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Library of Alexandria

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Contents

This OpenLearn free course encourages you to reflect upon and critically assess the factors that shape what we know about antiquity, as well as offering some insight into how different approaches to antiquity – whether through texts, material culture, or modern receptions – can work together. It is important to be aware of how studying the ancient world is always, at heart, an interdisciplinary endeavour, a fact which the case study in this free course demonstrates particularly well. You will explore the ancient Library of Alexandria, a great institution of learning and scholarship founded by the Ptolemaic rulers of Alexandria in the 3rd century BCE.

This OpenLearn course is an adapted extract from the Open University course A863 *MA Classical Studies part 1*.

Learning Outcomes

After studying this course, you should be able to:

- understand the ancient and modern significance of the Library of Alexandria
- critically assess the evidence in the different accounts of its destruction
- understand the ways in which different modern contexts and ideologies shape our interpretations of historical events.

1 Approaching the Library of Alexandria

One of the most important questions for any student of the ancient world to address is 'How do we know what we know about antiquity?' Whether we're thinking about urban architecture, or love poetry, or modern drama, a wide range of factors shape the picture of antiquity that we have today. Interpreting an ancient text, or a piece of material culture, or understanding an historical event, is never a straightforward process of 'discovery', but is always affected by things like translation choices, the preservation (or loss) of an archaeological record, or the agendas of scholars – and I'm sure you could think of many more factors to add to this list. These things certainly complicate our access to the ancient world, but they are also what make its study such a rich and rewarding pursuit!

> You might find it useful to begin this free course with a quick overview of the Library of Alexandria by listening to the edition of the BBC Radio 4 programme *In Our Time* which dealt with the library.

We will begin by taking a look at key features of the Library of Alexandria and its modern counterparts, before examining the dramatic tales that have been told about its destruction, and the symbolic value that it continues to hold today. Although it is a famous ancient icon, there are surprisingly large holes in our knowledge of the Library, which the modern world has attempted to plug in all sorts of fascinating ways. This makes it an ideal topic for thinking about how to interpret and evaluate different kinds of material alongside each other, and about how you might sift the 'facts' from the multi-layered stories and ideas that have been created since antiquity.

2   The universal library?

If we think about a library collection as a body of knowledge, then we can see that the way in which that collection is built up, ordered, and classified, is very important. Not only is some kind of order necessary to help scholars – both ancient and modern – navigate their way through a mass of information, it also tells us something about the particular worldview that underpins that collection of knowledge, and the ideological purposes that motivate it. So, for example, we would expect a study of volcanoes to be classified as a 'scientific' work, but the Greeks and Romans did not use the same sorts of categories to classify things: a text like Lucretius' *De Rerum Natura* used quite different methods to explore the natural world, not least in its use of poetry to explain such diverse topics as the weather, geological features, or the human body.

The question of organising knowledge becomes even more pressing when we turn to the Library of Alexandria, for this was a collection that, many people believe, was intended to hold *all* books that had ever existed. Can such a claim be true? Let's begin by delving a little deeper into this part of the Library's story. The belief in the Library's universality can be traced to a letter by one Aristeas, apparently an Alexandrian courtier in the second century BCE; it is the earliest extant source that mentions the Library. In the course of describing how the Library came to hold the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, the Septuagint (or Greek Old Testament), Aristeas explains how its first director, Demetrios of Phaleron, 'received large sums of money to gather together, if possible, all the books in the world' (*Letter of Aristeas*, 9; see Shutt, 1985, p. 12). The idea that the Library of Alexandria set out to gather every book ever written – including important non-Greek texts – no matter the cost, would be repeated numerous times, from the first-century CE historian Josephus, to the sixth-century CE scholar Isidore of Seville, until it became arguably the most famous characteristic of the Library, with enormous repercussions for how we view it today.

Activity 1

Before we test the veracity of this claim, I'd like you to stop and consider *why* this belief in a universal library of Alexandria might have been so powerful and long-lasting. First, jot down some thoughts on what the idea of a universal library means to you. What might be its equivalent in the modern world?

Then read Andy Potts, 'The internet's librarian' (2009), which is an extract from an *Economist* magazine profile of Brewster Kahle, founder of the Internet Archive, and Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night* (2006). How does the library of Alexandria figure in each of these accounts, and how do their pictures of a modern version contrast with each other?

