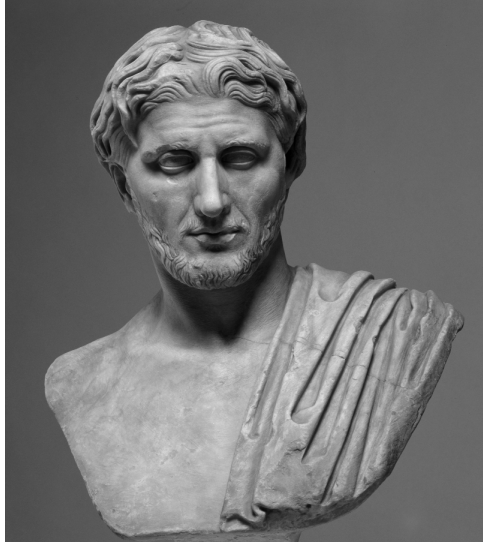


1

The Library

300 BCE-500 CE



PRECEDING PAGE:

*Demetrius of Phaleron, probable founder of the library
at Alexandria, circa 300 BCE. Roman-era copy at the
Kunsthistorisches Museum Vienna.*

BY TRANSFORMING A LARGELY ORAL SCHOLARLY
CULTURE INTO A LARGELY WRITTEN ONE, THE LIBRARY
MADE THE GREEK INTELLECTUAL TRADITION BOTH
PORTABLE AND HERITABLE.

THE MAN who founded the most famous library in the Western world wore makeup, dyed his hair blond, carried on affairs with married women and adolescent boys, and led a life checkered by political intrigue. Demetrius of Phaleron (ca. 360–280 BCE), who initiated the construction of the library at Alexandria, ranks among the least known but most pivotal figures in the Western intellectual tradition. Demetrius began his career in Athens, where he was a student at the famous open-air school founded by Aristotle, the Lyceum. By 317 BCE he had become tyrant of Athens, courtesy, if only indirectly, of another student of Aristotle, Alexander the Great. Alexander and his father had put Greece under Macedonian control, with formerly democratic Athens now subject to their overlordship. In part puppet dictator, in part philosopher-king, Demetrius ruled Athens with a high-handedness arguably typical of intellectuals in power. Somewhat hypocritically, given his own flamboyant habits—he was notorious for his orgies and lavish banquets—he initiated a series of crackdowns on excess and luxury in dress and enter-

tainment. By 307 BCE he had made so many enemies that he sought exile in Thebes.¹

By this time, Alexander the Great was long dead and his generals were busy carving up his legacy in Asia. The general in charge of Egypt, the future Ptolemy I, invited Demetrius to emigrate to Alexandria after the leader of the Lyceum declined a similar offer. Demetrius jumped at the chance and became in effect Ptolemy's court philosopher. Before he managed to disgrace himself again (by alienating Ptolemy *II* in a succession controversy), he first initiated and then supervised the construction of Alexandria's library and its equally famous Museum.

There are at least three ways to tell the story of the library, each from a different perspective but all overlapping. The first approach is institutional: the tale of how libraries were founded and funded; how books were produced, collected, copied, categorized, and stored; and how scholars made use of them. Such a story might begin with the libraries of ancient Mesopotamia. It would reach its apex in the Ptolemies' unprecedented decision to collect all the world's knowledge at Alexandria. And it would conclude with the glories of Islamic scholarship, which transmitted and expanded the knowledge of antiquity across the greater Mediterranean and beyond.

The second approach is intellectual, and begins with the philosophical rationale for collecting books in the first place. Organizing and managing a library is, after all, a monumentally tedious task, in need of a deep-seated prior commitment to justify its utility. In particular, libraries rest on the conviction that

writing is the best way of organizing knowledge. Yet as recently as 1800, Enlightenment encyclopedists and Romantic university lecturers still disagreed over whether writing or speech is preferable. Given that such philosophical greats as Socrates and Plato preferred to debate rather than scribble, the decision taken by their immediate successors to found the first Greek libraries is a surprising development in need of special explanation. Greek society, like most archaic societies, revolved around oral tradition, the memorization and recitation of the Homeric epics. If hearing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* gave you cultural literacy, if epic poems achieved their highest expressiveness in theatrical performance, why write them down? Here a direct line connects Demetrius to Aristotle: their common decision to support writing as comprehensively as speech, to write everything down, store it in libraries, and base scholarship on the analysis and synthesis of texts rather than on verbal argument.

