**Library of Alexandria**

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*This article is about the Ptolemaic library of the Ptolemy dynasty and Roman Egypt. For the current day library, see* [*Bibliotheca Alexandrina*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bibliotheca_Alexandrina)*. "Great Library" redirects here. For the library of Quebec in Montreal, see* [*Grande Bibliothèque*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grande_Biblioth%C3%A8que)*. For library of Bagdad during the Islamic Golden Age, see* [*Grand Library of Bagdad*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Grand_Library_of_Bagdad)*.*

*The Great Library of Alexandria*, O. Von Corven, 1st century

The **Royal Library of Alexandria**, or **Ancient Library of Alexandria**, in [Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexandria), [Egypt](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Egypt), was one of the largest and most significant [libraries of the ancient world](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_libraries_in_the_ancient_world). It was dedicated to the [Muses](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muse), the nine goddesses of the arts. It flourished under the patronage of the [Ptolemaic dynasty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemaic_dynasty) and functioned as a major center of scholarship from its construction in the 3rd century BC until the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BC. With collections of works, lecture halls, meeting rooms, and gardens, the library was part of a larger research institution called the [Musaeum of Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musaeum), where many of the most famous thinkers of the ancient world studied.

The library was created by [Ptolemy I Soter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy_I_Soter), who was a Macedonian general and the successor of [Alexander the Great](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alexander_the_Great). Most of the books were kept as [papyrus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus) scrolls, and though it is unknown how many such scrolls were housed at any given time, their combined value was incalculable.

The library is famous for having been burned, resulting in the loss of many scrolls and books, and has become a symbol of the destruction of cultural knowledge. A few sources differ on who is responsible for the destruction and when it occurred. Although there is a mythology of *the* burning of the Library at Alexandria, the library may have suffered several fires or acts of destruction over many years. Possible occasions for the partial or complete destruction of the Library of Alexandria include a fire set by [Julius Caesar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Caesar) in 48 BC, an attack by [Aurelian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurelian) in the AD 270s, and the decree of [Coptic Pope](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_of_the_Coptic_Orthodox_Church_of_Alexandria) [Theophilus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pope_Theophilus_of_Alexandria) in AD 391.

After the main library was fully destroyed, ancient scholars used a "daughter library" in a temple known as the [Serapeum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Serapeum#Alexandria), located in another part of the city. According to [Socrates of Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates_of_Constantinople), Coptic Pope Theophilus destroyed the Serapeum in AD 391.

**Structure**

Although the exact layout is not known, ancient sources describe the Library of Alexandria as comprising a collection of scrolls, a [peripatos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Peripatos) walk, a room for shared dining, a reading room, meeting rooms, gardens, and lecture halls, creating a model for the modern university campus. The library itself is known to have had an acquisitions department (possibly built near the stacks, or for utility closer to the Harbour), and a cataloguing department. A hall contained shelves for the collections of papyrus scrolls known as *bibliothekai* (*βιβλιοθῆκαι*). According to popular description, an inscription above the shelves read: *The place of the cure of the soul.*

The library was but one part of the [Musaeum of Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musaeum), which functioned as a sort of research institute. In addition to the library, the Musaeum included rooms for the study of astronomy, anatomy, and even a zoo of exotic animals. The classical thinkers who studied, wrote, and experimented at the Musaeum include the mothers and fathers of mathematics, astronomy, physics, geometry, engineering, geography, physiology and medicine. These included notable thinkers such as [Euclid](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euclid), [Archimedes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Archimedes), [Eratosthenes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eratosthenes), [Herophilus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Herophilus), [Erasistratus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Erasistratus), [Hipparchus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hipparchus), [Aedesia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aedesia), [Pappus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pappus_of_Alexandria), [Theon](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theon_of_Alexandria), [Hypatia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hypatia), and [Aristarchus of Samos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristarchus_of_Samos).

**Collection**

It is now impossible to determine the collection's size in any era with any certainty. [Papyrus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Papyrus) scrolls constituted the collection, and although [codices](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Codex) were used after 300 BC, the Alexandrian Library is never documented as having switched to [parchment](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Parchment), perhaps because of its strong links to the papyrus trade. (The Library of Alexandria in fact was indirectly causal in the creation of writing parchment — due to the library's critical need for papyrus, little was exported and thus an alternate source of copy material became essential.)