Discussion

It's not hard to see why the universal library is an appealing idea. On a personal level, think about the collection of information, whether large or small, that might be gathered on your bookshelves at home. Not only can you access it any time you like, you might also feel as though you somehow already possess the knowledge contained within those shelves, even if you haven't read all the books! Now imagine what it would mean if the library of a city or an institution, or even an individual, could claim to have gathered all the world's knowledge on to its shelves. Such an achievement would bestow enormous prestige on those responsible for the collection; they, too, might

even seem to possess the knowledge themselves. You might also have noted that a universal library might not equate to universal access. A collection of all the world's knowledge looks very different if not everyone can consult it.

If you were imagining an ancient universal library, you were no doubt picturing something on an enormous, awe-inspiring scale, but what about a modern equivalent? A few decades ago this would have been hard to comprehend, but now of course the internet offers a tantalising glimpse of a virtual universal library which gathers all the world's knowledge, and even preserves digital copies of all books. The profile of Brewster Kahle shows how the library of Alexandria provides a reference point for these endeavours, and Alberto Manguel makes the same sort of comparison with his description of digitisation projects as 'the ghostly stock of all manner of Alexandrias past or future'. The library of Alexandria still looms large as a model of universal knowledge for the twenty-first century.

While both Kahle and Manguel see the internet as the heir to the ancient concept of the universal library, you might have noted that Manguel's notes of caution contrast with Kahle's enthusiasm. Although Manguel acknowledges the practical benefits of a virtual universal library, he hopes that it will coexist with the traditional library, and he reminds us that even virtual copies of books are fragile and not immune to being lost. You may or may not share these anxieties about the digital universal library, but it is important to recognise how central they are to the question of 'how we know what we know' in the twenty-first century and beyond. As you proceed to look at the library of Alexandria and its fate in more detail, you will also see how some of these modern anxieties have very ancient roots.

2.1   Assessing the evidence

We shall return to the idea of Alexandria's universal library at the end of this free course – but before getting too caught up in these dizzying, seductive images, it's important to assess the historical evidence carefully. Can we confidently state that this was a universal library? Indeed, can we confidently say *anything* about it? The library of Alexandria may symbolise the totality of the world's knowledge – but we actually know very little with any certainty. Scholars have long argued that the *Letter of Aristeas* is fiction, a piece of Jewish propaganda aimed at Greek audiences, and there is no reason to believe its claims for the library's universality, especially since it is riddled with other factual errors (such as wrongly naming Demetrius as the library's first director). Indeed, many things that we think we know about the library prove to be mistaken, or uncertain at best, as the next activity will demonstrate.

Activity 2

Read Roger Bagnall, 'Alexandria: library of dreams' (2002), from the start of the article up to '… hundreds of thousands of rolls' (p. 356). You do not need to read the footnotes. As you read, pay careful attention to Bagnall's account of the historical library, and the evidence he uses. What kind of picture of the library does he build up? Are you surprised by any of it?

Discussion

Bagnall's article is an uncompromising and valuable account of the troubling gap between the popular image of the library of Alexandria and the limited reliable evidence that we actually possess. Each of the library's key features is shown to rest on questionable historical foundations, not least the idea that it housed a 'universal collection'; Bagnall argues that it is implausible to imagine a library housing the vast numbers of papyrus rolls (up to half a million) mentioned by many of the sources, since the figures could only be accurate if the library held a great many more ancient texts than we know about today – an unlikely scenario. He also doubts the often-repeated anecdotes about how the library acquired its collection – by ransacking passing ships, for example – and the assumption that the poet and scholar Callimachus could have catalogued the holdings of an entire library, especially a universal one. Even the founding of the library is uncertain, suggests Bagnall: impossible to attribute confidently to either of the first two Ptolemies.

You might also have noticed how the literary and archaeological records – or, rather, the lack of them – work together in Bagnall's account. We might be able to say more about the library if the sketchy and unreliable ancient texts could be supplemented by useful archaeological evidence, but there is very little to go on – as Bagnall shows, the so-called granite papyrus containers are unlikely to have been used for this purpose.

Figure 1 Map of the ancient city of Alexandria.

