

## 060: Ptolemaic Egypt – A Traveler’s Guide to Alexandria

*I’m Lagides, king – through my power and wealth complete master of the art of pleasure  
There’s no Macedonian, no barbarian, equal to me or even approaching me  
The son of Seleukos is really a joke with his cheap lechery  
But if you’re looking for other things, note this too:  
my city’s the greatest preceptor, queen of the Greek world, genius of all knowledge, of every art.<sup>1</sup>*

Entitled “*The Glory of the Ptolemies*”, this piece was composed in 1911 by the poet Constantine Peter Cavafy. Cavafy was born in Constantinople, but was raised in the Greek community that thrived in Alexandria until the mid-1950s. His love for the history of the Hellenistic period and that of what he considered to be his native city resonates throughout his works. While it had seen better days in Cavafy’s time, for over 1000 years after its creation Alexandria was considered one of the greatest cities in the world. Its initial foundations were laid out by Alexander the Great, but Alexandria would take a life of its own as the passion project for the Ptolemaic dynasty who turned the city into their royal capital. Imperial power funneled vast amounts of money to aid in its beautification with the construction of some of the most spectacular monuments and buildings of the era, all the while attracting intellectuals and artists that would flock together under the Ptolemies’ patronage, replacing Athens as the intellectual and cultural center of the Greek world. For sure, we have already spent an entire episode covering cities in the Hellenistic Age, but I don’t plan on this being a retread of past content. Among its contemporaries Alexandria stands alone, unique in both its splendor and documentation – though we have surprisingly little archaeological remains, we have several descriptive accounts of the city itself and its landmarks. In this episode I want to take you on a sightseeing tour of Alexandria, guiding you through the city’s history and layout while also covering such legendary locations like the Lighthouse of Pharos and the great Library. Though my focus is on the Alexandria of the Ptolemies, the nature of my sources requires me to take some liberties with my presentation, but I wish to paint the most complete (and entertaining) picture that I can. That all being said, let us begin.

In the winter of 332/331, Alexander had arrived in Egypt, spending most of his time consolidating his newfound conquests while also making a laborious journey to the Oracle of Siwa. But like everywhere he visited, the Macedonian king would not leave until he had imprinted himself upon landscape through the foundation of a city. Although we must treat the claim that Alexander founded over 70 cities with a healthy degree of skepticism, of all the settlements that bore his name, it would be the one in Egypt that would become the greatest.<sup>2</sup> Like any city worth its salt, the foundation of Alexandria is wrapped up in fantastical legends and omens. A serpent is said to have persistently harassed the workers, and hungry birds devoured the grain that was used to map the layout of the city.<sup>3</sup> While Alexander was able to reinterpret these omens as being signs of the city’s future greatness, the truth was probably more mundane and practical. Alexandria is located at the westernmost portion of the Nile Delta, where the Nile River fans outwards into several tributaries before emptying into the Mediterranean. At the time of

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<sup>1</sup> Translation found [here](#)

<sup>2</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 328e

<sup>3</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, 3.2.1-2; Plutarch, *Life of Alexander*, 26.5-6; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Alexander Romance*, 1.32

Alexander's invasion, it was a sparsely populated location that held few villages within the general area or along the nearby Lake Mareotis, the modern Mariout. How occupied it really was is a matter of scholarly debate, but there are several natural features that stood out to Alexander and the various authors as being particularly ideal.<sup>4</sup> It is directly adjacent to the sea, providing an opportunity for commercial enterprise while also adding to its defensibility.<sup>5</sup> Because the Nile empties into the Mediterranean, the area surrounding Alexandria did not have many problems with stagnant water.<sup>6</sup> Rome, by contrast, was prone to seasonal inundations of the Tiber River which lead to flooding – forming a perfect breeding ground for mosquitoes and malaria which ravaged the population at the end of the summer, among other diseases.<sup>7</sup> That being said, Caesar comments on the poor potability of Alexandria's drinking water that was brought in by the Nile, so it wasn't completely perfect.<sup>8</sup> Given that the Mediterranean and Lake Mareotis were also undrinkable, and the city needed to rely on vast underground cisterns to meet the needs of its large populace. But one of the features that Strabo and others comment on is how the city's position enabled it to catch the Etesian Winds, a northwestern breeze brought across the sea that kept Alexandria relatively mild and comfortable during the height of summer, and the streets were designed in part to funnel cool air into homes and residences.<sup>9</sup>

Alexander would not live to see his work fully carried out. Following his death in 323, Alexander's companion and general Ptolemy would immediately claim Egypt as his domain. In his early years as satrap of Egypt, he resided in Memphis until the city was completed in roughly 311.<sup>10</sup> Though we know it simply as Alexandria, in antiquity the city would be known as Alexandria-by-Egypt, or Alexandria-near-Egypt. Egyptians referred to it as *Ra-qed* or Rhakotis, which translates into "construction site" – perhaps a reference to the city's lengthy initial settlement, or the fact that it was constantly being renovated and expanded.<sup>11</sup> Such naming conventions indicate that for both the Greeks and Egyptians alike, Alexandria was a special place. For the former it was a bastion of Hellenic culture, a testament to the wealth and power of the Ptolemaic kings and queens. For the latter, it did not command quite the same amount of respect as the cities of the pharaohs of old. Both viewed it as distinct from the topography of Egypt, and island unto itself.

Let's start with the general layout of the city. A recurring descriptor of Alexandria's outline is that it is *chlamys*-shaped – referring to a cloak with a rectangular or quadrilateral shape which starts off from a narrower mouth and gradually radiates outwards.<sup>12</sup> Initially planned by the famous architect Deinocrates, it was organized on a Hippodamian grid, with its streets arranged at 90° angles.<sup>13</sup> Some of the streets were large enough to allow for horse-drawn carts or chariots to comfortably travel on, and

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<sup>4</sup> Fraser, P.M. "Ptolemaic Alexandria", Pgs. 5-7; Cohen, G. "The Hellenistic Settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin, and North Africa", Pg. 355

<sup>5</sup> Strabo, Geography, Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 17.52; Julius Caesar, *The Alexandrian War*, 12.14

<sup>6</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.7

<sup>7</sup> Harper, K. "The Fate of Rome: Climate, Disease, & the End of an Empire" Pgs. 47-49, 81-91

<sup>8</sup> Julius Caesar, *The Alexandrian War*, 12.5-9

<sup>9</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.7; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 17.52.2

<sup>10</sup> The Satrap Stelae, dedicated in 311, makes the earliest dated mention of Alexandria as the royal residence.

<sup>11</sup> Chauveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pg. 57

<sup>12</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8

<sup>13</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 2.pref. 1

they were often named after the royal family – for instance, there was the street of Arsinoe, Our Lady of Mercy.<sup>14</sup> Cutting through the center of the city from east to west is the Canopus Way, which would be the widest of Alexandria’s streets and the stage upon which parades and religious festivals would be carried out, such as the Grand Procession of Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the early 270s.<sup>15</sup> At each end of the Canopic Way would be city gates, the eastern portion known as the Moon gate, and the west the Sun gate. The gates were built into a large stone wall that surrounded the city, defending it from potential attackers like the Seleucid king Antiochus IV who besieged it in<sup>16</sup>. Strabo says that the diameter of the city running from left to right measured at 30 stadia, approximately 5.6 km or 3.5 miles.<sup>17</sup>

Despite the apparent contradiction of being the dynastic capital of a monarchy, Alexandria status as a Hellenic city meant that its civic structure was organized in roughly the same manner as other traditional Greek *poleis*.<sup>18</sup> The Jewish writer Philo of Alexandria says that the city was divided into five districts, named after the first five letters of the Greek alphabet (Alpha, Beta, Gamma, Delta, and Epsilon respectively).<sup>19</sup> Its male citizens were enrolled in tribes and demes, who elected city magistrates. Only a few of the tribes have their names recorded, but they clearly reflect the political and ideological reality of the city’s unique position as the seat of Ptolemaic power: names like Berenice, Ptolemais, and Dionysia.<sup>20</sup> Most of the city’s initial population was of Greco-Macedonian background, part of the wave of immigration or resettlement during the tumultuous years following Alexander’s death and the Wars of the Successors. Opportunities to serve in the civil bureaucracy or in the military must have been considerable draws, especially if they had the chance to be brought into the inner circle of the Ptolemaic court. Others may have looked to capitalize on commercial enterprises as shopkeepers, artisans or travelling merchants, attracted to the wealth and power of the city. Not all Greeks would become citizens of Alexandria, mind you, and many would continue to retain their identities as immigrants or children of immigrants from other *poleis* across the Aegean and Ionia.

