

ALEXANDREA
AD AEGYPTVM
THE LEGACY OF
MULTICULTURALISM
IN ANTIQUITY

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BETWEEN THE MUSEUM AND THE LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

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On the 16th October 2012, the President of the Arab Republic of Egypt inaugurated a large and modern building bearing the Latin name *Bibliotheca Alexandrina*, displaying on its external wall the characters of approximately twenty-five alphabets. Projected in 1974, its construction began in 1995, funded by 27 countries and institutions, from Norway to Japan, largely supported by UNESCO; it comprises a vast library with shelf space for four to eight million books, three museums, six art galleries, five research institutes, a conference centre capable of seating up to three thousand people, a planetarium and, of course, an Internet Archive. Though not exhaustive, this list conveys the sense of universalism in such an enterprise and the emphasis on the relationship between political power, on the one hand, and science and culture, on the other hand. It is worth noting that the new building is probably located where the ancient one once stood.

This brief description enables us to introduce the subject of this chapter: what is there in common between the city founded by Alexander the Great founded in 331 B.C., after his conquest of Egypt, and chosen by Ptolemy I as his new seat of government, in 323, and the vast cultural goals that their successors set out to achieve? What is this Alexandria of Egypt (let us use this designation to distinguish it from more than sixteen other cities named after it that were later founded in several of the countries conquered by the Macedonian emperor over the years) that lends its name to an entire era of Greek culture (now rightly called Hellenistic)? This is the city that is also the largest cultural centre from the last decade of the 4th century to the second half of the 2nd century. Such a title is transferred to Rome only

in the 1st century A.D., although only in the Antonine Age should Rome be recognized as the capital of Hellenism, as stated by J. Irigoín¹.

A significant difference between Ancient and Modern Alexandria lies in the population distribution. Even though it is not a megalopolis like Cairo (which has more than three million inhabitants and over seventeen million inhabitants in the metropolitan area), Modern Alexandria, the second largest city in the country, has a population that largely exceeds four million. During the Ptolemaic Dynasty the population numbers were much lower, but the variety and proportion between the origins of its inhabitants was remarkable. In fact, the Greeks that lived there, to whom the splendour of culture was owed, were about one hundred thousand, whereas the native Egyptians amounted to seven million; there were also populations of Jewish and Syrian origins. And yet Hellenistic influence prevailed. In an important paper Andrew Erskine emphasizes the significant role of Greek culture and of the Museum and Library, while also stressing the differences between the then new city and the Hellenistic πόλεις, even though the latter were but colonies – they lacked any traditional bond with the motherland and had no participation in any institution resembling a βουλή.

This does not mean that all the Greeks that lived there had the same origin. On the contrary, many prominent scholars came from other cities in the Mediterranean area: from Syracuse (Theocritus, Archimedes), Samos (Aristarchus), Cyrene (Callimachus), Phaleron (Demetrius); from Alexandria came Apollonius of Rhodes (who was granted citizenship of that island as an honour) and Diophantus. One of the most remarkable mathematicians of all times, Euclid, is said to be of Alexandrian origin, for lack of a better hypothesis.

The truth is that many of the data on the greatest scientists and philologists of that period come mostly from late authors and are often contradictory. Most importantly, these authors provide unclear information or no information at all on the two great institutions created by Ptolemy I and II: the Museum and the Library.

Thus, Strabo mentions, in his description of the magnificence of the city and the royal palace, the Museum but not the Library. After comparing the layout of the city to a grid of parallel streets crossing each other perpendicularly – a plan conceived by Deinocrates of Rhodes, the most renowned architect at the time – proceeds (XVII. 1-2):

And the city contains most beautiful public precincts and also the royal palaces, which constitute one-fourth or even one-third of the whole circuit of the city; for just as each of the kings, from love of splendour, was wont to add some adornment to the public monuments, so also he would invest himself at his own expense with a residence, in addition to those already built, so that now, to quote the words of the poet, «there is building upon building». All, however, are connected with one another and the harbour, even those that lie outside the harbour.