You might also have noticed how the literary and archaeological records – or rather, the lack of them – work together in Bagnall's account. We might be able to say more about the library if the sketchy and unreliable ancient texts could be supplemented by useful archaeological evidence, but there is very little to go on – as Bagnall shows, the so-called granite papyrus containers are unlikely to have been used for this purpose. In a 2008 article Jean-Yves Empereur, the leader of excavations in Alexandria, explained why archaeological evidence for the library is in short supply. We know that the library was part of Alexandria's Palace Quarter – which the map in Figure 1 shows as adjacent to the harbour – but seismic activity over the centuries has left this area of the city underwater, and the extent of the modern city also impedes access to its ancient remains. Moreover, if the library were to be found, suggests Empereur, would we even recognise it as such? Papyri would not have survived in Alexandria's humid conditions (unlike the arid desert which preserved the Oxyrhynchus rolls), and the buildings would likely have consisted of simple stoas and other large spaces, making them possibly indistinguishable from other large buildings. Perhaps an inscription would give a key to the building's identity, but interpreting inscriptions is itself rarely straightforward. Although the Egyptian authorities have occasionally trumpeted the discovery of so-called lecture halls, other archaeologists are sceptical.

You can read one such report from 2004,
David Whitehouse: 'Library of Alexandria discovered', via the BBC News website.

3   The destruction of the library

I hope that, after reading the extract from Bagnall, you will have seen that asking 'how we know what we know' about the library of Alexandria means acknowledging that we actually *know* very little. This uncertainty only deepens when we turn to consider its eventual fate. It's obvious that, at some point in history, the library disappeared; but *how*? If you are seduced by the idea of the library as a storehouse of universal knowledge, then take a moment to imagine what it would mean for all the world's books to be lost – or even destroyed. What could possibly lead to such a calamity, and what would its effects be? Even if you take the more moderate (and, to my mind, plausible) view, that the library could not possibly have been 'universal', but was at least a very large and ambitious scholarly collection, then you are still likely to be curious about what happened to it, and to lament the disappearance of texts that it might once have contained. The stories that are told about the end of the library of Alexandria are therefore a very important part of how we interpret it. In this section I shall introduce you to some different accounts of the library's disappearance, and ask you to evaluate them as potential historical sources, before this free course's final section considers their symbolic potential.

Activity 3

Read the following passages, each of which offers a different perspective on the library's destruction:

- Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 49
- Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 42.38.2
- Ammianus Marcellinus, *Histories* 22.16.13–14
- Edward Gibbon, *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*
- Gregory Bar Hebraeus/Abu'l Faraj, *Chronicum Syriacum*.

How many versions of events are offered here? As you read, think about any problems that might arise with using these writings as historical sources (for example, look at their dates of composition; you might need to do some background research to find out more about authors with whom you're unfamiliar, but don't spend more than half an hour on this), and note where the sources corroborate or contradict each other.

Discussion

Let's take each of these sources in turn and try to determine whether they tell us anything reliable about the fate of the library. The brief account in Plutarch's *Life of Caesar* appears to be a straightforward assertion that the library was destroyed as a (presumably unintended) consequence of a fire started by Julius Caesar, in 48 (or perhaps 47) BCE. Caesar had become embroiled in a conflict between Ptolemy XIII and his sister, Cleopatra, and had taken the famous queen's side; he was forced to start the fire when Ptolemy's fleet besieged them in Alexandria, but, as well as burning the ships, many buildings on the harbourside, and perhaps beyond, were destroyed – including, says Plutarch, the library. This account is short on detail, though, and was written at least a century after the events it describes.

Dio Cassius' reference to the same event is similarly brief, and comes a little later (probably written near the beginning of the third century CE). Careful reading of the original texts should also start to raise some doubts, for while Plutarch uses the Greek

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word for 'library' (*bibliothēkē*), Dio refers simply to the burning of 'books' (*biblion*). Although you can find this translated as 'library' in some versions, the Greek, when read carefully, is talking about 'warehouses', which potentially held books as well as grain – so is Dio even describing the destruction of the main library at all?

These two sources exemplify the care we need to take when mining ancient texts for historical information. Translation choices can significantly affect the way we interpret a text, as can the ways in which the texts relate to other kinds of evidence. If we knew for sure that the library of Alexandria was located close to the harbour, then we might be more confident in Plutarch's account, but, as you saw in the previous section, our ignorance of its position and layout gives us little in the way of corroborating evidence.

Ammianus Marcellinus' even later (fourth century CE) account of Caesar's fire further demonstrates how uncertainties over the material presence of the library increase the confusion in written accounts of its fate. Again, we have an account of the library falling victim to Julius Caesar – and note how Ammianus emphasises its awe-inspiring scale – but it is now connected to a temple called the Serapeum. We know enough about the archaeology of Alexandria to be sure that this was located some distance from the Palace Quarter and the harbourside – as you can see from the map in Figure 1 – so what library is Ammianus referring to here? Scholars agree that the Serapeum did house an offshoot of the main library of Alexandria – usually referred to as the 'daughter library' – but this was unlikely to have been affected by the 48/47 fire. Read alongside the other sources, then, Ammianus' account leaves us still more confused over the size, and crucially the location, of the Alexandrian libraries under discussion.