While much of its inhabitants and culture was Hellenic, the city’s population was quite cosmopolitan in origin.<sup>21</sup> Despite their somewhat apathetic attitude towards Alexandria, many indigenous Egyptians lived inside of the so-called “Construction Site”, and the easternmost portion of the city was generally described as the Egyptian district. A major Jewish community resided in the Delta district, probably the largest outside of Jerusalem itself.<sup>22</sup> Surviving graves from Alexandria’s Necropolis dating to the 3<sup>rd</sup> century point to individuals of Celtic or Galatian backgrounds residing as mercenaries, while still having enough time to raise families in the city.<sup>23</sup> With such evidence, it is not surprising that Alexandria has been described as the Mediterranean’s first metropolis, surpassing any of its predecessors and

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<sup>14</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8; Fraser, P.M. “*Ptolemaic Alexandria*”, Pgs. 35-36

<sup>15</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 196a-203b

<sup>16</sup> Livy, *The History of Rome*, 45.11

<sup>17</sup> According to Duane W. Roller’s translation of Strabo, 1 Stadion = ~187 m, or 613.5 ft.

<sup>18</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.42; Monson, A. “*From the Ptolemies to the Romans: Political and Economic Change in Egypt*” Pg. 262; Chaveau, M. “*Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra*” Pg. 57; Fraser, P.M. “*Ptolemaic Alexandria*” Pgs. 93–131

<sup>19</sup> Philo, *Against Flaccus*, 55

<sup>20</sup> Cohen, G.M. “*The Hellenistic Settlements in Syria, the Red Sea Basin, and North Africa*” Pg. 356

<sup>21</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.12; Polybius, *The Histories*, 34.14

<sup>22</sup> Josephus, *Against Apion*, 2.4; Bickermann, E.J. “*The Jews in the Greek Age*”, Pgs. 87-89

<sup>23</sup> <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247110>; <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247109>

contemporaries like Athens, Carthage, or Syracuse.<sup>24</sup> By the end of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, Diodorus tells us that the number of free inhabitants living within Alexandria approximately numbered 300,000.<sup>25</sup> This was a figure taken from Roman censuses shortly after Cleopatra's death, and may not necessarily include the populations of women, children, or slaves. It is therefore possible that the total inhabitants amounted to around 500,000, making it the largest city in the Mediterranean until Rome during the reign of the Antonine emperors in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century AD.<sup>26</sup>

Travelers ought to keep in mind the atmosphere of the city, along with customs of its residents. The Alexandrian mob was particularly notorious for violence and rioting, whether between them and the government (which would in turn retaliate with extreme prejudice) or due to tensions between the various ethnic and cultural groups of its cosmopolitan makeup.<sup>27</sup> Diodorus Siculus witnessed a crowd of Egyptian Alexandrians lynch a Roman official who accidentally killed a cat, which may be playing into misunderstandings and stereotypes about Egyptian religion, but the frequency of such incidents in Alexandria's history suggests there is truth to the claim.<sup>28</sup> At least one Ptolemaic ruler would be killed by the citizens of Alexandria, and Caesar's army faced great difficulties in trying to extract themselves from the rage of its denizens.<sup>29</sup> To keep order, a vast police force was stationed throughout the city, and the royal district held barracks to house the personal guard of the crown in case things got particularly heated.

For those looking to journey to Alexandria, one cannot do much better than travelling by sea. Quite unlike its Egyptian predecessors, the capital was also a major port. Egypt never had a strong maritime tradition, and previous dynasties preferred to place their capitals more inland and along the Nile, rather than having a proximity to the "Great Green" (the Egyptian name for the Mediterranean). Two harbors would be created: the "Great" Harbor on the eastern side, and on its western portion was the *Eunostos* Harbor (which roughly means "the Harbor of Happy Returns"), the latter of which was connected by canal to Lake Mareotis.<sup>30</sup> Dividing the two harbors was the Island of Pharos, an oblong or faucet-shaped piece of land located about half a mile from the shoreline. Originally one could only reach it by boat, but at some point during the turn of the 4<sup>th</sup> century a great mole named the *Heptastadion* was constructed. Its main function was to act as a land bridge to the island, and it also had the benefit of controlling the flow of ships in and between the harbors. Pharos also made for an excellent defensive point, as Caesar would find out during his siege of Alexandria.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Scheidel, W. "Creating a Metropolis: A Comparative Demographic Perspective" in "Ancient Alexandria Between Egypt and Greece" Pg. 1; Woolf, G. "The Life and Death of Ancient Cities: A Natural History" Pgs. 381-383

<sup>25</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 17.52.6

<sup>26</sup> Manning, J.G. "The Last Pharaohs: Egypt Under the Ptolemies, 305-30 BC" Pgs. 138-139; Apherghis, G.G. "The Seleukid Royal Economy: The Finances and Financial Administration of the Seleukid Empire" Pgs. 54-56

<sup>27</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, 34.14; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.12; Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.102; Josephus, *Antiquities of the Jews*, 18.8.1; Socrates Scholasticus, *Ecclesiastical History*, 7.13-15

<sup>28</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 1.83

<sup>29</sup> That being Ptolemy XI, see Appian, *The Civil Wars*, 1.102

<sup>30</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.6, 17.1.9-10

<sup>31</sup> Caesar, *The Alexandrian War*, 12.17-21

Just as the Statue of Liberty welcomed millions of immigrants into New York City, so too did Alexandria greet its visitors with a splendid sight upon their approach to the Queen of Cities. On the easternmost portion of Pharos, located on its own flat base connected by a dike to the main body of the island, stood a colossal lighthouse that acted as a beacon to guide ships into the harbor in the dark of night. Its main architect (or perhaps its dedicant) was Sostratus of Cnidus, his work beginning in approximately 297 and not completed until 283/282 during the reign of Ptolemy II.<sup>32</sup> Lighthouses had existed in antiquity prior to the one on Pharos, but it was the most ambitious one of its day and formed the model of later specimens across the Mediterranean world. If we were to go only on the descriptions of classical authors, we would have quite a challenging time reconstructing its physical appearance. Thankfully, we can use two unorthodox sources: the first are coins of Roman Emperors like Domitian and Hadrian, who issued specimens that present a reasonably consistent depiction of the Pharos Lighthouse close to the Hellenistic period.<sup>33</sup> The second is due to the Arabic-speaking scholars and travelers of the Middle Ages, who recorded their observations on its appearance and how it generally functioned, though some modifications had to have occurred over the centuries.<sup>34</sup>

