and works in 120 books, could not have held the information necessary to catalog hundreds of thousands of rolls.³⁶

Nothing in the Library's history has quite inflamed the imagination so much as its destruction. But how was it destroyed? This is a murder mystery with a number of suspects, each at least with opportunity and means. The most popular candidate has been Julius Caesar, whose operations in 48 B.C. in the harbor of Alexandria are often blamed for setting fire to the library near the shore. The turbulent political history of the third century of our era also offers some possibilities, including the emperors Caracalla, Aurelian, and Diocletian, all of whom did significant damage in Alexandria. The anti-Christian party insists that it

³³ Cf. Andrew J. Carriker, *The Library of Eusebius of Caesarea* (Ph.D. diss., Columbia Univ., 1999), 32, remarking that "a library that was a tenth of this size [sc. the 500,000 in Ps.-Aristeas] would still have been very large in antiquity," and collecting figures for ancient libraries.

³⁴ James H. Canfield, in *A History of Columbia University, 1754–1904* (New York, 1904), 437–41.

³⁵ See Allen Kent and Harold Lancour, eds., *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* 4 (New York, 1970), 295, for the British Museum's growth; 4:277, on the rise of the card catalog, which was dominant in the U.S. by 1893.

³⁶ The *Pinakes* were not themselves the library's catalog (see Fraser 1:453), but were certainly based on it. If its books were standard rolls of 20 sheets, and if they used relatively narrow columns (yielding 27 columns to a roll) and were written in small letters (44 lines to a column), they will still have contained no more than 142,560 lines. As much of the work was biographical, only part of that total is available for listing works. Of course some works had multiple books, but Callimachus seems to have listed some works (like Pindar) poem by poem and argued points about them; a number of entries per book-roll will have resulted, balancing the multi-roll works. If two-thirds of the space was used for titles and on average each line represented a title (both assumptions probably too favorable to the number of books), the total would still not have reached 100,000 rolls.

was the mob of monks responsible for the destruction of the Serapeum in 391, who wiped out classical learning. The pro-Christian, anti-Muslim sentiment can believe the stories that blame instructions given by the caliph to Amr, the Arab conqueror of Egypt, to feed the books to the fires in 642, but these originate centuries after the fact and are surely fiction.³⁷

Passions still run high on this matter. When Glen Bowersock first invited me to present this paper, I hesitated because of a traumatic early experience. I wrote an article on the Alexandrian Library on commission for a short-lived magazine called *The Dial*, published for Channel 13. The editor did not like my caution about the accounts of the destruction of the Library and, without telling me, rewrote the article to blame everything squarely on the Christians.³⁸ Whether he hated Christianity or just liked a simple story line, I do not know.

The matter is, truth to tell, not so clear.³⁹ The subject has been endlessly debated by modern scholars, but with little result. There was certainly still some substantial library in Roman Alexandria. This is evident from Suetonius's life of Domitian (20), where we learn that he replaced books lost to fire in Roman libraries in part by sending scribes to Alexandria to copy manuscripts there.⁴⁰ And some of the scholarly work that went on in the Roman period in Alexandria is difficult to imagine without a substantial library. As the Museum was certainly still operative in the Roman period, belief in a Caesarian destruction of the Library requires the uneconomical assumption that the Library was destroyed in the fire but the Museum was not. Recently there have been signs of a consensus in formation that the most likely date of

³⁷ See El-Abbadi, 167–72. A. J. Butler, *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, 2d ed. by P. M. Fraser (Oxford 1902, 1978²), 401–26, already pronounced the story a fable, although not all of his arguments are persuasive. See also Fraser's addenda to Butler, pp. lxxv–lxxvi, and Delia, 1465–67.

³⁸ "Lessons of the Alexandrian Library," *The Dial* 1.2 (Oct. 1980): 96–100.