In any case, the next extract that you read, from Edward Gibbon's account of Rome's fall, offers us a rather different version of events, one in which the location of a library in the Serapeum makes more sense. Drawing on a number of late antique sources, Gibbon refers to the library of Alexandria rising 'from its ashes' (presumably Caesar's fire) and being reconstituted in the 'temple of Serapis', or Serapeum – yet this too was destroyed in 391 CE, when the Christian rulers of Alexandria clamped down on pagan cults in the city and sacked the temple. For Gibbon, *this* was the real destruction of the library, and he again reinforces the idea of the library as a precious collection of knowledge – valuable, if not universal – and laments what might have been lost in this 'wreck of idolatry'. This is just what we might expect from this leading scholar of the Enlightenment. You will have noted, I hope, that Gibbon was writing in the 1770s and 1780s: even more distant from the events than our other sources. As with all historical accounts, we must carefully interrogate Gibbon, and recognise how his version of the library's destruction is shaped by his own cultural and intellectual context. This was a time that held the pursuit of knowledge, scholarship and rational enquiry in very high regard, and so it is not surprising that the perceived loss of the library, as the symbol of all of these things, might be so keenly felt.

Finally, you read yet another account of the library's destruction – this time laying the blame at the feet of the seventh-century Arab conquerors of Alexandria. The fact that the books apparently fed the furnaces of the city's baths for six months again suggests that this is the story of the destruction of a monumental library – but is it plausible? If we are to believe in it, it means that a vast library collection must have persisted in Alexandria for centuries, despite the damage apparently wrought by Romans and Christians. Alarm bells should also ring when we learn that this story does not emerge until six centuries after the events it recounts.

Figure 2 Robert A Dudley, *The Burning of the Library at Alexandria in 391 AD*, lithograph, *c*.1910, from Hutchinson's *History of the Nations*, published United Kingdom, 1910. Photo: Bridgeman Art Library .

You have now read accounts of what seem to be three different 'destructions' of a great library in Alexandria – a fire set by Julius Caesar in 48/47 BCE, the destruction of the library as part of the sack of the Serapeum by Christians in 391 CE, and the destruction of a library by Islamic conquerors in 641 CE. Each of them seems to be problematic to a greater or lesser degree, so can we sift through them and hope to arrive at a plausible version of events?

Activity 4

To see an example of the kind of careful analysis that such a jumble of narratives requires, let's return to Bagnall's account of the library. Read [Roger Bagnall, 'Alexandria: library of dreams'](#) (2002), from 'Nothing in the Library's history …' (p. 356) to the end of the article. How does Bagnall explain the library's disappearance?

Discussion

You will see that Bagnall offers a considerably less dramatic hypothesis of the library's fate. His central argument is that gradual processes of neglect and decay would have been just as damaging to the long-term survival of the library as any single act of destruction. The fire in 48/47 probably did destroy a significant number of books, but it is unlikely that the entire library disappeared – as Myrto Hatzimichali (2013) explains in an essay, there is evidence for ongoing library activity in Roman Alexandria, and, building on Dio Cassius' account, some scholars have suggested that the fire destroyed only papyri in warehouses which had not yet been transported to the main library (or which were perhaps due to be exported). The destruction of the Serapeum probably did destroy significant library holdings, but, as we have no way of knowing what was in the 'daughter library', it is misleading to think that the Christians somehow destroyed a great and universal library. The Islamic story is, scholars widely agree, simply fiction; Bernard Lewis (2008), for example, has shown how it has a number of parallels in contemporary myth and folklore. If anything, the most likely occasion for a large-scale destruction of library buildings is the early 270s, when the Emperor Aurelian was locked in fierce combat with Palmyran insurgencies in Alexandria and much of the city was destroyed. The fact that no contemporary sources mention the destruction of the library might simply suggest that nothing very significant remained of the original and great institution by this time.

This stark hypothesis can be difficult to accept. As Bagnall says, we like to have stories that identify villains to blame. Especially when Alexandria's library is so often presented as a pinnacle of scholarly achievement, can we really believe that such a great collection of knowledge was allowed gradually to deteriorate and disappear? The

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evidence, such as we have it, says that we must at least seriously entertain that theory – just as we must also readjust our notions of the scope of the library in the first place.

