

Cambridge University Press

978-1-108-01052-8 - Libraries and Founders of Libraries

Edward Edwards

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LIBRARIES, AND THE FOUNDERS OF  
LIBRARIES.

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“ You dwell alone ;  
You walk, you live, you speculate alone ;  
Yet doth Remembrance, like a sovereign prince,  
For you a stately Gallery maintain  
Of gay or tragic Pictures. ....

Books are your's,  
Within whose silent chambers treasure lies  
Preserved from age to age ; more precious far  
Than that accumulated store of gold  
And orient gems, which, for a day of need,  
The Sultan hides deep in ancestral tombs.  
Those hoards of truth you can unlock at will.”

*The Excursion*, iv.

## CHAPTER I.

INTRODUCTORY. — THE ANCIENT LIBRARIES OF EGYPT, OF  
 JUDEÆA, OF GREECE, AND OF THE ROMAN EMPIRE.

“Inde tenore pari, gradibus sublimia celsis  
 Ducor ad intonsi candida templa Dei.  
 Signa peregrinis ubi sunt alterna columnis  
 Belides, et stricto barbarus ense pater :  
 Quæque viri docto veteres cepere novique  
 Pectore, lecturis inspicienda patent. . . . .  
 Quarentem frustra custos me, sedibus illis  
 Præpositus, sancto jussit abire loco. . . . .  
 Nec me, quæ doctis patuerunt prima libellis,  
 Atria Libertas tangere passa sua est.  
 In genus auctoris miseri fortuna redundat ;  
 Et patimur nati, quam tulit ipse, fugam.”

*Tristia*, iii, 1.

OF the Libraries of the Ancients, the accounts that have descended to us are meagre and unsatisfactory. Some of the authors, to whom we owe such knowledge as we have, are either Encyclopædists, or geographers, or poets, intent on higher or on wider themes, and therefore treating of Libraries in a fashion merely incidental. Others of them derived their own knowledge at second-hand. Living, it may be, in the second or third centuries, and in Italy, we find them more communicative about the Libraries of the Ptolemies and of the Attali, than about the collections which lay almost at their own doors. The usual authorities, in a

General characteristics of the Evidence on Ancient Libraries.

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word, are but rarely bending their main attention to this particular subject. Still more rarely are they eye-witnesses of the facts for which they are made to vouch.

What can now be stated on this opening part of our theme,—and it must needs be stated briefly,—will, therefore, wear a fragmentary and hypothetical aspect. Too frequently, I fear, it will be but the abridgement of an oft-told tale. I begin by noticing the Libraries of Egypt. Part of this branch of the story rests on the authority of an historian, Diodorus of Sicily, and of a miscellany-compiler, Athenæus of Naucratis, but it has the advantage of supplementary testimony from the researches of modern Egyptologists.

The Libraries of Egypt.

Osymandyas, a king of Egypt, some fourteen centuries B.C., is said to have established a Library on the door or entablature of which was an inscription, that may be translated “*The Soul’s Dispensary*,”\* and on the walls of which were sculptures representing a judge, with the image of Truth suspended from his neck, and many books lying before him. So speaks Diodorus,† who had seen the building, but tells us nothing of its contents. Its books, whatever they were, are supposed to have perished during the Persian invasion under Cambyses.

Both Wilkinson‡ and Champollion§ identify with the building thus referred to by Diodorus the well-known monument,—usually designated the “Memnonium,” but preferably the “Ramesium,”—on the door-jambs of one of

\* Diodorus translated it by the Greek words *ψυχῆς ἰατρεῖον* (*Medicamentarium animæ*).

† Diod. Siculus, lib. i, c. 2, § 49. (Bipont reprint of Wesseling, I, 149.)

‡ Wilkinson, *Manners and Customs of the Ancient Egyptians*, i, 111—116. See also Osburn, *Monumental History of Egypt*, ii, 459.

§ *Lettres écrites d’Égypte*. . . en 1828 and 1829, 285.

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the inner halls of which may still be seen representations of Thoth, the inventor of letters, and the goddess Saf, his companion, with the titles "Lady of Letters," and "Presidentess of the Hall of Books." This monument is familiar to thousands of persons who have never visited Egypt, as from it was obtained that "Head of the young Memnon," which has long been so conspicuous an object in the Egyptian Gallery of the British Museum.

There was also, according to Eustathius and other ancient writers, a library at Memphis, deposited in that temple of Phtha, from which Homer was absurdly accused of having stolen both the Iliad and the Odyssey.