³⁹ Matters are made worse by the failure of our best source, Strabo, to speak clearly on the matter. In his *Geography* 17.1.8, he says that "the Mouseion is also part of the palaces, possessing a *peripatos* and *exedra* and large *oikos*, in which the common table of the *philologoi*, men who are members of the Mouseion, is located. This *synodos* has property in common and a priest in charge of the Mouseion, formerly appointed by the kings, but now by Caesar." (I have kept technical terms in transliteration.) Why does Strabo not mention the Library? His odd allusiveness in 2.1.5 has also aroused suspicion: "For Eratosthenes takes all these matters as actually established by the testimony of the men who had been on the spot, having encountered many *hypomnemata*, with which he was well furnished, having a library such as Hipparchos himself says it was." Was it no longer such in Strabo's time? And yet, it looks as if the palace quarter had been unscathed by the fires, to judge from the overall tenor of Strabo's report.

⁴⁰ On what basis Staikos (83) thinks this episode might indicate the existence of Latin works in the Library, I cannot see.

major destruction for the Palace Library is 273, with Aurelian's recapture of Alexandria from the Palmyrenes the occasion.⁴¹ But there is no direct evidence concerning the Library in the ancient sources for this; the argument, rather, is that the palace area was devastated at this time and the great Library was probably a victim of this larger destruction.

The argument is even more complicated, however, because it is generally thought that there were multiple libraries in Alexandria. John Tzetzes, you will recall, speaks of an outer library. He does not tell us where it was. Modern scholarship has uniformly filled in the gap with the statement of a Christian writer, Epiphanius, the bishop of Salamis best known for his compendium on heresies, to the effect that "later another library was built in the Serapeum, . . . which was called the daughter of the first one."⁴² Other Christian writers echo this information. Archaeological work at the Serapeum has shown that there were spaces that could have housed books, but that is as much as excavation has revealed.⁴³ The age of this library is unknown, although it is usually thought, on not much evidence, to go back to the time of Ptolemy III's construction at the Serapeum. Neither Caesar's fire nor Aurelian's destruction would necessarily have affected the Serapeum; thus a library *could* have survived in Alexandria until the destruction of the Serapeum itself.

What is less commonly recognized⁴⁴ is the existence of what a film about brittle books some years ago called "slow fires." Papyrus is a good material, acid free and highly durable. It can last for hundreds of years under good conditions. But Alexandria hardly represented ideal conditions. It has a Mediterranean climate, not a Saharan one, with humidity enough to be detrimental to books. No papyri have survived there from antiquity to the present day, unlike in drier desert areas in Egypt. Books deteriorate also with use, and who is to say that there were no mice or insects in the great library? These certainly were

⁴¹ Most recently, Casson, 47, adopts this view.

⁴² Epiphanius, *De mens. et pond.* 11, quoted along with Tertullian, *Apol.* 18, in Fraser 2:478 n. 132. See Fraser's discussion, 1:322–24, citing in footnotes the other evidence.

⁴³ And even there, we find little comfort. M. Rodziewicz (above, n. 29), 321, points out that the colonnaded spaces usually thought of as a possible location in the Serapeum were "destroyed in the early Roman period," so that the later Roman library's "location in the temenos remains unknown until now."

⁴⁴ An exception is my colleague Alan Cameron, quoted in the *New Yorker*, 8 May 2000, p. 97. The notion put forward by the author of that article, that parchment is more "stable" than papyrus, is, however, fiction. James O'Donnell, *Avatars of the Word* (Cambridge, Mass., 1998), 52, also points out that recopying into codices would have been essential to survival. (His statements that Menander was not copied into codex form and that parchment predominated over papyrus in codices, however, are erroneous.) Staikos, 89, also concludes finally that deterioration was the culprit.

present in archives even in drier parts of Egypt. We have plenty of evidence for papyrus rolls remaining in use for a century, and some for survival as long as two or even three hundred years.⁴⁵ But that is about the limit, as far as we can see. The likelihood is that by the reign of Tiberius relatively little of what had been collected under the first three Ptolemies was still usable.