4   Reimagining the library

The very few facts that we have about the library's life and death only get us so far, as you have seen. But I like to think that our approach to antiquity is about much more than cold, hard facts. The way in which we deal with our uncertainties about the past is interesting in its own right, and should be studied with an open, enquiring mind. Even when common sense tells us one thing – that the library may have been gigantic, but not universal, and that it may have been abandoned and neglected rather than wantonly destroyed – our ideological, not to say emotional, approach to the past may lead us in another direction. The final section of this free course therefore asks you to spend a little time thinking about why these ideological and emotional interpretations of past events are valuable – both for their own sake, and because they so clearly inform many people's assumptions about what did actually happen.

This sort of approach to antiquity falls under the broad umbrella of 'classical reception studies'. In simple terms, a reception of antiquity is any act of engagement with the ancient past: this could be a Hollywood film of a historical event, a piece of art that imitates a classical model, or a piece of scholarship that seeks to explain an ancient text – the possibilities are endless. What is important is that we recognise how, through these encounters with the past, we are always looking at antiquity from the perspective of the present. The baggage that we carry with us in our present necessarily affects what we *do* with that past, whether we're restaging an ancient play, or 'simply' interpreting an historical event. We 'receive' and interpret the ancient past according to our own agendas, as do the translators, editors and scholars you inevitably rely on for information about, and interpretations of, the classical world. Let's think about how this might work in the context of the library of Alexandria.

Activity 5

As the previous section suggested, the various accounts of the library's destruction might not stand up to much historical scrutiny, and there most likely was no single cataclysmic destruction of a universal library in Alexandria. But these stories have been repeated often enough over the centuries in order for them to take on a life of their own. Look back at those different versions of the library's destruction – at the hands of Romans, Christians or Muslims – and note down your thoughts on how these different versions might have been ideologically motivated, and why they might remain powerful even when they've been discredited. What is the consequence of assigning responsibility for the 'destruction' to one group of people or another?

Discussion

The first thing that you might have noted is that the accounts of Caesar's fire in 48/47 BCE (the extracts from Plutarch, Dio Cassius and Ammianus Marcellinus) don't specifically blame Caesar for the library's apparent destruction, but rather suggest that it was an unintended consequence of the fire that was directed at Ptolemy's fleet. The brief description of what happened to the library is relatively neutral, ideologically speaking (though of course it is easy to imagine that other, perhaps lost, accounts of Caesar's fire might have presented him in a more negative light – ancient attitudes towards Caesar were hardly uniformly neutral, after all). The accounts of the Christian and Arab destructions (provided by Gibbon and Hebraeus, respectively) are much more loaded, in that they make the destruction an intentional act; in both cases,

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broadly speaking, the library is destroyed because it is a symbol of a pagan worldview, one that is unacceptable to the new ruling powers, whether Christian or Muslim. This interpretation might be familiar if you have seen *Agora*, a 2009 film (directed by Alejandro Amenábar) which told the story of the female scholar Hypatia, who worked in Alexandria at the time of the sack of the Serapeum. This event becomes the centrepiece of the film, and though it is acknowledged that it is the daughter library in the Serapeum, rather than the original main library, that was destroyed, still its destruction is presented as a violent desecration of a large (if not universal) body of knowledge, perpetrated by the brutally misogynistic and bigoted Christian rulers of Alexandria who cannot abide the open-minded, enquiring spirit of the pagans as symbolised by Hypatia. Consequently, the film attracted a good deal of controversy for its supposed anti-Christian agenda, and, although the film-makers vehemently denied this, it's not hard to see why it met with such an intense reaction. The image of books being destroyed remains a powerful symbol of brutality and totalitarianism in the modern world, perhaps best exemplified by the public burning of 'un-German' books under the Nazi regime in 1933.

This is not to say that we can label these sources as themselves anti-Christian or anti-Muslim propaganda – but once these stories of wanton destruction by specific groups gain currency, they are free to be repeated, embellished, or rejected, in order to suit any number of different purposes.