Mention of Aristotle, who served as Alexander's boyhood tutor, brings us back to the Macedonian world conquests and to a third approach, which might be called political. Alexander's successors, in particular the rulers of Egypt and Asia Minor, brought Greek culture out of its confinement in the city-states, or poleis, which give us our word for politics. The libraries they founded enabled knowledge to flourish for the first time in the radically different social environment of the Hellenistic empire. Since then, libraries have been supported by an astonishing variety of political systems down to the present day. Any institution that has lasted well over two millennia has to have appealed not

just to scholars and academics but to society at large. It must have fulfilled some of the deepest aspirations of ancient people, reflected the wishes of those commanding influence and resources, and meshed with the structures of social and political power. Understanding why the Ptolemies—and others of Alexander's successors—saw fit to establish libraries, of all things, gives us insight into why large-scale political powers so often make patronage of learning a key part of their competition with rivals.

With politics as our guide, then, but with institutional developments and intellectual rationales in mind, let us sketch the origins of the Hellenistic library. Academic knowledge first emerged in the society of the Greek polis at Athens. But only the eclipse of this world, and with it classical Greece itself, made possible the rise of the library and its characteristic forms of scholarship. Sumptuous institutions conceived on a grand scale, libraries reflected the wealth and ambition of Hellenistic empire-builders newly emboldened to assert the hegemony of Greek learning over the known world. Nothing in the ancient world compared with their achievement—except in China, whose epoch of unification also inspired a great library to organize knowledge. There too cultural standardization went hand in hand with the end of classical philosophy and its replacement by imperial patronage of scholarship. Equally true, the profound differences between Chinese and Hellenistic libraries reveal what was historically specific about the scholarly culture that emerged in the West. Alexandria, not Athens, was its first center. Alexandria's

library became a model for three other imperial civilizations of Mediterranean antiquity, Rome, Christendom, and Islam, all founded on the Greek legacy.

SPEECH AND WRITING IN THE CLASSICAL POLIS

Among the most disquieting features of the ancient Greeks, a people we often regard as the fount of Western civilization, is their profound devaluation of private and family life, the sphere of women, children, and slaves. Public life—the only life that really mattered—was the domain of men. Celebrations of the phallus, graphically depicted on numerous vases and sculptures, announce a culture of frank and aggressive masculinity.² Equally troubling to modern sensibilities, the Greeks showed a distinct preference for pederastic relationships between adult men and postpubescent boys. Misogyny and homoerotic swagger underlie the vibrancy and brilliance of Greek philosophy, even while raising the puzzle of why it ever took written form.

The male-male love for which ancient Greece is famous had its origins in military comradeship. Adult men and teenagers—fifteen- to nineteen-year-olds, not children—tried to prove themselves to each other, the older ones taking younger comrades under their wing. Sometimes such relationships did take the form of explicit carnal contact, though this was generally looked down upon; homosexual intercourse was viewed more as adultery is today than as pedophilia, as an all-too-human weakness of the flesh rather than a perversion of nature. The norm was instead a kind of passionate friendship. Greek education was

designed to transform the male erotic bond into a bond between mentor and protégé, to make pederasty into pedagogy.³ (An analogous blend of sexual and educational fellowship flourished among women on the island of Lesbos.) Physical education was as important as, if not more so than, mental training; gymnastics derives from the word *gymnos* (“naked”), indicating the Greek mode of male exercise. Over time, however, mastering effective speech came to outweigh prowess in the martial arts.