From what we can tell, the lighthouse was segmented into three parts, each piece becoming smaller and more tapered as they were stacked towards the top. The materials used in its construction was a mix of limestone, granite, and white marble on its face, which was reinforced with molten lead to provide structural support against either earthquakes or battering from the waves.<sup>35</sup> The base of it was rectangular, with a courtyard and several rooms to house the soldiers and onsite staff. The second portion was octagonal, and a cylindrical crown formed the peak that contained the beacon. The interior was hollow, with a spiral ramp corkscrewing throughout the structure, allowing for the movement of goods and men up and down the Lighthouse. Taking everything together, its total height stood over 400 ft (122 m), making it the second tallest structure in antiquity after the Great Pyramids of Giza.<sup>36</sup>

How did the lighthouse work? On the surface, it's a straightforward concept: a light source situated on an elevated platform, which illuminates the immediate area to prevent sailors from accidentally crashing into the rocks, while also providing a fixed point of reference to indicate a safe haven. At night, Pliny the Elder claims that it could easily be mistaken for a star in terms of its brightness, and others suggest that one could see it as far away as 70 miles.<sup>37</sup> To better redirect the light source, or perhaps to avoid using fuel in the daytime, a large parabolic mirror made of bronze might have been used as well.<sup>38</sup> The Muslim chroniclers have a more extravagant tradition that the lighthouse utilized a system of glass mirrors

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<sup>32</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.6; St. Jerome, *Chronological Tables*, 124.1; Posidippus, *Epigrams*, 23; Lucian, *The Way to Write History*, 62; The Byzantine Suda posits 297 BC as the date it was built, but most sources lean towards 283/282 upon completion. I will go with Fraser, P.M. who reconciles the dates by reasonably arguing that it was built and completed in that timeframe.

<sup>33</sup> For a full list of examples, see [here](http://ancientcoinage.org/lighthouses-of-alexandria.html) (http://ancientcoinage.org/lighthouses-of-alexandria.html)

<sup>34</sup> Behrens-Abouseif, D. "The Islamic History of the Lighthouse of Alexandria" *Muqarnas*, 200, 23(2006), Pgs. 1-14

<sup>35</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.83; Broadhurst, R.J.C. "The Travels of Ibn Jubayr: being the chronicle of a mediaeval Spanish Moor concerning his journey to the Egypt of Saladin, the holy cities of Arabia, Baghdad the city of the Caliphs, the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, and the Norman kingdom of Sicily." Pgs. 32-33"

<sup>36</sup> Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pg. 59;

<sup>37</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.18

<sup>38</sup> Jordan, P. "The Seven Wonders of the Ancient World" Pgs. 46-47; Pollard, J. and Reid, H. "The Rise and Fall of Alexandria: Birthplace of the Modern World" Pg. 90

throughout the body to better redirect the focus of the light into the sea, or perhaps to use it as a weapon.<sup>39</sup> This is a similar belief to the Medieval European stories of the Syracusan scientist Archimedes creating a death ray using mirrors and the sun. But like Archimedes' death ray, this is not attested to in any of our ancient sources, though it may be based on a nugget of truth that perennially fascinated later writers.

It wasn't strictly utilitarian in design either. To keep and maintain a lighthouse requires time and money, so things like using wood as fuel can be problematic, especially when we consider that wood is not especially abundant in Egypt. Clearly it was also intended to be a beautiful piece of architecture, its hefty cost of 800 silver talents only adding to the notion that this was meant to be a testament to Alexandria's glory. The marble adorning the face of the structure would have shone brightly in the Egyptian sun. Adorning its peak was a statue of Zeus Soter, while four bronze statues of mermen wielding trumpets adorned the 4 corners of the body of the Lighthouse.<sup>40</sup> Ironically, despite being frequently placed on lists of the "Seven Wonders of the Ancient World", the Lighthouse never actually appears on any ancient equivalent.<sup>41</sup> This does not diminish its achievements, however. Virtually every outsider's description of Alexandria praises the Lighthouse as a marvel of engineering and design. Caesar's memoirs on the Alexandrian War took a break from glorifying his military achievements to give an aside on how the lighthouse was an architectural masterpiece.<sup>42</sup> Even a more austere Roman like Scipio Aemilianus, who journeyed to Alexandria on an ambassadorial mission and found much of the pomp and splendor of Ptolemy VIII distasteful, nevertheless was left in awe at the scale and scope of Pharos.<sup>43</sup> 1,300 years later, the Andalusian traveler Ibn Jubayr considered the Lighthouse a gift from God and commented: "*Description of it falls short, the eyes fail to comprehend it, and words are inadequate, so vast is the spectacle.*"<sup>44</sup>

Sadly, we will never be able to confirm such glowing reports. Over the course of time the structure was severely damaged by earthquakes, a perpetual problem for the cities of the Mediterranean. Although the various ruling powers of Alexandria attempted to either restore the lighthouse or reinforce it, by the mid-14<sup>th</sup> century Ibn Battuta dourly noted how it had crumbled into ruin over a period of 20 years, and whatever was left has since been swept into the sea.<sup>45</sup>

Sailing past the Lighthouse, you may now enter the harbor, a hub of scurrying ships as they sailed to and from the docks with their cargo and crew in tow. Alexandria's unique coastal position made it a major destination for sailors of the Mediterranean, while its connection to the Nile would link it to the Red Sea, giving access to the wealth and luxury goods of Africa and India. To even do business in Alexandria, you

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<sup>39</sup> Behrens-Abouseif, D. "*The Islamic History of the Lighthouse of Alexandria*" *Muqarnas*, 200, 23(2006), Pg. 1

<sup>40</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.83; Rowland, I.D. "*Three Seaside Wonders: Pharos, Mausoleum and Colossus*" in "*A Companion to Greek Architecture*" Pgs. 450-452; The number of statues varied, some listing 1, 2 or 4. They are variously thought to be either Zeus, Poseidon, Ptolemy II and Berenice II, and a combination of them.

<sup>41</sup> Rowland, I.D. "*Three Seaside Wonders: Pharos, Mausoleum and Colossus*" in "*A Companion to Greek Architecture*" Pgs. 450

<sup>42</sup> Caesar, *The Civil War*, 11.112

<sup>43</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 33.28b

<sup>44</sup> Broadhurst, R.J.C. "*The Travels of Ibn Jubayr: being the chronicle of a mediaeval Spanish Moor concerning his journey to the Egypt of Saladin, the holy cities of Arabia, Baghdad the city of the Caliphs, the Latin kingdom of Jerusalem, and the Norman kingdom of Sicily.*" Pgs. 32-33"

<sup>45</sup> Ibn Battuta, "*Travels in Asia and Africa*", Pg. 47

needed to deal with government officials at one of the city's banks to acquire Ptolemaic-backed currency, which could command high exchange rates.<sup>46</sup> Additionally, you could be subject to import taxes based upon the goods you brought in. Still, this inconvenience could be worth it, as you now had access to one of the greatest marketplaces in the world. Conveniently known as the Emporium, this is where the merchants of the city and beyond gathered, storing their goods to protect from thieves while also displaying their wares acquired from lands both near and far to attract the eye of any prospective buyer. Incense and other aromatics would be acquired from the Arabian kingdoms of the Sabaeans and Nabateans; gold, ivory and elephants would be shipped up from Africa from the region of the Sudan and as far south as Somalia; Indian traders would bring spices, and gemstones like rubies and sapphires. Much of our knowledge of the Red Sea in antiquity comes directly from sailors and other Ptolemaic officials, who would scope out and establish trading settlements that would later form the bedrock for the proverbial "Silk Roads" – which were largely based around on sea routes rather than overland travel.<sup>47</sup> A sizeable community of merchants would therefore reside within Alexandria's quarters, some using it as a halfway harbor before sailing to their ultimate destination, while enough were stationed for long enough periods of time to organize and form special interest groups. These mercantile organizations allowed for traders to collaborate and gather information or solicit funds to finance joint expeditions and operations.<sup>48</sup>

In addition to being a center of commerce, the city also had a sizeable industry as well. Glass and metalwork produced in workshops were highly sought after; textile factories produced fine tapestries and carpets, along with cloth designs that were all the rage with the noble ladies of Alexandria and beyond.<sup>49</sup> The marshlands surrounding the city were cultivated to produce lotus and papyrus, the ancient world's equivalent of paper.<sup>50</sup> Along with the imports of aromatics from India and Arabia, Alexandria was noted for possessing its own perfume operation, using extracts from Libyan roses harvested in nearby Cyrene – a much less putrid process than other luxury goods like Tyrian dye.<sup>51</sup> Of course, the most important export of Alexandria and Egypt as a whole would be grain, which was initially sold and shipped out of the city's harbors at great profit for the crown.