Different accounts of the Library's destruction can bear considerable political significance right up to the present day, as the recent foundation of a new Alexandrian library – the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, in 2002 – demonstrates. As Susan Stephens (2010) has explained in a recent article, the new Library is profoundly shaped by contemporary ideas about the old one, and its fate, and responds particularly to the widespread popular belief in a Muslim destruction of the library. Instead of a narrative in which Muslims are destroyers of the world's knowledge, the revived library seeks to 'recuperate' their image in the eyes of the west, and to position modern Egypt as the heir to ancient Alexandrians' crowning achievement, in the universal library. Stephens also points out how, just as with the Ptolemies, the symbolism of a great Library was harnessed by Hosni Mubarak and the ruling elite of Egypt in order to boost their national identity and their prestige in the eyes of others. This must give us cause to reflect on how modern political contexts can overtake scholarship, for only shortly after Stephens's article was published, Mubarak's regime was overthrown by the Egyptian revolution in the 'Arab Spring' of 2011. The new Library survives, but news reports at the time told of how the building had to be protected from the 'lawless bands of thugs' who were looting many properties, and who might have targeted the Bibliotheca Alexandrina as a symbol of Mubarak's regime (see, for example, this report in *The Guardian* newspaper). The actual facts of what happened are not so important – the Library itself was not directly targeted, and certainly not looted – but what is clear is the speed with which, once again, it becomes a symbol of something much greater than just a collection of books.

Figure 3 Interior of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, University of Alexandria, Egypt. Photo: Getty.

Conclusion

Let us end, then, by lingering on the enduring symbolism of the library of Alexandria, usefully summed up in the reading by Alberto Manguel. What I take from his reflections is this: historically speaking, we may know very little about the nature of the library and what happened to it, but that doesn't mean it is of no use to us when thinking about the ancient world, the nature of knowledge, or indeed the human condition itself. Manguel shows how meaningful the library can be as a symbol, even if it is not supported by concrete historical evidence; indeed, I think it is the very fact that the 'real' library is so elusive that makes it so powerful as a symbol. In this sense, 'knowledge' about the ancient world doesn't necessarily mean only the historically verifiable facts and solid remains of material culture. As important as they are, they don't amount to very much when it comes to the library of Alexandria – and yet, as we have seen, it's something that assumes enormous importance in what we might call the historical imagination, through the stories that keep on being told about it. I hope that you, too, will have gained from this free course a keen sense of how to evaluate the gaps between what we think we know about antiquity and what the ancient evidence actually tells us, and to recognise that the stories that grow up in order to fill those gaps are interesting and important in their own right.

Readings

Andy Potts, 'The internet's librarian'

Potts, A. (2009) 'The internet's librarian', *The Economist* [Online]. Available at http://www.economist.com/node/13174399 (Accessed 9 June 2014).

For a man who has set himself a seemingly impossible mission, Brewster Kahle seems remarkably laid back. Relaxing in the black leather recliner that serves as his office chair, his stockinged feet wriggling with evident enthusiasm, the founder of the Internet Archive explains what has driven him for more than a decade. "We are trying to build Alexandria 2.0," says Mr Kahle with a wide-eyed, boyish grin. Sure, and plenty of people are trying to abolish hunger, too.

It would be easy to dismiss Mr Kahle as an idealistic fruitcake, but for one thing: he has an impressive record when it comes to setting lofty goals and then lining up the people and technology needed to get the job done. "Brewster is a visionary who looks at things differently," says Carole Moore, chief librarian at the University of Toronto. "He is able to imagine doing things that everyone else thinks are impossible. But then he does them."

Mr Kahle is an unostentatious millionaire who does not "wear his money on clothes", as one acquaintance graciously puts it. But behind his dishevelled demeanour is a skilled technologist, an ardent activist and a successful serial entrepreneur. Having founded and sold technology companies to AOL and Amazon, he has now devoted himself to building a non-profit digital archive of free materials—books, films, concerts and so on—to rival the legendary Alexandrian library of antiquity. This has brought him into conflict with Google, the giant internet company which is pursuing a similar goal, but in a rather different (and more commercially oriented) way.

[…]

But all these things are steps towards Mr Kahle's wider goal: to build the world's largest digital library. He has recruited 135 libraries worldwide to openlibrary.org, the aim of which is to create a catalogue of every book ever published, with links to its full text where available. To that end, the Internet Archive is also digitising books on a large scale on behalf of its library partners. It scans more than 1,000 books every day, for which the libraries pay about $30 each. (The digital copy can then be made available by both parties.)

Alberto Manguel, *The Library at Night*

Manguel, A. (2006) *The Library at Night*, New Haven, CT and London, Yale University Press, pp. 78–9.