Speech was central to the functioning of small-scale, personal politics like that practiced at Athens. For a long time the Greek poleis had been ruled by tyrants or aristocrats, but political conflict in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE gradually led to the establishment of democracies. The shift from tyranny to democracy intensified the need for pedagogy in effective public speaking. We tend so much to the reflexive praise of Greek democracy that it is easy to overlook its inherent weaknesses: take a group of people trained in combat, chronically at war, poor by modern standards, and confined to a small space, and, emancipated from traditional authority, they would likely proceed to clobber one another even more vigorously. In such a climate, spoken competition, in political debate at the town square, provided the means to channel violent conflict into nonviolent conflict.

These aspects of Greek education, society, and politics came together in the epic poems attributed to Homer, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Both center on masculine identity, the *Iliad* on the comradeship of war (one launched by a fight over a woman), the *Odyssey* on the lone individualist, the man who for ten years

prefers exploration and adventure to the company of his long-suffering wife, Penelope. The two epics also focus on Greek political cohesion: in narrating the Greek city-states' war against the Trojans of Asia Minor, they establish a group identity that held Greece together amid its tendency to degenerate into civil war. Passed down through the generations, they constituted a repository of what it meant to be Greek. Both epics were transmitted orally, memorized by professional bards or poets who roved from town to town.

For competitive speech, though, one needed not bards but coaches: the Sophists, a rival group of wordsmiths who came from all over Greece, converging in democratic Athens in the later fifth century BCE. The Sophists gathered in public spaces already frequented by men engaged in self-betterment, specifically the gymnasiums. Professionals for hire, they explained epic and archaic poetry, Homer in particular, and taught their clients to speak well. The ability to win any argument—the skill the Sophists purveyed—paved the road to influence and power in the polis. Literary knowledge was more important than scientific knowledge in this world, as it was throughout the premodern period. Effective speech conferred mastery over people, which in an age before advanced technology counted for far more than the mastery over nature that science offers.

Sophists addressed the challenges of democracy by systematizing the art of persuasion and the pedagogy of speaking well. In so doing they became the first true practitioners of textual scholarship.⁴ The careful, methodical study of Homer meant

getting the words exactly right, which entailed an emphasis on grammar, rhetoric, and roughly the field we now label linguistics or philology. For this the Sophists relied heavily on the written word, and in particular on books. They became infamous for the refinement of their linguistic distinctions and made lawyerly arguments drawing their evidence and citations from poetic precedents. Books, as references, were indispensable handmaidens to the sophistic style of argument.

But the Sophists were not only nitpickers, they were hucksters and cynical profiteers: this was the damning view of Socrates, foremost among the circle of elitist philosophers suspicious of democracy's tendency to put knowledge up for sale. Socrates believed that the Sophists' exaggerated faith in the written word weakened physical memory. A conservative, he hearkened back to the living, erotic, verbal bonds among men. The Socratic method, a robust question-and-answer, is the expression of an oral pedagogy founded on the productive friction between masters and students. It also reflects the Socratic belief that speech leads to truth: to judge the veracity of an utterance, one may also consult the reputation of its speaker, a central habit of mind in the face-to-face polis. The written word, by contrast, is untrustworthy and corrupting because it is detached from the actions, honor, and character of whoever uttered it.

What we know of Socrates, given his principled disdain for writing, comes inevitably from his pupils, mainly Plato, who for his own part acted to tip the balance back away from speech. Plato's dialogues took written form and by their very nature

accommodated difference and disagreement among rivals (including Socrates himself), working through their arguments logically. Equally important, they acted as a conduit for the Socratics' most innovative departures from the scholarship of the Sophists. For painstaking analysis of verb tenses in the Homeric epics, Plato and his circle substituted a style of metaphysical speculation associated with the eclectic philosophies of the pre-Socratics, who argued over such questions as whether atoms, numbers, or elements (earth, air, fire, water) were the ultimate constituents of reality. In essence, they fused the pre-Socratics' penchant for abstract contemplation with the Sophists' emphasis on practical scholarship.⁵ This brought a newly systematic viewpoint to perennial practical questions on the best ways to live, to form character, to constitute society, and to design institutions. Dialogues made this feat look natural. Not so much literal transcriptions as textual recreations of spoken debates, they paraded hard-won insights as the apparent products of extemporaneous philosophizing. This clever illusion confronted the Sophists on their own turf and created a lasting tension in academic culture between true wisdom and mere rhetoric. "Philosophy," the ideology of ancient learning, emerged as a calculated bid counterposing a public-minded love of wisdom to sophistic opportunism and private profit.

