

## **Destruction of Alexandria Library: A Historical Reappraisal**

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### **Abstract**

Alexandria was the first cosmopolitan city in the ancient world that dazzled people from all over the world. It was a trade hub situated near the Mediterranean Sea. Seemingly, the Great Library of Alexandria was the largest and first of its kind, a beacon in the ancient world. It was founded by Ptolemy I (367 BC - 283 BC), the founder of the Ptolemaic Dynasty. Great scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, and physicians worked there with royal patronage. However, the Great Library was burnt by Julius Caesar (48 BC), Emperor Aurelian (272 CE), Theodosius (391 CE), and Caliph Omar (RA) (639 CE). Therefore, it is an undeniable fact that it was a great catastrophe of the ancient world. Whether the library was worthy enough or not- is disputable in history, what seems indisputable is that the library was burnt. Based on the above arguments the present article tries to reveal the history of the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria and analyze how much the destruction affected the progress of human civilization.

### **Introduction**

The Great Library of Alexandria was the largest library in the ancient world, centre and symbol of Hellenistic culture, hub of excellence and intelligentsia, and a great learning epitome situated in the harbour of the Mediterranean Sea. The city of Alexandria was the first cosmopolitan city in the ancient world founded by Alexander the Great (356 BC –323 BC). He followed his tutor Aristotle's plan to make Alexandria a great place for learning in all fields of arts, science, and culture. In other words, Alexander followed Aristotle's ideal city plan. However, after the death of Alexander the Great, his cousin (General) Ptolemy ascended as king (Pharaoh) of Egypt who was also the founder of the Ptolemaic dynasty. He established Alexandria as capital instead of traditional city of Memphis.<sup>1</sup> Ptolemy I Soter (ruled Egypt from 323 to 282 BC) desired to make Alexandria as a great spiritual knowledge and learning center. He constructed a counterweight spiritual learning core of arts, science, and culture to the ancient Egypt and other Greek knowledge hub of Athens. To enrich the knowledge centre, King's agents were instructed to collect books from all over the world. Besides, it was a routine work to search foreign ships-which used to ply via Mediterranean port for

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business purpose. It was done for collecting books that enriched the knowledge hub in a sophisticated way. The library contained approximately 500,000 to 7000,000 scrolls. Moreover, many scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, musicians, and physicians worked there with the benefaction of royal privilege. Therefore, the library was hotbed for premier intellectuals of the ancient world. Thus the library became the hub of excellence.

The largest library of ancient world had been attacked many times by the outsiders, as a result, Alexandria suffered from 2<sup>nd</sup> century to 7<sup>th</sup> century for its strategic location in the Mediterranean world. It was attacked by Julius Caesar, Emperor Aurelian, Emperor Theodosius, and Caliph Omar (RA). There are many historical debates about the exact date of the destruction of the library. It is also a controversial issue in regards to the responsible invaders. But the historic truth is that the Great Library was attacked and burnt so many times. Alexandria was not only a library but a cultural epitome in its contemporary world. The devastation was resulted in a great catastrophe of ancient world as well as in the domain of knowledge. It is believed that the destruction of the library put the civilization back. The world civilization could have probably been reaching in more advanced level of science, arts, and culture if it could avoid the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria.

The objective of the present article is to illustrate the history of the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria in terms of harming of the progress of human civilization. Putting a special emphasis on the library's great works and contributions, the article also tries to elaborate the great loss in ancient world due to the destruction of the library.

### **Methodology**

Multiple sources have been used for the research, combining primary and closely related secondary materials, including archival documents. For exploring primary and secondary materials, both theoretical and empirical methods were quite helpful for this research. Since the study is qualitative in nature, there has been an extensive study of the sources. In doing so history based national and international books, research articles, e-journals, online sources, ancient history documentaries and Television series has been studied. Documentaries (Cosmos) had been presented by Carl Sagan (1934- 1996), National Geographic Channel, and BBC history based documentaries have also been very helpful to accomplish the present work. Archival documents and reports were also helpful

sources to complete it. The materials from reputed Universities' accessible library archives, such as University of Pennsylvania, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Columbia University, Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), University of Hodges, and the Library of Congress helped me out in collecting the sources on the great Library of Alexandria.