Even without hostile action, then, the Library, or Libraries, of Alexandria would not have survived antiquity. Indeed, any library almost certainly would have been a sorry remnant well before late antiquity, unless its books were constantly replaced by new copies, with the rolls being supplanted by codices in the fourth century. The ancients already were aware of this necessity: Jerome reports that the library at Caesarea founded by the theologian Origen was restored in the mid-fourth century by the copying of the books onto parchment.⁴⁶ But there is no evidence that any such replacement went on in Alexandria, nor any indication that the imperial Roman government provided any book acquisition budget to the Library. That does not mean there was none, but it is not likely to have been on the scale needed to maintain a truly great library.

It is hard to give up villains, but it looks as if we must abandon the search for some individual or small group to blame. The disappearance of the Library is the inevitable 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. It is idle, given this reality, to indulge in such Gibbon-like reflections as the following claim of Hugh Lloyd-Jones: "If this library had survived, the dark ages, despite the dominance of Christianity, might have been a good deal lighter; its loss is one of the greatest of the many disasters that accompanied the ruin of the ancient world."⁴⁷ This is to get things backward. It is not that the disappearance of a library led to a dark age, nor that its survival would have improved those ages. Rather, the dark ages—if that is what they were, and in the Eastern Roman Empire we may doubt the utility of such a concept—show their darkness by the fact that the authorities both east and west lacked the will and means to maintain a great library. An unburned building full of decaying books would not have made a particle's worth of difference.

⁴⁵ For references, see Naphtali Lewis, *Papyrus in Classical Antiquity* (Oxford, 1974), 60–61, with addenda in *Papyrus in Classical Antiquity: A Supplement* (Pap. Brux. 23, Brussels, 1989), 32–33.

⁴⁶ See Carriker (above, n. 33), 22–23, citing Jerome, *Ep.* 34.1 and *De viris ill.* 113.

⁴⁷ Lloyd-Jones (above, n. 17), 117.

Indeed, no more books would have survived antiquity if the Library had not been destroyed (deliberately or accidentally) than did so anyway. The destruction simply is not important. This may seem like a bleak assessment, but it need not be so. It suggests that we should turn our attention away from the dramatic single event and toward the forces and personalities that create and sustain cultural institutions, for it is their absence in the Roman period, not the presence of some destructive force, that decided the fate of the books of Alexandria. Why should anyone be disillusioned by the realization that creative achievements survive only if we foster a cultural milieu that values them? Most books existed in multiple copies, and it is the failure of most to survive that is most important. The rarities of the Alexandrian Library too owe their disappearance as much to omission as to commission.

I have devoted quite a bit of time to showing that those who have written about the Library of Alexandria have used dubious methods to arrive at improbable conclusions, pursuing what I believe to be false dreams. But Alexandria is also a library of valid dreams, and I shall close by evoking a few of them. First, and most directly, the Library and Mouseion sustained for the first time a philological enterprise, in which scholars tried to establish correct texts and to think about the art of doing so. Their earliest efforts were not terribly sophisticated by our standards, but they laid the foundations for all that has followed. This work had tangible results: In the literary papyri from Egypt, we can see the point—starting about 150 B.C.—at which the messy, unstandardized tradition of Homer's text was replaced by the standard text that we owe to Aristarchos of Samos, which lies at the root of the entire Homeric textual tradition since the second century B.C.⁴⁸ Although our copies of classical literature today are not those of the Library of Alexandria, most of them undoubtedly owe their quality, if not their survival, to the scholars of the Mouseion.⁴⁹

Second, the Library served as the base for a wide range of other scholarly activities, scarcely possible without its rich array of texts. I cannot evoke here anything like the full range of intellectual pursuits

⁴⁸ See most recently Johannes Kramer, "Die Geschichte der Editionstechniken und die literarischen Papyri," *Archiv für Papyrusforschung* 46 (2000): 19–40 at 22–23, putting the Alexandrian work in the context of the entire history of critical editing.