In 2004 the most popular of all Internet search services, Google, announced that it had concluded agreements with several of the world's leading research libraries – Harvard, the Bodleian, Stanford, the New York Public Library – to scan part of their holdings and make the books available on-line to researchers, who would no longer have to travel to the libraries themselves or dust their way through endless stacks of paper and ink. Though, for financial and administrative reasons, Google cancelled its project in July 2005, it will doubtless be resurrected in the future, since it is so obviously suited to the

capabilities of the Web. In the next few years, in all probability, millions of pages will be waiting for their on-line readers. As in the cautionary tale of Babel, "nothing will be restrained from them, which they have imagined to do," and we shall soon be able to summon up the whole of the ghostly stock of all manner of Alexandrias past or future, with the mere tap of a finger.

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The practical arguments for such a step are irrefutable. Quantity, speed, precision, on-demand availability are obviously important to the researching scholar. And the birth of a new technology need not mean the death of an earlier one: the invention of photography did not eliminate painting, it renewed it, and the screen and the codex can feed off each other and coexist amicably on the same reader's desk. In comparing the virtual library to the traditional one of paper and ink, we need to remember several things: that reading often requires slowness, depth and context; that our electronic technology is still fragile and that, since it keeps changing, it prevents us many times from retrieving what was once stored in now superseded containers; that leafing through a book or roaming through shelves is an intimate part of the craft of reading and cannot be entirely replaced by scrolling down a screen, any more than real travel can be replaced by travelogues and 3-D gadgets.

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Return to Activity 1

Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* 49

Plutarch, *Life of Caesar* in *Plutarch's Lives*, trans. B. Perrin (1919) Cambridge, MA and London, Harvard University Press [Online]. Available at http://www.perseus. tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0244%3Achapter%3D49 (Accessed 9 June 2014).

After Caesar had found them out, he set a guard about the banqueting-hall, and put Potheinus to death; Achillas, however, escaped to his camp, and raised about Caesar a war grievous and difficult for one who was defending himself with so few followers against so large a city and army. In this war, to begin with, Caesar encountered the peril of being shut off from water, since the canals were dammed up by the enemy; in the second place, when the enemy tried to cut off his fleet, he was forced to repel the danger by using fire, and this spread from the dockyards and destroyed the great library.

Dio Cassius, *Roman History* 42.38.2

Barnes, R. (2004) 'Cloistered bookworms in the chicken-coop of the Muses: the ancient library of Alexandria' in MacLeod, R. (ed.) *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, p. 71.

After this, many battles took place between them [i.e. the forces of Caesar and Cleopatra and of Ptolemy XIII] by day and night, and many parts were set on fire, so that among other places the docks and the grain warehouses were burnt, and also the books, which were, they say, very many and excellent.

Ammianus Marcellinus, *Histories* 22.16.13–14

Barnes, R. (2004) 'Cloistered bookworms in the chicken-coop of the Muses: the ancient library of Alexandria' in MacLeod, R. (ed.) *The Library of Alexandria: Centre of Learning in the Ancient World*, London and New York, I.B. Tauris, p. 71.

In addition there are [in Alexandria] temples with elevated roofs, among which the Serapeum stands out. Although it cannot be done justice with an inadequate description, it is so adorned with great columned halls, and statuary which seems almost alive, and a great number of other works, that, apart from the Capitolium, by which the venerable city of Rome claims eternal renown, nothing more magnificent can be seen in the whole world. In this temple were libraries beyond calculation, and the trustworthy testimony of ancient records agrees that 700,000 books, brought together by the unsleeping care of the Ptolemaic kings, were burned in the Alexandrian war, when the city was sacked under the dictator Caesar.

Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*

Gibbon, E. (1909–14 [1776–88]) *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 7 vols, ed. J.B. Bury, London, Methuen pp. 562–4.

Alexandria, which claimed his peculiar protection, gloried in the name of the city of Serapis. His temple, which rivalled the pride and magnificence of the Capitol, was erected on the spacious summit of an artificial mount, raised one hundred steps above the level of the adjacent parts of the city; and the interior cavity was strongly supported by arches, and distributed into vaults and subterraneous apartments. The consecrated buildings were surrounded by a quadrangular portico; the stately halls, and exquisite statues, displayed the triumph of the arts; and the treasures of ancient learning were preserved in the famous Alexandrian library, which had arisen with new splendour from its ashes. After the edicts of Theodosius had severely prohibited the sacrifices of the Pagans, they were still tolerated in the city and temple of Serapis; and this singular indulgence was imprudently ascribed to the superstitious terrors of the Christians themselves; as if they had feared to abolish those ancient rites, which could alone secure the inundations of the Nile, the harvests of Egypt, and the subsistence of Constantinople.

