

Recapturing the Past:
The Bibliotheca Alexandrina after Five Years

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In contemplating the development of libraries in the Western world, the name of one institution evokes thoughts of a veritable pinnacle of human enlightenment. Though accounts of the Library of Alexandria differ from source to source, it is generally recognized as the largest collection of books and one of the most important research centres of the ancient world. Thought to have been established by the Egyptian ruler Ptolemy Soter and then greatly expanded under the control of his son, the library and the great thinkers who were attracted to it played an important role in establishing Alexandria as one of the foremost cities in the Greek world. But the Alexandrian Library could not withstand the tribulations of time and for reasons that remain unclear, the institution and all the knowledge housed within it disappeared. In spite of its physical destruction, however, the memory of the library remained to “[loom] over the European imagination for more than eight hundred years” (Raven, 2004, p. 11). More than two thousand years after the establishment of the ancient library, its legacy was particularly evident as delegates from the Middle East and abroad gathered under the auspice of UNESCO to propose a revival of Alexandria’s former intellectual glory. With the 1990 signing of the Aswan Declaration, the delegates agreed to “revive the ancient library ... by restating its universal legacy in modern terms” (Aswan Declaration, 1990, p. 1). Dubbed the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (BA), the new library was opened in 2002 and began working to establish itself as a relevant part of Alexandrian society and a true successor to the most amiable principles of its ancient namesake. On the five year anniversary of the institution’s inauguration it seems appropriate to evaluate what progress the BA has made toward achieving the principle goal outlined in the Aswan Declaration. Ultimately, close scrutiny of the past five years reveals that the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has successfully

translated the international scope, cultural significance and technological achievements of the ancient library into the twenty-first century.

Perhaps the most enduring memory surrounding the ancient Library of Alexandria relates to the incredible size and scope of the collection that it housed. Though it is impossible to estimate the precise number of volumes held by the library at any given time, some sources argue that more than 500,000 scrolls had been gathered during the height of its prominence (Erskine, 1995). Thought to be responsible for such a massive stockpile of material was an aggressive government policy that obliged all ships docking in Alexandria to hand over whatever literature they had to the library which kept the original for itself and returned a copy to the owner (Heller-Roazen, 2002). If such a policy was actually enforced, it would easily explain why the library became as large as it did. Drawn to what was widely regarded as the sum of all human knowledge were flocks of scholars from all over the Hellenistic world (Erskine, 1995). Great thinkers like Euclid, Eratosthenes and Plotinus were happily sponsored by Egyptian rulers who valued the ideas that these men produced at the library (Erskine, 1995). Consequently, the scope of the library's collection and the scholars who were drawn to it from all over the world helped establish Alexandria as an international site of research and advancement.

The fact that the modern Bibliotheca Alexandrina was established in cooperation with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) represents a modern parallel to the international scope of the ancient library. Indeed, UNESCO's mandate to "promote international cooperation ... in the fields of education, science, culture and communication" (UNESCO, 2007, About UNESCO, para. 2) captures the spirit of what was once a cornerstone of the ancient library. However, the

BA's affiliation with UNESCO goes one step further in that it signifies a level of international collaboration that was impossible in the Hellenistic world. Each phase of the BA's development, from conception to construction, involved an exchange of ideas, money and materials among the international community. From the Norwegian-designed architecture of the building itself (Kapeller, 2001), to the Spanish, Italian and American manuscripts that fill its shelves (Ziedan, 2005), the Bibliotheca Alexandrina was an international institution from the very beginning. And unlike the ancient library, which translated all foreign materials into Greek (Erskine, 1995), the BA's mission to become a "place of dialogue and understanding between cultures and peoples" (BA, 2007, Mission and Objectives, para. 1) includes building a collection on all subjects and in all languages (Tocatlian, 1991). Consequently, a search of the library's OPAC reveals a wealth of materials, in a variety of languages, as diverse as Nellie McClung's short stories and Japanese economic policy (Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2007). The international flavour of the Bibliotheca's origins and the cultural inclusiveness of its collection, therefore, help comprise an institution that has been built by and for the entire world.