A single piece of writing might occupy several scrolls, and this division into self-contained "books" was a major aspect of editorial work. King [Ptolemy II Philadelphus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy_II_Philadelphus) (309–246 BC) is said to have set 500,000 scrolls as an objective for the library. [Mark Antony](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mark_Antony) supposedly gave [Cleopatra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cleopatra) over 200,000 scrolls for the library as a wedding gift, taken from the great [Library of Pergamum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Pergamum), but this is regarded by some historians as a propagandist claim meant to show Antony's allegiance to Egypt rather than Rome. The library's index, [Callimachus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Callimachus)' [Pinakes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinakes), was lost with the rest of the library, and it is not possible to know with certainty how large and how diverse the collection may have been. At its height, the library was said to possess nearly half a million scrolls, and, although historians debate the precise number, the highest estimates claim 400,000 scrolls while the most conservative estimates are as low as 40,000, which is still an enormous collection that required vast storage space. This library, with the largest holdings of the age, acquired its collection by laborious copying of originals. [Galen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen) spoke of how all ships visiting the city were obliged to surrender their books for immediate copying. The owners received a copy while the pharaohs kept the originals in the library within their museum.

As a research institution, the library filled its stacks with new works in mathematics, astronomy, physics, natural sciences and other subjects. Its empirical standards applied in one of the first and certainly strongest homes for serious [textual criticism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Textual_criticism). As the same text often existed in several different versions, comparative textual criticism was crucial for ensuring their veracity. Once ascertained, canonical copies would then be made for scholars, royalty, and wealthy bibliophiles the world over, this commerce bringing income to the library.

**History**

This Latin inscription regarding [Tiberius Claudius Balbilus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiberius_Claudius_Balbilus) of Rome (d. c. AD 79) mentions the "ALEXANDRINA BYBLIOTHECE" (line eight).

Although it was arguably one of the largest and most significant [libraries of the ancient world](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_libraries_in_the_ancient_world), details about it are a mixture of history and legend. The library's main purpose was to show off the wealth of Egypt, with research as a lesser goal, but the library's contents were used to aid the ruler of Egypt.

According to the earliest source of information, the [pseudepigraphic](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pseudepigrapha) [*Letter of Aristeas*](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Letter_of_Aristeas) composed between c180 and 145 BC, the library was initially organized by [Demetrius of Phaleron](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demetrius_Phalereus), a student of [Aristotle](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristotle), under the reign of [Ptolemy I Soter](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy_I_Soter) (c.367 BC—c.283 BC). Other sources claim it was instead created under the reign of his son [Ptolemy II](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemy_II_Philadelphus) (283–246 BC). The Library was built in the Brucheion (Royal Quarter) in the style of Aristotle's Lyceum, adjacent to (and in service of) the [Musaeum](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Musaeum) (a Greek Temple or "House of Muses", whence the term "museum").

The Library at Alexandria was in charge of collecting all the world's knowledge, and most of the staff was occupied with the task of translating works onto papyrus paper. It did so through an aggressive and well-funded royal mandate involving trips to the book fairs of [Rhodes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodes) and [Athens](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athens). According to [Galen](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Galen), any books found on ships that came into port were taken to the library, and were listed as "*books of the ships*". Official scribes then copied these writings; the originals were kept in the library, and the copies delivered to the owners. Other than collecting works from the past, the library served as home to a host of international scholars, well-patronized by the Ptolemaic dynasty with travel, lodging, and stipends for their whole families.

According to Galen, Ptolemy III requested permission from the Athenians to borrow the original scripts of [Aeschylus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aeschylus), [Sophocles](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sophocles) and [Euripides](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Euripides), for which the Athenians demanded the enormous amount of fifteen [talents](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Talent_%28measurement%29) (1,000 lbs./450 kg) of a precious metal as guarantee. Ptolemy III happily paid the fee but kept the original scripts for the library. This story may also be construed erroneously to show the power of Alexandria over Athens during the [Ptolemaic dynasty](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ptolemaic_dynasty). This detail is due to the fact that Alexandria was a man-made bidirectional port between the mainland and the [Pharos](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lighthouse_of_Alexandria) island, welcoming trade from the East and West, and soon found itself to be an international hub for trade, the leading producer of papyrus and, soon enough, books.

The editors at the Library of Alexandria are especially well known for their work on [Homeric](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Homer) texts. The more famous editors generally also held the title of [head librarian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Category%3ALibrarians_of_Alexandria). These included [Zenodotus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zenodotus), [Apollonius of Rhodes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Apollonius_of_Rhodes), [Eratosthenes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eratosthenes), [Aristophanes of Byzantium](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristophanes_of_Byzantium), and [Aristarchus of Samothrace](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aristarchus_of_Samothrace), among others. (While [Callimachus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Callimachus)—the first bibliographer and developer of the "[Pinakes](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinakes)", popularly considered to be the first library catalog—did his most famous work at the Library of Alexandria, he was never the head librarian there.) In the early 2nd century BC scholars began to abandon Alexandria for safer areas with more generous patronage, and in 145 BC Ptolemy VIII expelled all foreign scholars from Alexandria.