Institutionally, what Plato, his followers, and their dialogues together created, and what later imitators copied, was the philosophical school. Plato proved his devotion to wisdom by inviting rivals to join him, and his Academy—a brotherhood of scholars

constituted in an Athenian grove—ranged freely over the entirety of what has come to be known as academic knowledge. When Plato's student and rival Aristotle failed to succeed him as leader of the Academy, Aristotle's followers in turn created their own school, the Lyceum. Both institutions had close ties to the gymnasias for which they were named and as such conformed to the classic ideals of Greek pedagogy, establishing new oral traditions in acts of ritual love and public conflict among men. As an institution for organizing knowledge, the school engenders passionate commitments among individuals united, despite their own rivalry, around a charismatic founder. Its institutional continuity is by the same token threatened by the death or defection of leaders and prominent members. Aristotle confronted exactly this problem, finding in Athens and elsewhere a plethora of schools besides his own vying for intellectual position.

Aristotle was able to coopt his rivals by grounding his scholarship decisively in writing. He determined to synthesize positions represented by contending schools, his method being to group discrete doctrines and treat their differences and similarities with an aim to unraveling their apparent contradictions.⁶ Many find Aristotle's books insufferably bland for this reason. His kitchen-sink philosophy teems with sober categorizations—his typology of causes as material, formal, efficient, and final, for example—and lacks the spark of dissent that enlivens Plato. Others find Aristotle inspiringly capacious, able to incorporate all the encyclopedic detail, on everything from flora and fauna to political constitutions, that Plato lacked. Such a style is emi-

nently suited, in any case, to the shift from speech to writing. Speech thrives on one-sided positions, so argument can go on indefinitely around the same questions; writing makes an inclusive, ecumenical approach both possible and desirable.

So too the library embodied on a large scale what Aristotle's books embodied in miniature, which makes Aristotle not just the personal but also the intellectual link to the Hellenistic world that emerged through his student Alexander. Every library comfortably contains writings and juxtaposes ideas that, if they were represented by their proponents in the flesh, might contrast violently with one another. Yet there they sit, on shelves, awaiting such scholars as may chance upon them to confront their latent contradictions. Libraries reduce complexity not by proposing a new simplicity—a bold philosophy advancing air, not water, as the ultimate constituent of matter, for example—but by constructing a well-made intellectual edifice where every doctrine has its proper place. Where schools fade or fragment, libraries persist; where schools sustain fixed arguments and preserve intellectual lineages, libraries absorb new knowledge and accommodate newcomers to learning. This made Greek learning, incubated by oral competition, newly portable to non-Greek landscapes. Abroad, for the first time, writing enabled the accumulation not just of philosophical perspectives but of knowledge of the world more generally.

ALEXANDRIA: GREECE ABROAD

Ancient books had been in circulation on the open market long before the first Hellenistic libraries, but their collection was a

private affair, not a public one. Books, or rather papyrus scrolls, were produced by trained copyists operating out of commercial bookshops or working as household slaves for wealthy patrons. The physical act of writing carried the opprobrium of all manual labor and was disdained by cultivated men; scholars who “wrote” books in fact dictated them to their scribes. Together with the emphasis on speech in politics and philosophy, this limited the extent to which books could be—or could be seen as—the authoritative storehouses of knowledge in classical Athens. Only with the shift from polis to empire and the founding of libraries at Alexandria, Pergamum, and elsewhere did the collection of books become a public affair.