The Library of Alexandria's role as a cultural centre for Greek people living in the city of Alexandria is another memory that has persisted throughout the ages. Having colonized a new land that was both far away from Greece and inhabited by a native Egyptian population that many Greeks regarded as frightening and backward (Erskine, 1995), the library existed as an important symbol of Greek culture for a people who were far removed from it. By providing a repository for such Greek classics as the epic poems of Homer (Erskine, 1995), those who wished to immerse themselves in their native customs were provided with the appropriate means to do so. On the other hand, simply

seeing such a prominent cultural centre from day-to-day likely provided more than enough cultural identification for colonists who did not make use of its facilities (Erskine, 1995). The library's presence also helped to maintain a barrier between the Greek colonists and the Egyptian natives because it upheld an elitist society from which Egyptians were excluded in the city of Alexandria (Erskine, 1995). As long as such officially sanctioned cultural differentiation was maintained, Greeks and Egyptians would never interact with each other on common ground.

A modern parallel to the ancient library's role as a Greek cultural centre can be seen, albeit in a much more positive light, in many of the research initiatives undertaken by the Bibliotheca Alexandrina. The Alexandria and Mediterranean Research Center, for instance, was established and charged with the task of researching and documenting all topics related to the city of Alexandria and the Mediterranean region with the aim of promoting these cultures both within the area and abroad (BA, 2007, Alex-Med). The Gamal Abdel Nasser Collection is comprised of fully digitized speeches, photos, videos and government documents that have been catalogued and made freely available online (BA, 2007, Gamal Abdel Nasser Digital Archive) in order to promote interest in an important Egyptian political figure to both researchers and the general public. The library also participates in the development of the Online Access to Consolidated Information on Serials (OACIS) project for the Middle East. The OACIS aims to promote better understanding of the Middle East by providing easier access to regional literature and academic journals for the rest of the world (BA, 2007, OACIS for the Middle East). Thus, by providing both a leadership role and a physical repository for these research initiatives, the BA helps connect the people of Alexandria, the Middle East,

and the world with a series of regional cultures from which they might otherwise be isolated by time, space or lack of access privileges.

The technological achievements that were incorporated into the Library of Alexandria represent another lasting memory of the ancient institution. The very concept of creating a library, for example, was revolutionary in an age when most intellectual thought was transmitted orally (Salem, 1991). As a result, the success of the library may have helped to legitimize the preservation of intellectual ideas in writing. Furthermore, a groundbreaking cataloguing system devised by the poet Callimachus was one of the first of its kind. The system organized the library's holdings by author and topic, thereby making individual items more easily retrieved (Salem, 1991). Considering that large libraries and cataloguing systems exist to this day, the Library of Alexandria was clearly at the forefront of technological development in the Hellenistic world.

As a founding objective, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has promised to fully embrace the technology of the new digital age (BA, 2007, Mission and Objectives). Indeed, the institution's commitment to technology is most immediately reflected by the fact that the library building itself has been designed to resemble a computer microchip (Kapeller, 2001). Beyond its own architecture, however, the library is heavily involved in various projects that are only possible through the implementation of modern technology. The Taha Hussein Library for the Visually Impaired, for instance, provides a collection of books written entirely in Braille, while computer terminals running special software make the general library catalogue, e-books and databases accessible to the blind (BA, 2007, Taha Hussein Library for Visually Impaired). The BA also participates in the Internet Archive project by maintaining a series of computers that contain a record

of the World Wide Web between the years of 1996 and 2006 (BA, 2007, The Internet Archive). Finally, the library has employed digital imaging technology to create electronic reproductions of rare Egyptian manuscripts that can be viewed on special computer terminals inside the library (BA, 2007, Manuscript Center). Other materials, like the 1798 *Description de l’Egypte*, have been reproduced and published onto the Web for all to enjoy (BA, 2007, Description de l’Egypte). Like its ancient predecessor, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina employs technology in ways that make information accessible to more people.

Five years after its grand opening, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina has made much progress toward establishing itself as a worthy successor to the legacy of its ancient namesake. In particular, the international scope, cultural significance and technological achievements represented by the Library of Alexandria have all been successfully translated into twenty-first century terms. However, just as it took several generations for the ancient library to reach its legendary status, so too will the Bibliotheca Alexandrina require many years to re-establish the city of Alexandria as a world-class learning centre.

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