But the most superb library of Egypt, perhaps of the ancient world, was that founded by Ptolemy Soter, at Alexandria, and enriched by many successive kings. About the year B.C. 290, there was wont to assemble, at the 'Museum' of Alexandria, a society of learned men, for whose use the first Ptolemy, as we are told, formed a collection of books, the extent of which has been very variously computed. Josephus\* puts an official speech into the mouth of Demetrius Phalereus, as addressed to Ptolemy, in which he says, that there were about 200,000 volumes in the library, and "that in a little time there would be 500,000;" but the entire story—like that as to the origin of the Septuagint—is a fable, having no sort of authority. There is no evidence of the truth of Josephus' assertion that Demetrius Phalereus was librarian of the Alexandrian Library, better than that which exists for the seventy-two apocryphal books; the seventy-two interpreters; the six and thirty boats; and the six and thirty cells, each with a skylight.

\* *Josephi Antiquitatum Judaicarum*, liber xii, c. 2 (Ed. Dindorf, 1845 i, 439).

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Library.

Ptolemy Philadelphus, an equally liberal and enlightened prince, collected books in the Temple of Serapis, in addition to those accumulated by his father, and at his death left in it, according to the statement of Eusebius, about 100,000 volumes. He had agents in every part of Asia and of Greece, commissioned to search out and purchase the rarest and most valuable writings; and amongst those which he procured were the works of Aristotle, purchased of Neleus.\* The measures adopted by Ptolemy Philadelphus, for augmenting the Alexandrian Library, seem to have been pursued by his successor Ptolemy Euergetes, with unscrupulous vigour. He caused, it has been said, all books imported into Egypt by foreigners to be seized and sent to the Academy or Museum, where they were transcribed by persons employed for the purpose; upon which the copies were delivered to the proprietors, and the originals deposited in the library. He borrowed of the Athenians—so runs the story—the works of Sophocles, Euripides, and Æschylus; caused them to be transcribed in the most elegant manner; retained the originals for his own library; and returned to the Athenians the copies which had been made of them, with fifteen talents† for the exchange. As the Museum, in which the library was originally founded, stood near the royal palace, in the quarter of the city called Brucheium, the books, it is supposed, were at first deposited there; but when this building had been completely occupied with books, to the number of 400,000 volumes, a supplemental library was erected within the Serapeum, or Temple of Serapis; and the books there placed gradually increased—if we are to follow the usual authorities—to the amount of 300,000 volumes; thus making, in both libraries, a grand

\* Athenæus, lib. i, c. 4, ed. Schweighäuser.

† Computed to be equal to more than £3,000 sterling.

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total of 700,000 volumes,—but “volumes” in a very different sense to that in which we now use the word, vague as that modern use too commonly is.

The difficulties arising from the *translation* into another language of such words as βιβλος, βιβλίον, τομος; *codex, liber, libellus, volumen, tomus, scapus; book, pamphlet, tract, volume*, and the multitude of like words in other tongues—like, but probably no two of the whole number precisely and absolutely equipollent—are quite enough to account for very wide discrepancies in library statistics, whether ancient or modern; but, as respects ancient libraries, more particularly, another large opening was made for error by that oscitancy of transcribers, as Addison calls it, which led them to use figures instead of words.

The Alexandrian Library continued in all its splendour until the first Alexandrian war, when, during the plunder of the city, the Brucheium portion of the collection was accidentally destroyed by fire, owing to the recklessness of the soldiers. But the library in the Serapeum still remained, and was augmented by subsequent donations, particularly by that of the Pergamean Library, amounting, according to Plutarch, to 200,000 volumes, presented by Mark Antony to Cleopatra; so that it soon surpassed the former both in the number and in the value of its contents. Seneca affirms that the Alexandrian Library was rather to be considered a pompous spectacle, than a place for the studies of the learned.\* At length, after various revolutions under the Roman emperors, during which the collection was sometimes plundered and sometimes re-established, it was utterly destroyed by

\* *De Tranquillitate Animi*, cap. 9.—“Non fuit elegantia illud, aut cura [He is referring to a passage in one of the lost books of Livy, in which those words occurred,] sed studiosa luxuria: immo ne studiosa quidem, quoniam non in studium sed in spectaculum comparaverunt;” &c.