¹ «Les éditions de textes». In *Entretiens Hardt* XL. Genève, 1993, p. 72.

The Museum is also a part of the royal palaces; it has a public walk, an Exedra with seats, and a large house, in which is the common mess-hall of the men of learning who share the Museum. This group of men not only hold property in common, but also have a priest in charge of the Museum, who formerly was appointed by the kings, but is now appointed by Caesar.

Our first observation is that the Greek original of the word that we translated as «erudite» is *philologos*. We will return to it later on. We would also like to stress that Strabo, in another passage of his *Geography* (II.5), refers to the Library as being available to Hipparchus, who is known to have been a scientist connected to the Museum. On the other hand, Diogenes Laertius (V. 51-57), nearly three centuries later, speaks of the two institutions on similar terms. Furthermore, several other authors provide information (albeit contradictory at times) about this matter. The oldest and perhaps most reliable reference is found in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1241, which contains the names of most of the librarians of 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C., such as Apollonius of Rhodes, Eratosthenes and Aristarchus.

It is quite surprising to see a scientist's name in this short list: Eratosthenes, an eminent geographer who calculated the circumference of the Earth with remarkable accuracy, by determining latitudes. His treatise was called *Geometry*, a compound noun the etymology of which means exactly «measurement of the Earth».

Whatever the exact location of the Museum and the Library in Antiquity, it is certain that the men of science worked in the former, while the men of letters worked in the latter.

As regards the designation of Museum, it is worth noting that the institution and its purposes bore no resemblance to today's museums. Etymologically it was the Temple of Muses, directed by a priest. From this perspective, its organization was similar to Aristotle's school, which included also a temple with the same name. Speculations about the establishment of the Lyceum and its library by the Ptolemies are generally accepted as impossible to demonstrate nowadays, especially after R. Pfeiffer's famous work *History of Classical Scholarship from the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age*, in which the chapter on the Hellenistic period begins with this often cited sentence²: «In the stupendous work of Aristotle the telos of the classical age was reached, the end of the intellectual development of the Attic as well as of the Ionian period».

Therefore we have to exclude Strabo's tradition, according to which the Stagirite would have taught the kings of Egypt how to organize a library. As A. Erskine notes, that would not have been possible for «Aristotle was dead by the time Ptolemy gained control of Egypt»³; probably, it means that the organization of the materials was modelled on Aristotle's private collection and that the idea of forming a community of scholars was modelled on the structure of the Lyceum. According to the same Hellenist, it is more plausible

² ERSKINE, 1968: 87.

³ ERSKINE 1995: 38-48.

that the Peripatetic philosopher Demetrius of Phaleron, ten years after his dismissal as tyrant of Athens, was welcomed by Ptolemy, to whom he would have presented the aforementioned model⁴. Yet another possible explanation lies in the monarchic tradition, dating back to Pindar, of supporting illustrious poets at the court. Erskine further opposes these views: the main reason underlying the creation of the Museum and the Library would have stemmed from the Ptolemies' intent to establish their political supremacy on cultural foundations. There are abundant allusions, either explicit or veiled, to the royal house by the three major poets at the time: Theocritus (*Idyll XVII*), Callimachus (*Hymn to Delos*), Apollonius of Rhodes (in the Argonauts' voyage).

We will not discuss the fate of Aristotle's Library, which presumably was bequeathed to Theophrastus and then to Neleus, as hypothesized by Athenaeus (I. 3a-b) and accepted by contemporary scholars, like J. Irigoien. Instead we will focus on what is generally accepted regarding the acquisition of books by the Ptolemies.

Some references date back to Roman period. The most interesting of them is Galen's, one of the greatest names in the history of Medicine, who discovered that blood, rather than air, circulates in the arteries⁵. He said that, under Ptolemy III's orders, all books aboard the ships docked in the harbour of Alexandria were to be seized in order to be copied; once the books had been copied, the copies, not the originals, were returned, with the excuse that they were written on higher-quality papyrus⁶. It is in this context that the transmission of the text by the three tragedians takes place: Ptolemy III orders from Athens, giving fifteen talents as security, the official edition of their works – the edition that was preserved in the public archives and that actors were compelled to use. After copying the text, the original remained in Egypt and the copy was returned, with careful emphasis on the fact that the copies were made on the best papyrus.