Feeling the need to stretch your legs after a long sea voyage? Like any good Hellenic city, Alexandria possessed a gymnasium, a staple of traditional Greek civic and social life. Of course, being what Alexandria was, its gymnasium was without comparison. Strabo considered it the most beautiful building in the city, where the men of the upper classes exercised and socialized while the youth received educational training.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>46</sup> Thonemann, P. "The Hellenistic World: Using Coins as Sources" Pg. 123

<sup>47</sup> Geminus, *Elements of Astronomy*, 16.24; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.15; Habicht, C. "Eudoxus of Cyzicus and Ptolemaic exploration of the sea route to India" in *The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile: Studies in Waterborne Power* – Edited by Buraselis et. al., Pg. 197-206; Benjamin, C. "Empires of Ancient Eurasia: The First Silk Roads Era, 100 BCE-250 CE", Pgs. 204-236; For a more in-depth discussion on this topic, see McLaughlin, R. "The Roman Empire and the Indian Ocean: The Ancient World Economy & the Kingdoms of Africa, Arabia & India"

<sup>48</sup> Fraser, P.M. "Ptolemaic Alexandria", Pgs. 185-188

<sup>49</sup> Pomeroy, S.B. "Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra" Pg. 164-170

<sup>50</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.15; Pliny, *Natural History*, 13.21-26

<sup>51</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 15.689

<sup>52</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.10

Are you more into sporting events, looking for more high-energy entertainment, or trying to find a good place to gamble? Head to the eastern edges of the city, and step into the Hippodrome to catch teams of charioteers or horse riders racing along the sandy semicircular track. The Alexandrian Hippodrome, known as the *Lageion* after the Ptolemaic dynasty's Greek name *Lagidae*, was probably considered the premier arena in the Mediterranean until the creation of the Circus Maximus in Rome and the Hippodrome of Constantinople. The track lanes were over 500 meters in length, and at each of the turning posts would be a shrine known as the *Taraxippos*, literally meaning "horse frightener" – this is because the turns were the most dangerous part of the arena, and the terror of the horses (or the incompetence of the driver) resulted in many crashes and deaths in that particular spot.<sup>53</sup> It is likely that teams of charioteers would practice in the Hippodrome, many of whom were destined for Panhellenic games like the Olympics. These riders were often directly sponsored by the monarchy to represent Alexandria and, by extension, themselves. Berenice II was a noted patroness of charioteers, and her teams won victories that were immortalized through the poetry of Callimachus and Posidippus.<sup>54</sup> The Ptolemies also sponsored other athletes like wrestlers and boxers, and established their own Pan-Hellenic games in the city, such as the Ptolemaia and Basileia – such events and sponsorships broadcasted the power and prestige of Alexandria.<sup>55</sup>

If you're looking to get away from the hustle and bustle of the Hippodrome, or prefer something more cultured, head on over to the local theatre. A staple of Greek cultural life, the theatre of Alexandria was found in the palace district, with a semicircular design and stone seats built into the hillside. Classics such as Homer and Herodotus would be recited here, along with the works of the great Athenian playwrights.<sup>56</sup> But Alexandria was home to a vast output of literary works, and there was plenty of new and exciting material to perform on the stage as well. The recitations of great poets like Posidippus and Callimachus would sing praises of the glory of the Ptolemies and of the divinities. Apollonius of Rhodes' new epic, the *Argonautica*, recounted the adventures of Jason and the Argonauts as they travelled the Black Sea in search for the Golden Fleece. But maybe you're looking to listen to something a little more down-to-earth (or perhaps lowbrow)? The mimes of Herodas, vignettes performed by one actor doing all parts, very much appealed to common people of Alexandria – portraying scenarios like infidelity, nagging family members, and raunchier elements like brothel visits and pillow talk. The comedies of Menander may have been able to provide a middle ground, and by sheer numbers alone there must have been something for everyone to enjoy – Menander is said to have written over 100 different plays in his lifetime during the 2<sup>nd</sup> century.

One of the largest and most magnificent parts of Alexandria was the palace complex in the northeastern

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<sup>53</sup> Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 6.20.15 mentions such a post for the track in Olympia, but there's no reason to think that these would not be found in Alexandria as well.

<sup>54</sup> Clayman, D.L. "Berenice II and the Golden Age of Ptolemaic Egypt" Pgs. 157-158

<sup>55</sup> Polybius, *The Histories*, 27.9; Remijsen, S. "Greek Sport in Egypt: Status Symbol and Lifestyle" in "A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity" Pgs. 349-360

<sup>56</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 14.620c

portion of the city, with the inner palace located within the adjacent island of Antirhodos – a not-so-subtle comparison between it and the Aegean island of Rhodes.<sup>57</sup> By Strabo's day, the palace district had grown large enough to encompass roughly 1/4<sup>th</sup> to 1/3<sup>rd</sup> of the entire city, as each successive ruler sought to add their own personal touches to the royal residence with ever constant building programs.<sup>58</sup> Ironically, scholars long had been unable to find any traces of the palaces of Alexandria. In the late 1990's however, underwater excavations lead to the rediscovery of part of the inner complex on Antirhodos, which had slipped into the sea due to earthquakes and erosion. Much of its remains dates to the time of Cleopatra VII or slightly before – perhaps indicating that it was abandoned shortly after the conquest of Rome.<sup>59</sup> Several artifacts have been recovered that gives us hints of its splendor, including granite statues and mosaic flooring. But the poet Lucan, perhaps playing up the visuals for literary effect, paints us a picture of what the throne room looked like during Cleopatra's day:<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>57</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.9

<sup>58</sup> Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 17.52.4; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8

<sup>59</sup> Vizard, F. "In Search of Cleopatra's Palace." *Popular Science* 05 1999: 78-81.