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the Saracens, under the orders of the Caliph Omar, when they acquired possession of Alexandria, A.D. 638. Amrou, the victorious general, was himself inclined to spare this inestimable treasury of ancient science and learning; but the ignorant and fanatical caliph, to whom he applied for instructions, ordered it—according to the well-known story—to be destroyed. “If,” said he, “these writings of the Greeks agree with the Koran, or book of Allah, they are useless, and need not be preserved; if they disagree, they are pernicious, and ought to be destroyed.” The sentence of destruction was executed with blind obedience. The volumes of parchment, or papyrus, were distributed to the four thousand baths of the city; and such was their incredible number, that six months, we are told, were scarcely sufficient for their combustion.\*

This, at all events, is the received account of a memorable event, and, although often questioned, it has never been satisfactorily refuted. But it should be borne in mind, that the identification of the library destroyed by Omar, with the library which had been established, and *perhaps* restored in the Serapeum, is wholly conjectural. The Temple of Serapis had itself been demolished two hundred and fifty years before, by Theophilus, Archbishop of Alexandria, and it is certain that the library was then pillaged if not destroyed. Orosius has recorded the feelings of indignation aroused, towards the close of the fourth century, by the sight of the still empty shelves. (. . . *Nos vidimus armaria librorum, quibus direptis, exinanita ea a nostris hominibus,*

\* Gibbon (*Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. ix, p. 440) has endeavoured to disprove the positive account given by Abulfaragius, by means of negative arguments. But it may probably be thought that the direct and positive statement of an historian of such unquestionable credit as Abulfaragius, cannot be set aside by arguments of a negative and hypothetical character.



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*nostris temporibus memorent.\**) Besides the two great libraries which have been already described, Alexandria possessed a third in the Sebasteum, or Temple of Augustus, and a fourth of much later date than the others, attached to its famous "School." If the last-named collection was the object of Omar's fanaticism, the loss to learning must have been less severe than has usually been imagined.

The Holy Book which, in mediæval catalogues, we so often meet with under the designation 'Bibliotheca,' was, in fact, the first Library of the Hebrews, and in it their Synagogues possessed the seed not alone of the purest Theology, but of the truest History, the most pregnant Philosophy, and the loftiest Poetry, which the world has seen. In small compass, they had there the substance of the many thousands of volumes into which, in subsequent ages, the Holy Scriptures have been, by turns, illustrated or obscured, explained or merely diluted. To bring before the mind a vivid conception of the marvellous way in which that small collection of the early Synagogues has literally *grown* into a vast library, the traveller need but enter the Royal Library of the Kings of Wirtemberg, where he will find a series of nearly nine thousand several editions of the Bible, yet will learn that it exists in many forms and many tongues which are not there represented. But it needs not that a man should travel to Stuttgart to gain such a conception. He can put before his mind the assured fact that whilst that vast number of editions is but a proportion of the total number of editions and translations which have been printed, the entire aggregate itself, could it possibly be brought together, would look small in

The Libra-  
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Hebrews.

\* Orosius, ed. Havercamp, lib. vi, c. xv. 421.

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comparison with a like collection of the Biblical apparatus. And if he be a man of few books, and but one tongue, he may be happy in the thought that, like the Hebrew of the early Synagogue, he can hold in his hand the pith and essence of all that vast accumulation, together with a supplement immeasurably more important.

The Hebrews had, too, at a very early period, their public archives. Those which Herod caused to be burned, for the purpose of destroying the muniments of the ancient families, so that his own obscurity of origin might no longer be made conspicuous by contrast, are said, by Eusebius,\* to have reached almost as far back as to the origin of the Hebrew nation. But though he consigned the public records to the flames, those of individuals seem to have been beyond his power, and to have served, long afterwards, towards the re-establishment of the history of the subjugated people. There are, too, in early Jewish history some traces of Libraries, more strictly so called. But they are traces only, till we come to the era of the Maccabees. And, even then, we can only infer from an incidental passage or two, and from such an expression as “the multitude of books,” that their collections had expanded beyond the sacred Scriptures and the ritualistic lore, and that their historical works had become numerous enough to induce the compilation of abridgements.

Holy Scripture also mentions a library of the kings of

Their archives.

Libraries of the Persians and Assyrians.

\* “Porro autem, cum familiæ non Hebræorum solum, verumetiam eorum qui usque ad Proselytos genus suum referebant, . . . ad illud tempus scriptis proditæ, in tabulariis reservarentur; Herodes . . . annales illos de generum et familiarum antiquitate incendit: arbitratus se nobilem visum iri, cum nemo suum genus ex publicis illis monumentis depromptum, ad Patriarchas, vel ad Proselytos, vel ad eos qui Γειῶραι (i. e., terræ incolæ qui cum Israelitis permiscébantur,) vocati sunt, omnino posset reducere.”—Eusebius, *Historia Ecclesiastica*, lib. i, c. 7 (Edit. Christopherson, 1570, 15).