⁴⁹ Luciano Canfora, *The Vanished Library* (Berkeley, 1990), 197, concludes by minimizing the importance of the Library of Alexandria in this regard, claiming that "what has come down to us is derived not from the great centres but from 'marginal' locations, such as convents, and from scattered private copies." Actually, much of what has survived comes to us through Constantinople, wherever it ultimately wound up; Canfora's claim is thus spurious. But even if it were not, it ignores the impact of Alexandria (and other great centers) on the transmission of the texts that wound up in more remote locations. Cf. the half-hearted rejoinder of R. Barnes (above, n. 17), 75.

supported by the Library's collections, but they included many attempts to compile systematic information about different subjects.⁵⁰ One example is geography, where Eratosthenes was able to make decisive progress in creating the mathematical foundations of that subject and in enabling the development of cartography.⁵¹

Third, and probably most important of all, the Library of Alexandria bequeathed the image of itself, the idea of a large, comprehensive library embracing all of knowledge. As James O'Donnell has put it, "the library at Alexandria has long loomed as a chimera of power and mystery on the horizon of our culture."⁵² The sources tell us that this reach extended beyond Greek culture to the literature of its neighbors, ranging from the Jews to India. They probably exaggerate, but it is still significant that already within a century or so of its founding the Library had become a symbol of universality of intellectual inquiry and of the collection of written texts.⁵³ Even if Pseudo-Aristeas's story of the creation of the *Septuagint* is fictitious, it shows us that inclusion in the Library was a kind of universally recognized validation to which people would aspire. The Library was so far beyond anything else antiquity had known up to that point that it embodied these aspirations and appealed to the imagination of all who wrote about it. Its grip on the minds of all who contemplated it was already in antiquity as great as it was later, and it hardly mattered what fanciful numbers they used to express its greatness. Although the authors whose works survived antiquity told posterity little of any concrete substance about the Library, they transmitted its indelible impression on their imaginations.

This image was passed on to the Renaissance and the modern world, and every one of our great contemporary libraries owes something to it. By way of example, the paper of my colleague Carmela Franklin (below, p. 372) describes how a Vatican librarian of the fifteenth century wrote a Latin version of Tzetzes' potted history of the Library in the margin of a manuscript of Plautus. The contemporary attempt to create a new universal library in Alexandria itself, which has received enormous press coverage, is only the latest representative

⁵⁰ Fraser 1:447–79 gives a survey of "Alexandrian scholarship," but many other sections of his book are also relevant.

⁵¹ See on this point Mostafa El Abbadi, "The Ancient Library and its World-wide Connections: The Making of a World Map," *Proceedings of the 1st Annual Bibliotheca Alexandrina Symposium, 17–19 October, 1998* (Alexandria, n.d.), 22–26. For a general discussion of geography in Alexandria, see Fraser 1:520–52.

⁵² O'Donnell, *Avatars* (above, n. 44), 33.

⁵³ The widest claims, however, come in late Christian sources and may be no more than embellishments on Ps.-Aristeas; cf. Barnes (above, n. 17), 67. They are, however, quoted without challenge by most authors; cf., e.g., Lloyd-Jones (above, n. 17), 116–17.

of this tradition. Many aspects of this project have been criticized, perhaps with reason,⁵⁴ but we will have the right to denigrate the aspirations it embodies only when we become willing to give up our own pursuits of the Alexandrian dream. Thankfully, I see no signs of such renunciation. Although it is too late to recover much of the reality of the Ptolemaic library, its dream is very much still with us.⁵⁵

⁵⁴ The most serious problem at present being the lack of a coherent collection development policy and funds to carry it out. The beautiful working space in the library, however, is a worthy successor to the Muses' bird-cage.

⁵⁵ Thanks to Glen Bowersock for the invitation to deliver this paper; to Alan Cameron, Carmela Franklin, G. N. Knauer, and Maria Pantelia for various comments and references; and to Mostafa El-Abbadi for offprints of rare publications and a visit to the new Alexandrina in January 2001.