### **Foundation of the Great Library of Alexandria**

Ancient Alexandria was founded in 331 BC by Alexander the Great, who followed his tutor— a man of great knowledge, the philosopher-Aristotle's ideal city plan to make them into practice.<sup>2</sup> The city of Alexandria was one of the greatest cities in the ancient world. Because of its increasing importance the city became a megalopolis and the connexion between Greece and Egypt.<sup>3</sup> Its sophisticated foundation dazzled many visitors. That great city had spacious streets along with palaces, and temples. It was the learning center of ancient Egypt from the date of its foundation to nearly 1,000 years until the Arab conquered Alexandria in 640 CE.<sup>4</sup> After the death of Alexander the Great in June 323 BC in Babylon, his cousin Ptolemy ascended the throne as the pharaoh, who is also known as Ptolemy I Soter (367 BC - 283 BC) and the founding father of Ptolemaic dynasty.

However, the Great Library of Alexandria was one of the greatest achievements of Ptolemaic dynasty as well as for Ptolemy I, who ruled Egypt from 323 to 282 BC who patronized spiritual learning center of arts, science, and culture of the ancient Egypt. The records depict that Ptolemy I empowered the famous orator Demetrios Phalereus, "to collect, if he could, all the books in the inhabited world."<sup>5</sup> It is also said that King Ptolemy wrote letter to all the sovereigns and governors on earth requesting to send books as well as encouraged poets and prose writers, sophists, doctors, musicians, and historians for gathering the universal knowledge under one roof.<sup>6</sup> In this way Ptolemy wanted to build a universal learning center which was a great cultural achievement of him. To enrich and implement his desire he sent his agents to collect books, manuscripts, and scrolls from Asia, Africa, North America, and Europe. This experience as well as book collection procedure finally assembled the largest library in the ancient world, which was the Hellenistic cultural center of Egypt i.e. the Great Library of Alexandria.

There were two libraries according to the historical evidences and different legends. The first one was called "Mother" library situated in the *Mouseion* in the *Bruchium* quarter of the city was founded between

300-290 BC by the Ptolemy I.<sup>7</sup> It was known as the world's largest collection with an inventory of around 490,000 papyrus rolls.<sup>8</sup> The second one was named "Daughter" library situated near to the Temple of *Serapis* (*Serapeum*), was founded before 200 BC. There is a debate over the historical legacy of the library of "Daughter". Whether the library even existed or not is yet to be unanimously settled. But the destruction of the library is undeniable and it has been historically proved by the experts. However, the recent geological and geophysical research supports the existence of both libraries of the ancient world.

### **Historical Legends on the Great Library of Alexandria**

The trend of the collection of books was uncommon until the fifth century BC. It was in Ptolemaic dynasty when knowledge, culture, and history keepers were encouraged to copy and collect books from all over the world. Alexandria witnessed not only the romantic history of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra but also many scholars in the field of arts, science, medicine, literature, and philosophy. It was a place of inspiration and motivation for the ancient scholars and intellectuals. Alexandria was a great hub used as a knowledge sharing platform for the scholars across world.

The Great Library amazed many scholars and gave them scopes to generate knowledge on science, arts, literature, and culture by giving royal privilege and patronage. The idea of knowledge production at this stage was remarkable. Many historical legends have been associated with the Great Library. Euclid worked on Geometry; Ptolemy mapped the stars tracks whereas great poet and scholar Eratosthenes worked on circumference of the Earth. During that time the water-clock and first keyboard instrument were designed by Ctesibious. Seemingly Archimedes worked out the theory of weight and displacement of liquids and gases.<sup>9</sup> The great astronomer, mathematician and women scientist Hypatia spent her entire life in the library. The famous poet Callimachus, who was great librarian for the first time, invented the catalogue system working out there. This was here in the library; the authentic version of Homer's epics was reproduced by Zenodotus, who was also a great critique in literature.<sup>10</sup> Hippocrates, on the other hand, was a great physician worked on Medicine whose works are regarded as the great source of modern medical science.

### **The Destiny of the Great Library of Alexandria**

Dozens of historical debates are there over the destruction of the great library of Alexandria. There are plenty of questions which have been

arisen from the ancient period till to date. Who was responsible for the demise of the Great library of Alexandria? When was it destroyed? What were the reasons behind burning up that knowledge house? The ancient sources did not even solve this maze. Historians cannot reach a unanimous decision to explain the history of the destruction of the Great Library.