<sup>60</sup> Lucan, *Pharsalia*, 10.111–131

*Spacious rose the hall  
Like to such fane as this corrupted age  
Shall scarcely rear: the lofty ceiling shone  
With richest tracery, the beams were bound  
In golden coverings; no scant veneer  
Lay on its walls, but built in solid blocks  
Of marble, gleamed the palace. Agate stood  
In sturdy columns, bearing up the roof;  
Onyx and porphyry on the spacious floor  
Were trodden 'neath the foot; the mighty gates*

*Of Meroe's ebony throughout were formed,  
No mere adornment; ivory clothed the hall,  
Studded with emerald spots; upon the doors  
Gleamed polished tortoise shells from Indian seas:  
And gems of price and yellow jasper shone  
On couch and coverlet, whose greater part  
Dipped more than once within the vats of Tyre  
Had drunk their juice; and part were feathered gold;  
Part crimson dyed, in manner as are passed  
Through Pharian leash the threads.*

As a diplomat or a higher-ranking government official, you would expect to be taken to the royal court, where the monarchs and their circle of advisors and Royal Friends would be sequestered. A flurry of messengers entered and exited the court, each carrying letters and petitions addressed directly to King Ptolemy regarding all matters of concern throughout Egypt, whether they deal with protestations against the annual taxation rate or requests to enter the army.<sup>61</sup> Particularly special guests could be invited to join a banquet, and gluttony was a particularly favorite vice to label the royal family with. In one instance, Ptolemy II set up an enormous, canopied tent, capable of holding a reception of guests on 130 couches. The interior would be layered with the finest of Persian carpets and flowers, while the guests would eat using gold and silver dinnerware while surrounded by magnificent works of art and exotica.<sup>62</sup> The spread was probably no less spectacular, as even for a party of twelve Cleopatra required the cooks to have eight boars roasting in just so the members can have a prime cut at any time they request, never mind the famous anecdote of Cleopatra dissolving a pearl in a cup of wine or vinegar.<sup>63</sup>

The palace is also said to have contained a zoo.<sup>64</sup> Such practices were not uncommon among monarchies, and perhaps it would be better understood as a personal collection of curiosities than anything resembling a modern zoo. Still, it certainly was a sight designed to impress, and not without precedent. Many Egyptian cities held sacred animals within their walls, which eventually became popular attractions for Greek and Roman tourists – a Ptolemaic letter dating to 112 regarding a Roman senator's visit to the Fayyum requests that that he be provided cutlets with which to feed Petesouchis, the sacred crocodile, and Strabo was given a similar treatment during his tour.<sup>65</sup> But with a force of experienced hunters and sailor, along some considerable financial backing, Ptolemy II would acquire a menagerie of animals from the most distant regions of the world to house in the Alexandrian Zoo. Multiple pythons were captured in Ethiopia and put on display in Alexandria, some measuring a believable 20 ft (6 m), while a more outlandish specimen was claimed to be 46 ft (14 m).<sup>66</sup> A description

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<sup>61</sup> See Plutarch, *Moralia*, 790b for an anecdote pertaining to the Seleucid court, but one that almost assuredly can be applied to the Ptolemaic court as well.

<sup>62</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae* 5.196a-197c

<sup>63</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 28.1-4;

<sup>64</sup> Hubbell, H.M. "Ptolemy's Zoo", *The Classical Journal* Vol. 31, No. 2 (Nov., 1935), pp. 68-76

<sup>65</sup> P. Tebt 33; Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.38

<sup>66</sup> Aelian, *On Animals*, 16.39; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 3.36-37

of Ptolemy II's Grand Procession gives us a taste of what was in his stores:

*"One hundred and thirty Aethiopian sheep, three hundred Arabian, twenty Euboean; also twenty-six Indian zebus [a type of cattle] entirely white, eight Aethiopian, one large white she-bear, fourteen leopards, sixteen genets, four caracals, three bear-cubs, one giraffe, one Aethiopian rhinoceros."*<sup>67</sup>

We also cannot forget about the elephants, for which the Egyptian government went to great lengths to acquire, primarily for their use in warfare. But Ptolemy II seems to have kept one as a personal pet and companion for many years, even managing to teach it a few tricks and commands.<sup>68</sup> Queen Berenice II is also have said to have kept a tame lion as a pet and became so comfortable that she let it lick her face and share the dinner table with her.<sup>69</sup>

It would be unsurprising to know that one of the city's most well-known attractions would be tied directly to its eponymous founder, Alexander the Great. Ptolemy I purloined the body of the dead king while the funeral train was en route from Babylon back to Macedonia and squirreled it away in Memphis, before finally bringing it to Alexandria.<sup>70</sup> Such an act was viewed as a declaration of war by the rival Perdikkas, and it's not hard to see why – it was the duty of every Macedonian king to bury his predecessor, and so Ptolemy was clearly jockeying for the title with a such a statement. But interment of the body was rich with additional layers of symbolic importance. Any city chosen to hold the remains of royalty would automatically be given a degree of prestige and standing.<sup>71</sup> Yet for Alexandria to house the remains of Alexander, who was not only \*the\* founder of the city but one of the most legendary figures of their time and beyond, the Ptolemies were explicitly linking their legitimacy and power to the legacy of the conquering hero.<sup>72</sup>

Like the man himself, Alexander's final resting place was larger than life. Near or within the palace complex was the appropriately named Sema or Soma ("body"), a building that acted as much a temple as it was a mausoleum.<sup>73</sup> Contrary to the traditional Macedonian practice of cremation, the king's body was on full display, allegedly preserved by Babylonian and Egyptian embalmers who cleaned the body with perfumes and myrrh before coating it in honey.<sup>74</sup> It was originally stored in a golden sarcophagus, but the financial woes of Ptolemy XII necessitated the reappropriation of the gold and replacing it with one made of glass.<sup>75</sup> The Soma became a pilgrimage site for many famous Romans, who would come to visit and venerate throughout the centuries: Julius Caesar, Caligula, and Caracalla, with the latter two taking personal "mementos" from the king's body such as his cloak or his armor.<sup>76</sup> Even in the

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<sup>67</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 5.201c

<sup>68</sup> Aelian, *On Animals*, 9.58, 11.25

<sup>69</sup> Aelian, *On Animals*, 5.39

<sup>70</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8; Pausanias, *Guide to Greece*, 1.6.3; Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, 18.28-29; Arrian, *Events After Alexander*, 25

<sup>71</sup> For the importance of burial in the Seleucid kingship model, see Kosmin, P.J. *"The Land of the Elephant Kings: Space, Territory, and Ideology in the Seleucid Empire"* Pgs. 103-105

<sup>72</sup> Krasilnikoff, J.A. *"Alexandria as Place: Tempo-Spatial Traits of Royal Ideology in Early Ptolemaic Egypt"* in *"Alexandria: A Cultural and Religious Melting Pot"* Pgs. 31-32; Stewart, A. *"Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics"* Pgs. 229-230; Erskine, A. *"Life after Death: Alexandria and the Body of Alexander"* Pgs. 171-176

<sup>73</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8; Zenobius, *Proverbs*, 3.94; Fraser, P.M. *"Ptolemaic Alexandria"* Pgs. 15-17

<sup>74</sup> Quintus Curtius Rufus, *The History of Alexander*, 10.10.9-13; Pseudo-Callisthenes, *The Alexander Romance*, 3.34

<sup>75</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.8

<sup>76</sup> Suetonius, *Life of Caligula*, 52

immediate aftermath of his conquest of Alexandria and Egypt, the Emperor Augustus would pay his respects to Alexander by placing a golden crown and flowers within the sarcophagus, all the while refusing to view the tombs of the Ptolemies, remarking:

*“My wish was to see a king, not corpses”*<sup>77</sup>

The Soma and the body of Alexander have since been lost, much to the dismay of hundreds of archaeologists who have searched in vain for the final resting place for the Macedonian king.

While landmarks like the Lighthouse or the Soma propelled Alexandria into the stuff of legend, the city was also decorated with many works of art intended to beautify. A painting depicting the tale of Apollo’s ill-fated Spartan lover Hyacinthus by the legendary artist Nicias of Athens was commissioned by the Ptolemies, a work of such renown that Augustus had it carried off to Rome following the conquest of Egypt, which likely spurred on the creation of several Roman copies of Nicias’ work that have been found in places like Pompeii.<sup>78</sup> Depictions of the royal family were commonplace, and were appropriately ambitious in scale and beauty. Discovered on an island off the Red Sea coastline and gifted by a Ptolemaic governor, an enormous piece of green Peridot gemstone was masterfully carved into the likeness of Arsinoe standing nearly 6 ft (1.8 m) in height.<sup>79</sup> The description of Ptolemy II’s Grand Procession, far too lengthy to recite here, lists dozens of masterfully crafted sculptures and metalwork that dazzled its audience in terms of splendor and proportions.<sup>80</sup>

For all their philhellenic tastes, the Ptolemies seem to have incorporated several artifacts from Egypt’s imperial past into the visual makeup of Alexandria. At great expense, a stone obelisk of Nectanebo II measuring almost 120 ft (37 m) high was ferried down the Nile River and deposited in the city during the reign of Ptolemy II, and Pliny tells us of two other obelisks measuring 62 ft (19 m) dating to the reign of Thutmose III in the 1400s BC.<sup>81</sup> The excavations of the Antirrhodos has recovered several artifacts adorning the palace which carried Egyptian motifs or themes: items such as sphinxes, a statue of Cleopatra that resembled a traditional Egyptian queen, and the goddess Isis all carved out of black granite.