It should be noted that that material was easily obtained from the stems of a plant that was once abundant on the banks of the Nile. Meanwhile another kingdom dismembered from Alexander's empire, that of the Attalids of Pergamus, began to rival Alexandria. That is why, according to Pliny the Elder (*N. H.* XIII, 70.), the Ptolemies quickly forbade the export of the plant. The Attalids then resorted to a writing material obtained from prepared animal skins, the name of which derives from the city it came from: parchment. While the authenticity of this story is not recognized by all scholars, the fact is that the new material was used in Europe until the 14th century.

Let us focus on a specific stance in our small digression: rivalry, which in its simplest form is envy. Early on this feeling was manifested by Timon of Phlius in an hexameter satire

⁴ ERSKINE, 1968: 39-40.

⁵ Galen, *Comm. II in Hipp. Epid. III*, CMG 5.10.2.1 (1936), 79.8 apud PFEIFFER, ERSKINE, 1968: 82, 192.

⁶ ERSKINE, 1968, who refers to this text in the aforementioned article published in «Greece and Rome», p. 39 and 47, n. 8, believes that the famous doctor's opinion is tied to the fact that he was born in the rival city of Pergamus.

mocking the scholars of the Museum, that «crowd of bookish scribblers [...] they argue away interminably in the chicken coop of the Muses»⁷.

We would like to point out that, according to another tradition, the kingdom of Pergamon had also attempted to entice Alexandrian erudites, like the famous Aristophanes of Byzantium, but a cruel penalty was imposed for him: the famous librarian was imprisoned in Alexandria for life⁸.

But the main issue is that, although that there are many questions unanswered and others that the discovery of new papyri (like the one containing the list of librarians) may eventually shed light upon, there is no doubt whatsoever about the splendour of two institutions supported by the magnificent Ptolemaic Dynasty – the Museum and the Library – where the most distinguished scholars and writers at the time met and worked. As regards the Museum, it is well attested that scholars received money, there were feasts and banquets, discussions in which the kings took part, and the facilities for such activities was also provided, as well as a peripatos lined with trees. There were also botanical and zoological gardens.

We mentioned Eratosthenes above. Pfeiffer stated that he was the first sage and poet to be above all a scientist. It is worth noting that he was the first to call himself a φιλόλογος⁹, rather than a γραμματικός, as Suetonius wrote. The latter designation was also used by Praxiphanes and later by Dionysius Thrax, the author of the first Greek grammar in the sense currently attributed to the word denoting that kind of compendia¹⁰.

There were many prominent names in several branches of science, particularly in Medicine, Mathematics and Astronomy. For instance, the great physicians of the 3rd century B.C. like Herophilus, who for the very first time differentiated between cerebrum and cerebellum, and tendons and nerves, and his disciple Erasistratus, who distinguished between sensory and motor nerves¹¹. Also the three notable Alexandrian mathematicians, among whom Euclid, who laid the grounds for the Geometry named after him and learned nowadays (though other non-euclidian geometries exist since the 19th century); Apollonius of Perge, who studied the sections of cones; and the greatest of them all, Archimedes of Syracuse, the discoverer of the buoyant force principle and the inventor of so many mechanisms. In Astronomy, Aristarchus of Samos, who presented the first heliocentric theory (immediately contradicted, definitively corroborated by Kepler at the beginning of the 17th century); and Hipparchus of Nicaea, who discovered the precession of the equinoxes and the nutation motion of the Earth's axis¹².

⁷ Fr. 60 Wachsmuth.

⁸ Cf. ERSKINE, 1968: 46, note 43.

⁹ Op. cit., p. 152.

¹⁰ *De grammaticis et rhetoribus*, cap.10, *apud* Pfeiffer, op. cit., p. 158 and n. 8.