However, the Great Library of Alexandria had been experienced four major fires; (i) during the civil war of Julius Caesar, partially burnt in 48 BC; (ii) during the attack of Aurelian in AD 270-275; (iii) Emperor Theodosius who provoked to burn the library in 391 AD; and (iv) Caliph Omar (RA) burnt it when Muslims conquered Egypt in 639 AD.<sup>11</sup>

Some historians believe that the library was partially burnt during the Julius Caser's civil war whereas others think the library got demolished with the attacks and riots when Alexandria suffered from the 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries to the 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>12</sup> Whether it was Julius Cesar, Aurelian, Theodosius, or Caliph Omar (RA) responsible for the destruction of the library or not is arguably reasonable. What seems beyond argumentation is that the great library a hub of ancient knowledge had been attacked was ultimately burnt and destroyed. This is the point where the notion 'pen is mightier than the sword' proved untrue.<sup>13</sup>

### **The Fate of the Library during the Roman Civil War**

Theodotus: What is burning there is the memory of mankind. Caesar: A shameful memory. Let it burn. (Shaw, Caesar and Cleopatra, Act II) Heave'ns! What a pile! Whole ages perish there: And one bright blaze turns learning into air (Pope, Dunciad Variorum, Bk, III, lines 69-70)<sup>14</sup>.

The first and perhaps most well established common believe about the destruction of the great library was based on the fire of civil war during the reign of Julius Caser. The Roman Civil War (49-45 BC), i.e., Caesar's Civil War was one of the last politico-military wars for the establishment of Roman Empire in Roman Republic against the Optimates (Boni), who was politically conservative and socially traditionalist faction of the Roman Senate.<sup>15</sup> He was supported by Pompey (106 BC-48 BC). When Caesar tried to seize Pompey as he broke the allies with Roman, Pompey fled to Egypt, where he was murdered by an officer of King Ptolemy XIII.<sup>16</sup>

Caesar had gone to Alexandria in 48 BC where he learned that Pompey was already dead. Instead of coming back home, he rather engaged him in another civil war. He learned that a power sharing war

was ongoing between Ptolemy XII and his historical legend sister, Cleopatra VII, for the throne of Egypt.<sup>17</sup> However, Caesar took Cleopatra's side. The conflicts erupted and Ptolemy besieged Caesar and Cleopatra. This is said that to defend the city from Ptolemy, Caesar ordered to set fire to some of the ships of the harbour, as a result, conflagration fire spread to the docks and then reached to the library and thus the Great Library was burnt.<sup>18</sup> Jon Theim aptly avers:

Forty thousand books were burned at Alexandria; let someone else praise this library as the noblest monument to the wealth of kings, as did Titus Livius, who says that it was the most distinguished achievement of the good taste and solicitude of kings. There was no "good taste" or "solicitude" about it, but only learned luxury.<sup>19</sup>

It was possibly a total disaster of center for learning in the ancient knowledge world. Probably, hundred thousands of volumes were burnt together by a misfortune fire. The books were from all parts, to theatre to science, literature to culture. American historian Leo Roy opines in his research on the *Library of Alexandria* "it was an unfortunate lost."<sup>20</sup>

### **The Library of Alexandria from 3<sup>rd</sup> to 5<sup>th</sup> Century CE**

Although the exact date of the destruction of library has been a matter of historical debate, there are some narratives which claim that Aurelian (270-275 CE) was also responsible for the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria. It was destroyed in 272 CE during the civil war. Aurelian destroyed the Brucheion quarter of the city. Aurelian fought against the Queen Zenobia of Palmyra. During the course of fighting, it is alleged that, the quarters were damaged where the main library was located. Fortunately, the smaller (Daughter) library was survived.<sup>21</sup>