Unsurprisingly, given its reputation for the gathering of intellectuals, there were also a number of technological wonders adding to the city’s luster. The temple of Arsinoe II was originally planned to be built with a ceiling containing lodestone, a naturally magnetic material that was intended to hold an iron statue of the queen in the air without any harnesses or anchors to give the illusion of heavenly flight.<sup>82</sup> An inventor by the name of Ctesibius devised numerous hydraulic powered mechanisms, some of which were of practical use, but others were clearly designed to delight and amaze: a horn shaped like

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<sup>77</sup> Suetonius, *Life of the Divine Augustus*, 18.1; Cassius Dio 51.16.5 provides a more cynical and humorous take, suggesting that Augustus accidentally broke off Alexander’s nose in the process of his visit.

<sup>78</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 35.132

<sup>79</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 37.108

<sup>80</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 196a-203b

<sup>81</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 36.14; The obelisks are said to measure 80 and 42 cubits respectively (1 cubit = .46 m); These later became known as Cleopatra’s Needles, and one has since ended up in New York City

<sup>82</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 34.148; The deaths of Ptolemy II and the architect Timochares put an end to this particular design choice.

Arsinoe-Aphrodite would make music when wine was poured into it, and a water-powered predecessor of the pipe organ.<sup>83</sup> His successor Philon of Byzantium also invented a hydraulic automaton in the shape of a tree with a bird's nest – when water was poured inside, a snake would menacingly rise towards the baby chicks before their mother flapped her wings to “scare” the serpent back down.<sup>84</sup>

Beyond the city's amusements, in order to meet the spiritual or religious needs of the people, there were several holy sites and temples within Alexandria. The most famous of these was the Serapeum, a temple dedicated to the god Serapis that was built in the time of Ptolemy III Euergetes. Serapis was a unique Ptolemaic creation, a blend of mythological concepts and ideas such as the Greek god Hades and the Egyptian Osiris and Apis. The god was likely intended to provide a bridge between Egyptian and Greek communities, though it seems to more readily adopted by the Greek-speaking world than it was by the Egyptians.<sup>85</sup> Contrary to the more Hellenic temples, the Serapeum was located the heart of the Egyptian district in the southeastern part of the city. Visitors to the temple journeyed for the god's oracular powers. Before departing for Rome from Alexandria amidst the civil wars of 69 AD, Tacitus claims that the future emperor Vespasian sought council from Serapis in the temple as well.<sup>86</sup>

Our most splendid and detailed example of what a Ptolemaic temple's appearance is like comes from a Late Antique description of the Tychaion, a temple dedicated to Tyche, the goddess of fate or fortune.<sup>87</sup> As one enters the building, you will find a series of semicircular niches embedded within the walls of the temple. Housed inside the openings would be the depictions of the Olympian pantheon. Between six of the divinities would be a great representation of Ptolemy I Soter carrying a cornucopia to represent the fertility of the city. Flanking both the exterior and interior doorways would be bronze statues of Ptolemaic kings, and on the inside were statues of a seated philosopher in contemplation and a scientist astride and carrying the globe in his raised left hand. The centerpiece of the room would be Alexander “the Founder”, receiving a crown from the Earth goddess Gaia, who herself was being crowned by Tyche and miniature representations of Victory.

There were numerous smaller temples that dotted Alexandria as well: the Arsinoeum, the temple dedicated to the posthumously deified sister-wife of Ptolemy II; the Poseideion could be found near the coast of the Great Harbor, likely to bring good fortune for the ships entering and exiting the ports. Along with Serapis, another Greco-Egyptian deities received sanctuaries within the city. A heavily Hellenized rendition of the Egyptian goddess Isis was housed alongside Harpocrates, a blend of the Cherubic Eros and childlike version of Horus that protected secrets and mysteries. Festivals would be

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<sup>83</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 9.8.2-4; Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 4.1.74b-e; Hedylus, *Epigrams*, 4

<sup>84</sup> Philon of Byzantium, *Pneumatics*, 61

<sup>85</sup> Pfeiffer, S. “*The God Serapis, His Cult and the Beginnings of the Ruler Cult in Ptolemaic Egypt*” in “*Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World*” Pgs. 387-408; Naether, F. “*New Deities and New Habits*” in “*A Companion to Greco-Roman and Late Antique Egypt*” Pgs. 439-440

<sup>86</sup> Tacitus, *The Histories*, 4. 82

<sup>87</sup> Pseudo-Nicolaus, *Progymnasmata*, 25; McKenzie, J.S. and Reyes, A.T. “*The Alexandrian Tychaion: a Pantheon?*”, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, Volume 26 , 2013 , pp. 36-52; Stewart, A. “*Faces of Power: Alexander's Image and Hellenistic Politics*” Pgs. 243-246

celebrated throughout the year, thanks to a proliferation of cults within the city.<sup>88</sup> The Ptolemaia, a festival centered around the deified kings and queens, would see the cult statues of those like Ptolemy I and Berenice I carried in procession throughout Alexandria.<sup>89</sup> Ptolemaic queens sponsored festivals dedicated to Aphrodite and Adonis, whereupon the women of Alexandria would attend to celebrate the goddess of marriage and fertility.<sup>90</sup> Alexander the Great had his own civic cult centered around his role as *Ktistes*, “The Founder”.<sup>91</sup> Such events would be accompanied by music, either from players and musicians taking part in the procession, or organized choirs.

In addition to matters of the spirit, on the western outskirts of the city lay the Necropolis, a final resting place for Alexandria’s inhabitants. As much as it was somber, it was also considered quite beautiful, with rows of decorated graves and gardens that provided a sense of tranquility.<sup>92</sup> Some of the graves would have frescoes on them, providing us with small yet personal connections to the life and background of its owner. One limestone slab shows a man named Isidoros wearing military garb while softly gesturing to two young girls – perhaps a depiction of a Ptolemaic soldier, who might have died while on campaign, sharing a final tender moment with his daughters.<sup>93</sup> Another shows a woman dying in the process of childbirth, a grim reminder of the all-too-real difficulties of life in the ancient world.<sup>94</sup> The practice of mummification, perhaps the most famous thing about Egypt besides the pyramids, also continued to thrive into the Ptolemaic period.<sup>95</sup> Mummies and other traditional Egyptian mortuary practices could be found alongside more Greek presentations in Alexandrian tombs, and sometimes the line becomes so blurred that it is hard to tell the cultural or ethnic origins of its occupants.<sup>96</sup>

The queen of cities was certainly renowned for its physical beauty, but she was also known for her brains as well. Under the patronage of the Ptolemies, the Alexandria would play host to some of the greatest scientists, intellectuals, and artists of the era. Though Athens may have been the cultural tour-de-force of the Classical period, Alexandria was intended as its replacement. Amidst the palace complex was the Mouseion, better known as the Museum. Its name was derived from the Muses, the nine goddesses of the arts so often invoked by poets and philosophers, and a small sanctuary to them was certainly incorporated into the Museum. Within its walls would host a collection of full-time scholars, who would reside in the Museum on the Ptolemaic payroll. The patronizing of scholars and artists was nothing new in the context of royal courts, especially during the Hellenistic Age. They might be hired as tutors for the royal children or serve as a flatterer and compose sycophantic ballads in the king’s honor – both of which occurred in spades in the Ptolemaic court. However, what the Ptolemies set up was