**Destruction**

Main article: [Destruction of the Library of Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Destruction_of_the_Library_of_Alexandria)

*The Burning of the Library at Alexandria in 391 AD*, an illustration from 'Hutchinsons History of the Nations', c. 1910

The famous burning of the Library of Alexandria, including the incalculable loss of ancient works, has become a symbol of the irretrievable loss of public knowledge. Although there is a mythology of "*the* burning of the Library at Alexandria", the library may have suffered several fires or acts of destruction of varying degrees over many years. Ancient and modern sources identify several possible occasions for the partial or complete destruction of the Library of Alexandria.

During [Caesar's Civil War](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caesar%27s_Civil_War), [Julius Caesar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Julius_Caesar) was [besieged at Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Siege_of_Alexandria_%2847_BC%29) in 48 BC. Many ancient sources describe Caesar setting fire to his own ships and state that this fire spread to the library, destroying it.

[W]hen the enemy endeavored to cut off his communication by sea, he was forced to divert that danger by setting fire to his own ships, which, after burning the docks, thence spread on and destroyed the great library.

—Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*

Bolstering this claim, in the 4th century both the pagan historian Ammianus and the Christian historian [Orosius](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orosius)wrote that the Bibliotheca Alexandrina had been destroyed by Caesar's fire. However, [Florus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Florus) and [Lucan](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucan) claim that the flames Caesar set burned only the fleet and some "houses near the sea". Years after Caesar's campaign in Alexandria, the Greek geographer [Strabo](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Strabo) claimed to have worked in the Alexandrian Library.

The library seems to have continued in existence to some degree until its contents were largely lost during the taking of the city by the Emperor [Aurelian](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Aurelian) (AD 270–275), who was suppressing a revolt by [Queen Zenobia](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zenobia) of [Palmyra](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palmyra). During the course of the fighting, the areas of the city in which the main library was located were damaged. Some sources claim that the smaller library located at the Serapeum survived, though [Ammianus Marcellinus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ammianus_Marcellinus) wrote of the library in the Serapeum temple as a thing of the past, destroyed when Caesar sacked Alexandria.

5th century scroll which illustrates the destruction of the Serapeum by Theophilus

Paganism was made illegal by an edict of the Emperor [Theodosius I](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theodosius_I) in AD 391. The temples of Alexandria were closed by [Patriarch](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Patriarch_of_Alexandria) [Theophilus of Alexandria](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theophilus_of_Alexandria) in AD 391. The historian [Socrates of Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Socrates_Scholasticus) describes that all pagan temples in Alexandria were destroyed, including the Serapeum. Since the Serapeum housed a part of the Great Library, some scholars believe that the remains of the Library of Alexandria were destroyed at this time. However, it is not known how many, if any, books were contained in it at the time of destruction, and contemporary scholars do not mention the library directly.

In AD 642, Alexandria was [captured by the Muslim army](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Muslim_conquest_of_Egypt) of [Amr ibn al `Aas](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Amr_ibn_al-Aas). Several later Arabic sources describe the library's destruction by the order of [Caliph Omar](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Caliph_Omar). [Bar-Hebraeus](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bar-Hebraeus), writing in the 13th century, quotes Omar as saying to [Yaḥyā al-Naḥwī](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_Philoponus): "If those books are in agreement with the Quran, we have no need of them; and if these are opposed to the Quran, destroy them." Later scholars are skeptical of these stories, given the range of time that had passed before they were written down and the political motivations of the various writers.

**Legacy**

Although the various component parts of the physical library were destroyed, in fact the centers of academic excellence had already moved to various capital cities. Furthermore, it is possible that most of the material from the Library of Alexandria actually survived, by way of the [Imperial Library of Constantinople](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Imperial_Library_of_Constantinople), the [Academy of Gondishapur](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Academy_of_Gondishapur), and the [House of Wisdom](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/House_of_Wisdom). This material may then have been preserved by the [Reconquista](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reconquista), which led to the formation of [European Universities](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Medieval_university) and the [recompilation of ancient texts](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Research_library#Renaissance) from formerly scattered fragments.

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