The Alexandrian Library, nucleus of Hellenistic culture, was also a religious hub. It was the worship center of Pagans, Christians, and Jewish people. It is claimed that the Daughter library was destroyed for religious riots during the Roman Empire by Emperor Theodosius (379-395 CE). The library was destroyed in 391 CE, when Christianity has been declared the official religion of the Roman Empire. It is believed that both the holdings (*Mouseion* and *Serapeum*) were used as Pagan temples. After the declaration of official religion, the Pagan's temple faced great danger. Besides, it was becoming more critical when they were under the fanatic Bishop. Religious riots arose, when Bishop ordered to destroy the Pagan temples in 391 CE in Alexandria that bared a great catastrophe in history. It is also said that he led a mob to get the temple; and finally *Serapeum* was demolished by Theodosius's

followers whether same fate occurred to the collection of the books of the library those were associated with the religious temple.<sup>22</sup> According to Mostafa EI- Abbadi:

The Mouseion, being at the same time a 'shrine of the Muses', enjoyed a degree of sanctity as long as other Pagan temples remained unmolested. Synesius of Cyrene, who studied under Hypatia at the end of the fourth century, saw the Mouseion and described the images of philosophers in it. We have no later reference to its existence in the fifth century. As Theon, the distinguished mathematician and father of Hypatia, herself a renowned scholar, was the last recorded scholar-member (c.380), it is likely that the Mouseion did not long survive the promulgation of Theodosius' decree in 391 to destroy all Pagan temples in the city.<sup>23</sup>

John Julius Norwich in his *Byzantium* work supported the idea of Pagan temples' destruction as well as Edward Gibbon too. However, religious zealots destroyed the lighthouse, inspirational institution, hub of science and philosophy in the ancient world. It was a great loss in terms of the progress of the human civilization.<sup>24</sup>

Another sketch is popular about the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria, which is connected with the execution of Hypatia, who was a noble teacher, mathematician, astronomer, also known as the last great scholar of Alexandria. It is considered that violence occurred when the Christian prefect of Alexandria, Cyril ordered Jews to leave, the great astronomer Hypatia protested, she was then murdered by Cyril followers in a mob; library was also burnt along with great legend.<sup>25</sup>

### **The Fate of the Library after the Muslim Conquest of Egypt**

Among a large number of sources on the controversial history of the destruction of the Great Library, a few sources suggest that the library of Alexandria was burnt when the Arabs conquered the Egypt. It is assumed that, Caliph Omar (RA) sent a letter to his general, Amr Ibn Al-As, who was assigned for conquering the Egypt. Caliph Omar (RA) instructed his General about the books of the Great Library of Alexandria and instructed that:

If the writings of these Greeks agree with the book of God, they are useless and need not be preserved. If they disagree, they are pernicious and ought to be destroyed. 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.<sup>26</sup>

The sources describe that the General followed the orders and used the books as bathhouses water heating fuel. It took six months to burn those books completely. However, this blame was going to account in the thirteenth century-more than five hundred years after the event supposedly occurred. This is also important to note that the above mentioned account was still in dissemination among Christians in Egypt in the 1920s.<sup>27</sup> Edward Gibbon writes that many people had naively believed the chronicle which might be one kind of “the rational scepticism.” Gibbon further stressed “it would be endless to enumerate the moderns who have wondered and believed, but I may distinguish with honour that rational scepticism.”<sup>28</sup>

### **Destruction of the Library: Impact on the Human Civilization**

As the Library of Alexandria was a great place of learning and there was a tendency to collect books from all over the inhabited world as much as possible. This is obvious that the loss of the great library’s destruction was immense. It was a huge catastrophe in terms of culture, knowledge, and past glories of Alexandria. The scholars, who worked there were philosophers, scientists, astronomers, mathematicians, physicians, musicians, artists, writers, and so many. So this is not hard to imagine- how much valuable that library was, what a loss did happen, how the light was put off, and how many dreams were burnt! Moreover, it is impossible to measure accurately how much knowledge as well as the sources of knowledge got destroyed. Rachel Hajar cites in his work:

The world of books is the most remarkable creation of man. Nothing else that he builds does ever last. Monuments fall; nations perish; civilizations grow old and die out; and, after an era of darkness, new races build others. But in the world of books are volumes that have seen this happen again and again, and yet live on, still young, still as fresh as the day they were written, still telling men’s hearts of men centuries dead.<sup>29</sup>

It is supposed that if the great library of Alexandria was not burnt, the human civilization could have probably been more technologically advanced. In other words, the rational on the basis of the last couple of century’s scientific advancement dictates that the human being could surely able to explore and get in touch with space during 1500s or earlier. The rationality of this assumption is the quick technological progression that has taken place within short time. If look to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, one can see the great revolution of science and technology. The works of the Great Library of Alexandria could possibly accelerate this journey. If it

really happened in the 1500s or before that, one could perhaps see the world more distinctively. Nevertheless, there is not strong historical evidence to support this statement, and history does not predict but perhaps it might have been possible. Therefore, it was a great devastation for science and technology and after all, the destruction of the library affected the progress of human civilization enormously.