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<sup>88</sup> Fraser, P.M. “Ptolemaic Alexandria” Pgs. 189-286

<sup>89</sup> Iossif, P.P. “Ptolemaia” in “*The Encyclopedia of Ancient History, First Edition*” Pgs. 5624-5625

<sup>90</sup> Theocritus, *Idylls*, 15; Pomeroy, S.B. “*Women in Hellenistic Egypt: From Alexander to Cleopatra*” Pgs. 31-36

<sup>91</sup> Stewart, A. “*Faces of Power: Alexander’s Image and Hellenistic Politics*” Pgs. 229-230

<sup>92</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.10

<sup>93</sup> Currently the slab is housed inside of the Met, and Isidoros is a Galatian by origin. Link

(<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247109>)

<sup>94</sup> (<https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/247106>)

<sup>95</sup> Clement, C. “*Mummification in the Necropolis of Alexandria*”, *Archaeology*, 1999

(<https://archive.archaeology.org/online/news/gabbari.html>)

<sup>96</sup> Savvopoulos, K. “*Alexandria in Aegyptio. The Use and Meaning of Egyptian Elements in Hellenistic and Roman Alexandria*” in “*Isis on the Nile. Egyptian Gods in Hellenistic and Roman Egypt*” Proceedings of the IVth International Conference of Isis Studies, Liège, November 27-29 2008, Pgs. 80-82

completely unique: the Museum served as center of “institutionalized patronage”, one where individuals weren’t the focus, it was the scholarly activity taking place across generations of intellectuals fostered by Ptolemaic wealth.<sup>97</sup> The more cynically-minded were less positively inclined towards the environment, with those like the philosopher Timon of Philus commenting:

*“Many are feeding in populous Egypt, scribblers on papyrus, ceaselessly wrangling in the birdcage of the Muses”*.<sup>98</sup>

The competition to produce the greatest works could indeed be fierce, and the politics between its members even moreso. Competitions and symposiums were held, with the participants often performing in front of the king or queen. Ptolemy II was a notably hands-on patron, and there are many anecdotes of him interacting with the members of the Museum. Some of these could be light-hearted, like teasing one of member of staff who was renowned for solving language puzzles.<sup>99</sup> Others were less so. Ptolemy deliberately barred the Cyrenaic philosopher Hegesias from lecturing in Alexandria out of fear that his nihilistic teachings would spread in the city.<sup>100</sup> One Zoilus was punished for excessively criticizing the works of Homer, while the cynical poet Sotades was executed for reciting a mocking limerick regarding the incestuous marriage between Ptolemy and Arsinoe.<sup>101</sup>

But it seems that Ptolemy had high if selective standards when it came to maintaining the integrity of the Museum as an institution. According to the Roman author Vitruvius, Ptolemy II organized a poetry contest between several members of the Museum, but became enraged when the judge Aristophanes deduced that the competitors stole compositions thanks to his encyclopedic knowledge of the Library’s contents.<sup>102</sup> Strabo tells us of a lawsuit filed between contemporaries Eudorus and Aristo the Peripatetic: both wrote treatises on the Nile River that were near-identical in form and style, and so each accused the other of plagiarism, though we have no indication what ultimately came of it.<sup>103</sup>

But when people mention the name “Alexandria”, one image appears in the collective unconscious above all else: that of the Library, perhaps the greatest depository of knowledge in the ancient world. Its origins are somewhat vague. The idea of compiling or archiving written works was nothing new, but it was the scale and scope to which the Library of Alexandria had operated that made it truly outstanding.<sup>104</sup> Groundwork for the Library began under the reign of Ptolemy I, a learned man himself who had written an impressive memoir chronicling the campaigns of Alexander.<sup>105</sup> He apparently was prompted to begin his literary endeavor by Demetrius of Phalerum, who, besides being an ex-tyrant of Athens turned Ptolemaic advisor, was a student of Aristotle and a Peripatetic philosopher.<sup>106</sup> Aristotle’s

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<sup>97</sup> Erskine, A. *“Culture and Power in Ptolemaic Egypt: The Museum and Library of Alexandria”*, *Greece & Rome*, Vol XLII, 1, April 1995, Pg. 40; Murray, O. *“Ptolemaic Royal Patronage”* in *“Ptolemy II Philadelphus and his World”* Pgs. 9-24

<sup>98</sup> Timon, *Fragments*, 12

<sup>99</sup> Athenaeus, *Deipnosophistae*, 11.493c-494b

<sup>100</sup> Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*, 1.83

<sup>101</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 7.preface.8-9

<sup>102</sup> Vitruvius, *On Architecture*, 7.preface.4-7

<sup>103</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 17.1.5

<sup>104</sup> For a history of libraries down to the time of Assurbanipal II, see Potts, D.T. *“Before Alexandria: Libraries of the Ancient Near East”* in *“The Library of Alexandria – Centre of Learning in the Ancient World”* Pgs. 19-30

<sup>105</sup> Arrian, *Anabasis of Alexander*, Preface

<sup>106</sup> Plutarch, *Moralia*, 189D; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 12.2.1; Aristeas, *Letter to Philocrates*, 9

Lyceum held a vast amount of books, and his propensity to catalogue his works was enough for some authors like Strabo to claim that Aristotle had taught the Egyptian kings how to organize their own collections.<sup>107</sup> Though this last part is impossible, the connection between the Peripatetics and the structure of both the Library and Museum is a recurring theme, one which may have some solid ground.<sup>108</sup> I also need to clarify my use of the term “book” when it comes to antiquity. We cannot imagine a library in the traditional sense, since the bound codex wouldn’t come into widespread use until the High Roman Empire. Instead, writings would be in the form of rolled up sheets of papyrus, cultivated by the Egyptian government in mass quantities for official use. Thousands of papyrus rolls would be stored and catalogued in the library, each possessing little tags with the name of the work for quick reference. A staff of officials would be hired to maintain the Library or make copies of anything they could get their hands on, and they would be overseen by a Head Librarian. We have fragment of papyrus that provides us a list of Head Librarians, and it contains some of the most famous intellectuals of the entire period: the court poet Callimachus, the famed geographer Eratosthenes, and the epicist Apollonius of Rhodes.<sup>109</sup>

Our sources suggest that at the Library could contain anywhere from 200,000 up to 700,000 scrolls, and several anecdotes play up the degree which the Ptolemies sought to add to their hoard.<sup>110</sup> During Ptolemy II’s reign, it is said that every ship that pulled into Alexandria’s harbor would immediately be searched, and any books would be turned over to the librarians, who would return a new copy in place of the original.<sup>111</sup> Ptolemy seems to have been something of a collector, and requested from Athens the original manuscripts of the three great playwrights Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides. To assuage the fears of the nervous Athenians who were concerned about handing over such invaluable pieces of the city’s cultural legacy, the king provided 15 talents of silver as a security deposit – little good it did though, and in the end Ptolemy ended up forfeiting the relatively paltry amount of silver to keep the originals while the Athenians had copies returned to them instead.<sup>112</sup>

We also cannot claim that they merely copied the writings of previous authors, as there are many original works that have come out of scholars working in the Museum and the Library: scientific treatises like the Geography of Eratosthenes, a history of the Hellenistic dynasties by Timagenes, or even royal works like Ptolemy I’s account of Alexander the Great. There were also many commentaries and critical analyses of scholars like Homer and Plato. Although it was primarily designed to house and catalogue the writings of Greeks, there is evidence to suggest that the Library contained the writings of a variety of different cultures and languages, even if in smaller amounts. The records of Egyptians and Babylonians are said to have been translated into Greek, and Pliny the Elder speaks of commentaries on the writings

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<sup>107</sup> Strabo, *Geography*, 13.1.54

<sup>108</sup> The implication in Strabo’s text is that Aristotle directly taught the Egyptian kings, but Aristotle (apparently) never mentioned visiting Egypt, and if we are to assume that Egyptian kings meant the Ptolemies, Aristotle died in 322.