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At that time the archiepiscopal throne of Alexandria was filled by Theophilus, the perpetual enemy of peace and virtue; a bold, bad man, whose hands were alternately polluted with gold and with blood. His pious indignation was excited by the honours of Serapis; and the insults which he offered to an ancient temple of Bacchus, convinced the Pagans that he meditated a more important and dangerous enterprise. In the tumultuous capital of Egypt, the slightest provocation was sufficient to inflame a civil war. The votaries of Serapis, whose strength and numbers were much inferior to those of their antagonists, rose in arms at the instigation of the philosopher Olympius, who exhorted them to die in the defence of the altars of the gods. These Pagan fanatics fortified themselves in the temple, or rather fortress, of Serapis; repelled the besiegers by daring sallies and a resolute defence; and, by the inhuman cruelties which they exercised on their Christian prisoners, obtained the last consolation of despair. The efforts of the prudent magistrate

were usefully exerted for the establishment of a truce till the answer of Theodosius should determine the fate of Serapis. The two parties assembled, without arms, in the principal square; and the Imperial rescript was publicly read. But when a sentence of destruction against the idols of Alexandria was pronounced, the Christians set up a shout of joy and exultation, whilst the unfortunate Pagans, whose fury had given way to consternation, retired with hasty and silent steps, and eluded, by their flight or obscurity, the resentment of their enemies. Theophilus proceeded to demolish the temple of Serapis, without any other difficulties than those which he found in the weight and solidity of the materials: but these obstacles proved so insuperable that he was obliged to leave the foundations and to content himself with reducing the edifice itself to a heap of rubbish; a part of which was soon afterwards cleared away, to make room for a church, erected in honour of the Christian martyrs. The valuable library of Alexandria was pillaged or destroyed; and, near twenty years afterwards, the appearance of the empty shelves excited the regret and indignation of every spectator, whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice. The compositions of ancient genius, so many of which have irretrievably perished, might surely have been excepted from the wreck of idolatry, for the amusement and instruction of succeeding ages; and either the zeal or the avarice of the archbishop might have been satiated with the rich spoils which were the reward of his victory.

<div style="text-align: right">p. 564</div>

Gregory Bar Hebraeus/Abu'l Faraj, *Chronicum Syriacum*

Pearse, R. (2010) 'Bar Hebraeus, Abd al-Latif, and the desctruction of the library of Alexandria', *Thoughts on Antiquity, Patristics, Putting Things Online, Freeform of Speech, Information Access, and More* **[Online]. Available at http://www.roger-pearse.com/weblog/2010/09/11/bar-hebraeus-abd-al-latif-and-the-destruction-of-the-library-of-alexandria/ (Accessed 9 June 2014).**

In those days Yahya al-Nahwi, who was known as Grammaticus in our language, enjoyed fame among Arabs. He was a resident of Alexandria and a Jacobite Christian who ascribed to the Savari creed. In his last days he renounced the Christian faith, and all Christian scholars of Egypt gathered around him and advised him to recant, but he did not. When the scholars were disappointed they stripped him of all the offices that he held. He lived in that condition until Amr ibn al As (the Muslim commander of the army conquering Egypt) entered Egypt [in 641 A.D.].

One day Yahya went to see him. Amr came to know about his learning and scholarship and he paid him great respect. He began a discourse on philosophical issues which were unknown to Arabs. His speech made a deep impression on Amr and he became fond of him. As Amr was an intelligent, wise and thoughtful man, he made Yahya his companion, never parting his company.

One day Yahya said to Amr, "Whatever there is in Alexandria is in your control. As to things that are useful for you we have nothing to do with them, but as to those which you may not need, my request is that you favour us by putting them at our disposal, for we deserve them more than anyone else." Amr asked him what they were. He said: "They are the books on wisdom and philosophy that are stored in the state library."

Amr replied that he could not decide the matter himself but had to seek the Caliph's instructions in this regard. Accordingly, he informed the Caliph of the matter and asked for

instructions. The Caliph wrote: "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."

After receiving the reply Amr began dismantling the library. At his orders, the books were distributed among the public baths of Alexandria. Thus in a period of six months all the books were burnt and destroyed. Believe it, and do not be amazed.

Return to Activity 3

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