The destruction was a great hammering because the Alexandrian Library was the first of its kind and it was the largest library in the ancient world. Ancient Alexandria was the capital city and a trade core. As a result, the geologically strategic and significant one, Alexandria was very much popular comparing with other spaces in the ancient world. Moreover, books and so many sources of various branches knowledge were composed, copied and collected for the Great Library. Books were collected from Asia, Africa, and Latin America. Those were the kings, who encouraged legends with royal patronage for the impressive knowledge production. Thus the Great Library of Alexandria had been enriched and became a place of intellectual's breeding ground and it continued its glory for the next 700 years in the Mediterranean world.<sup>30</sup>

Alexandria secured the fame of knowledge and education core for the philosophers, physicians, geometricians, mathematicians and the astronomers who put their heads down to study in there. For the greater human civilization it was a terrible disaster for vis-à-vis history, philosophy, science, humanities, arts, literature, and culture. It is assumed that the epic cycle i.e., *Iliad and the Odyssey* were preserved in that great library.<sup>31</sup> Daniel cites in his work rightly:

The history of the Alexandrian Museum may well be regarded as the history of the development of classical scholarship as such, from the time of its first "learned man" Zenodotus of Ephesus (ca. 285 to ca. 270 B.C.), who was not only an early lexicographer of literary Greek but also the first critical editor of Homer, to that of its last great figure, Aristophanes of Byzantium (ca. 204 to 189 B.C.), who has been called the "founder of Greek punctuation" and is largely responsible for the fundamental definition of the metrical and prosodic units of poetry accepted by all subsequent readers of classical literature.<sup>32</sup>

However, it can be moderately understood that how serious the destruction is and the probable loss escalations for the destruction of the library in conditions of science, technology, and human progress. So it is packed down that the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria was

a great catastrophe in the history of knowledge and thoughts. There were many scientific discoveries as well as arts, literature, and cultural works stored over there. Therefore, it is a terrible disaster for advancement of science and technology, arts, culture, and finally progress of human civilization.

### **Conclusion**

Ancient Alexandria was a cosmopolitan city which attracted people from all over the world. With the course of time the Great Library of Alexandria, became a light house, a beacon, premier intellectual's seedbed, a hub of commerce, trade and culture. That grand knowledge house and learning center had been destroyed by the ignorant and power starving imperialist Emperors and the religious fanatics for over centuries. Ancient Alexandrian city was attacked many times in history because of its strategic location. The destruction of this Great Library was a catastrophe in the ancient world and definitely for the world of knowledge and wisdom. It was also an unparalleled damage in respect of arts, culture, and philosophical advancement. Great scientists, cataloguers, astronomers, mathematicians, physicians, think tanks, great and noble men worked there. It is thought that if it was not destroyed the human being might have been more advanced in science, technology, literature, arts, and culture. The Library of Alexandria was not only the largest learning center of its time but the first of its kind.

The Great Library of Alexandria was burnt by Julius Caesar's fire. Many of the pundits presume that it was an accidental fire that destroyed the library partially. Emperor Theodosius was another person who was blamed for destroying the library. Religious fanatics were also responsible for the damage of the library. Final destruction occurred when Muslim occupied Egypt although there are debates on this notion. Exponents of this school expound that the assigned General sent by Caliph Omar (RA) burnt those books which were against Quran, the holy book of Islam.

However, there are many historical controversies about the exact date and responsible persons towards the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria, but it is true that the library was destroyed. A knowledge hub, beacon in the ancient world was ruined. It was not only a library but also a heart of ancient cultural center that was demolished for the lust of power and religious dogmatism. With the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria it was proved that the sword is mightier than the pen.

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