<sup>109</sup> POxy 1241

<sup>110</sup> Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 12.2.1; Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 7.17.3; Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Histories*, 22.16.13–14

<sup>111</sup> Galen, 17a.606

<sup>112</sup> Galen, 17a.607

of Zoroaster by an Alexandrian scholar of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century.<sup>113</sup> Jewish tradition holds that Ptolemy II had also invited and sponsored a group of 70 Jerusalemite scholars to stay in Egypt and translate the Torah, the first five books of the Old Testament, into a Greek edition known generally as the Pentateuch.<sup>114</sup> Skeptics may doubt the actual historicity of the event, but the attempt to use the blessings of the Library as a form of credibility and scholarly prestige clearly indicates the positive reputation of the institution, even for non-Greeks.<sup>115</sup> Such was the Library's fame that many kingdoms and contemporaries sought to create their own centers of learning, and directly emulated the Alexandrian model. The Attalid rulers of Pergamon had amassed the second largest collection of books outside of Alexandria to compete with the Ptolemies, who retaliated in turn by banning the export of papyrus.<sup>116</sup> Julius Caesar also initiated a building program for a public library in Rome, no doubt inspired by his visit to Egypt.<sup>117</sup>

But all good things must come to an end, and the same was true for the Alexandrian Library. The destruction of the Library remains a highly divisive topic. Several culprits have been blamed who were sometimes spread centuries apart, some acting with malice, while others implicated through accidents or collateral damage. During his reign, Ptolemy VIII had purged the Museum and Library of anyone he suspected of bearing ill will towards his rule, and he unceremoniously staffed a military officer as the role of Head Librarian.<sup>118</sup> In 48/47 BC, the Library was caught in the middle of the fighting between the armies of Julius Caesar and Cleopatra, and those of Ptolemy XIII and Arsinoe IV. Caesar's attempts to destroy the Egyptian navy resulted in a fire that spread from the dockyards and engulfed the Library itself or one of its storehouses – an unintended consequence that is notably absent from his Commentaries but preserved by Plutarch and Cassius Dio.<sup>119</sup> Both Marc Anthony and Augustus seem to have attempted to undo the damage, such as refilling it with stocks taken from the Library of Pergamon.<sup>120</sup> Alexandria suffered two major sieges in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century AD, and took immense damage from fire and pillaging in the area that the Library was said to be in.<sup>121</sup> More controversially, there are a couple stories emerging out of Late Antiquity attributing the destruction to religious fanaticism. In 391, a group of Christians prompted by the Alexandrian bishop Theophilus destroyed at least a sister library in the Serapeum. Following Alexandria's conquest by the Rashidun Caliphate in 641, a 13<sup>th</sup> century Syrian author claimed that the second Caliph Omar ordered the destruction of all the library's contents that disagreed with the Qur'an.<sup>122</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Syncellus, *Chronographia*, I.516.3-10; Pliny, *Natural History*, 30.4; Barnes, R. "Cloistered Bookworms in the Chicken-Coop of the Muses: The Ancient Library of Alexandria" in *The Library of Alexandria – Centre of Learning in the Ancient World* Pg. 67

<sup>114</sup> Aristeas, *Letter to Philocrates*, 26-47; Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 12.2.1-15

<sup>115</sup> Though supposedly written in the time of Ptolemy II, Aristeas (or Pseudo-Aristeas) probably dates closer to the mid-2<sup>nd</sup> century.

<sup>116</sup> Pliny, *Natural History*, 13.21, 13.70

<sup>117</sup> Suetonius, *Life of the Divine Julius Caesar*, 44.1-2; Dix, T.K. "Public Libraries" in *Ancient Rome: Ideology and Reality* Libraries & Culture Vol. 29, No. 3 (Summer, 1994), pp. 282-296

<sup>118</sup> Chaveau, M. "Egypt in the Age of Cleopatra" Pg.

<sup>119</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Caesar*, 49; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, 42.38.2 Caesar, *The Civil War*, 11.111; Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights*, 7.17.3

<sup>120</sup> Plutarch, *Life of Antony*, 58.5; Philo, *On the Embassy to Gaius*, 151

<sup>121</sup> Ammianus Marcellinus, *The Histories*, 22.15

<sup>122</sup> The story comes from the *Chronicum Syriacum* by Gregory Bar-Hebraeus, also known as Abu'l Faraj. Given the context of the period in which it was written, during the heights of the Crusades, it may be thought of as an Anti-Islamic polemic. However, there are a few Islamic authors like Ibn-Khaldun that repeat a similar story. For various viewpoints on both Christian

Regardless of who is to blame, the disappearance of the Library and its contents has resonated with people across the ages. Almost universally it has been seen as calamitous, some considering it a major stumbling block to the cultural and intellectual progress of humanity, if not a temporary decline. For sure, the loss of any writings from the ancient world is something of a tragedy, and the Library's sense of scale only adds to it further. Optimists suggest that we have received the cream of the crop when it comes to Greek literature, and we have the Library to thank for that. However, this may just be wishful thinking: Callimachus, one of the Head Librarians, composed a list of all the authors and writings that were stored in the library, and it measured an astonishing 120 rolls of papyrus.<sup>123</sup> So does that mean the loss of the Library is as serious as it is thought to be? Yes and no. Truthfully, the loss of the Library is probably tied to a combination of general neglect punctuated by accidents and fire, rather than a decisive turning point that afflicts humanity to the present day. It is unlikely that there was some sort of scientific treatise lost in the blazes that would have propelled mankind to the Industrial Age, if we are to be a bit hyperbolic. Yet we are bereft of a whole corpus that would aid in our ability to reconstruct the ancient world, and perhaps it is the speculation of what may have been lost that is most damaging of all.

Though its Library may have disappeared, Alexandria continued to survive and thrive long after. Following death of Cleopatra and annexation of Egypt by Rome, Alexandria retained a position of pre-eminence within the Roman world. It was considered the second or third city of the Empire following Rome and later Constantinople, both in terms of political and economic importance. Rule under the Caliphs did little to diminish its role, and it became the second most populated city in Egypt following the establishment of Cairo by the Fatimids. Alexandria was still a prestigious learning center down to Late Antiquity, playing a major role in the development of Christianity as both home to many early theologians and from the many converts that resided there. Even today, Alexandria continues to play an influential role in the affairs of North Africa and the Mediterranean, capturing our imagination ever since Alexander and Ptolemy first stepped onto Egyptian soil over 2300 years ago.

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and Islamic attacks on the Library, see Abdou, Q. *"The Arab Story of the Destruction of the Ancient Library of Alexandria"*, Lewis, B. *"The Arab Destruction of the Library of Alexandria: Anatomy of a Myth"* and Empereur, J.Y. *"The Destruction of the Library of Alexandria: An Archaeological Viewpoint"* in *"What Happened to the Ancient Library of Alexandria?"*.

<sup>123</sup> Armstrong, R.H. *"A Wound, not a World: Textual Survival and Transmission"* in *"A Companion to Greek Literature"*

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