¹¹ See MARLOWE, 1971: 79-80.

¹² MARLOWE, 1971: 74-75.

The list is far from complete but nonetheless shows how science is rooted in Antiquity.

We cannot omit literary studies, an area wherein the edition of remarkable texts, like Homer's, was brought about. This type of activity was initiated by the first librarian, Zenodotus, but the most prestigious one was Aristarchus of Samothrace, who lived between the 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. and became known as Ὁμηρικὸς, because of his detailed work on those texts. However, we should note that he also produced exegetical work on other epic poems, poetry and drama; moreover, he was the first scholar to comment on a prose writer, Herodotus. He also established the terminology, colometry and metrical analysis (widely accepted during many centuries, although it would change in our age). While Aristarchus's name became a synonym for rigorous sustained criticism, we should not exclude his teacher's name, Aristophanes of Byzantium, for he was the first scholar to comment upon manuscripts of multiple literary genres (not just epic), to create punctuation and accentual marks, to compose arguments for tragedies and to establish a canon of writers (though the term canon was only coined David Ruhnken in 1768)¹³.

These two illustrious names should be joined by other figures' names, such as the poets Apollonius of Rhodes and Callimachus. The latter wrote, under Ptolemy III's orders, the so-called *πίνακες* in one hundred and twenty books, which were essentially a catalogue of the Library of Alexandria. However, this catalogue was much more than a mere alphabetically ordered list of the books stored in the Library: the catalogue was organized into genres, contained the incipit of each book, brief biographical information and sometimes even authenticity remarks about the works.

Both Callimachus and Apollonius of Rhodes, along with Theocritus, are deemed the greatest Alexandrian poets. Because the first two were librarians and also tutors of the Prince, it is difficult to determine their relationship. For instance, we cannot be sure that Apollonius was Callimachus's disciple, although some passages of the *Argonautica* seem to suggest it, as Pfeiffer observed¹⁴. There are some doubts whether Theocritus worked at the Library, although he certainly received the patronage of Ptolemy.

Some quarrels between the two may be presumed. The doctrines and poetic work of Callimachus and Apollonius are contradictory, as observed by several scholars. Some of Callimachus's verses are well-known, such as the following, which highlight his taste for erudition (fr. 612 Pfeiffer):

I sing of nothing unattested.

or the epigram beginning (XXVIII. 1-2):

I loathe the Cyclic poem, nor do I like

The road which carries many to and fro.

¹³ PFEIFFER, 1968: 204 sqq.

¹⁴ PFEIFFER, 1968: 141. See also HUTCHINSON, 1990: 85-91.

Concerning Apollonius, Pfeiffer noted that he followed closely epic tradition, as regards the unity and continuity in the organization of the poem, and the length of the books was similar to that in epic¹⁵. Furthermore, Alexandrian epic depicts the main characters rigorously analyzing strong emotions (Medea's awakening passion, in Book III, as well as Jason's hesitations, which sometimes render him into an anti-hero, in Gilbert Lawall's words¹⁶).

Theocritus's work is quite different; he is known as an author of bucolic poetry, dealing with challenges between shepherds, echoed in Roman and Renaissance poetry, and the so-called mimes or imitations of real life, the most famous of which is mime XV, *The Syracusans*: it depicts domestic scenes between two women friends, then public scenes while they walk through festive Alexandria before entering the splendid royal palace to listen to the lament for Adonis. This is the poem that gives us a lively picture of the city that we described at the beginning.

It goes without saying that these were certainly not the only Hellenist poets. Our focus on them stems not only from their worth and projection but also from the fact that their work is intertwined with Alexandria as a centre of intellectual life and cultural patronage.

We have seen that the distinction between the activities in the Museum and the Library is not always clear. Nonetheless the two institutions are a whole and mark a brilliant age, one that became a beacon in the history of science and culture.

¹⁵ Op. cit., p. 146-148. On this subject see also Irigoin, «Les éditions de texte», op. cit., p. 55.

¹⁶ AWAL, 1966: 111-169.