In 323 BCE, Alexander the Great died (one year before Aristotle), and this unleashed a struggle among his several successors. Poleis and city life continued, but larger-scale political organization became the rule. Empires now competed where cities had before, generally under the patronage of a wealthy ruler or family rather than a body of democratic citizens. Superseding the polis, these new states elevated cultural competition from the level of individuals to the level of dynasties without in any way undermining the centrality of Greek language or culture. Such dynasties simply commanded, for the first time, the resources to establish institutions outlasting their founders and tied to the longer-term fortunes of the states that sponsored them. The wealthiest and most powerful of these was in Egypt, where the Ptolemies lorded it over the Nile Valley from their capital at Alexandria, a military-administrative

outpost located where the river delta met the sea. Vying with other empire-builders in Antioch, Pergamum, and back in Macedonia and Greece, the Ptolemies made their city a magnet for ambitious emigrating Greeks. Alexandria grew under their tutelage to become the multicultural city of antiquity par excellence.

The Ptolemies were uncommonly cultured rulers and established as a paradise for scholars a lavishly endowed temple to the Muses, the Museum. Imperial patronage marked a critical shift away from the self-sacrificing public-spiritedness of Athenian philosophers toward a newfound concern for scholars' private lives, and in particular their incomes. Certainly the emphasis once given to character formation in the classical polis receded when politics began to center less on competitive speech than on palace intrigue. Pampered, coddled, secluded in a royal compound set apart from the hustle and bustle of a busy, polyglot port city, Museum members enjoyed hefty tax breaks and free use of residence halls, dining facilities, personal servants, teaching rooms, colonnades and open spaces, and, most important, the famous library. Resentful outsiders called it a "birdcage" for politically emasculated bookworms. But the Museum was part and parcel of a very shrewd policy to lure talent from all over the Greek world by providing all the creature comforts and cultural amenities of Greek life. The same thing happened on a smaller scale with the numerous gymnasia, baths, festivals, and theaters also established in Alexandria to weld the Greek diaspora into a ruling class.

The Ptolemies were anxious to attract the best Greek scholars to their capital and paid them handsomely. Among those who flourished under their patronage were Euclid, the great synthesizer of ancient geometry; Eratosthenes, whose measurements established with impressive accuracy the circumference of the earth (which, incidentally, he knew to be round); and Archimedes, the polymath best known today for his study of fluid mechanics. Later, under the Romans, Alexandria hosted Galen, the giant of ancient medicine, and Claudius Ptolemaeus (or simply Ptolemy—no relation to the Ptolemaic dynasty), architect of the geocentric solar system ultimately overturned by Copernicus.

But it was Demetrius of Phaleron who became the pivotal figure. No one better embodies the link from Aristotle to the library and the shift from polis to empire. Through his initiative, the Ptolemies set about acquiring as many books as possible. They paid huge sums, utterly indiscriminately, for whatever was available on the Mediterranean market. They even ordered incoming ships at port to yield up their scrolls for confiscation and copying; the copies, not the originals, were later returned to their owners. Books were an even better investment than scholars. Scholars come and go in a competitive world, but books can only accumulate. Ancient (albeit unverifiable) reports number the holdings of Alexandria's library during its heyday at over half a million. Though most books took up several scrolls, meaning that the quantity of discrete texts was perhaps a third as many, the Alexandrian library was still by far the most comprehensive library of antiquity.

Hellenistic scholarship

Greek knowledge pursued under the aegis of empire took on a more depoliticized character. Not only did charged speech at last yield to scholarly writing, but the all-encompassing pursuit of “philosophy” dissipated among the various fields of learning for which Alexandria became famous: literature, philology, poetry, geography, ethnography, medicine, mathematics, and experimental science. Philosophy itself failed—almost uniquely among learned pursuits—to thrive there, at least early on. Not only does philosophy feed on oral interaction, but it arguably profits from a dearth of texts: without the seductions of a research library, scholars are thrown back on their own intellectual resources. Amid Alexandria’s embarrassment of riches, by contrast, public intellectualism was easily sacrificed to private curiosity, and philosophy was transmuted into something more recognizably academic.

Collation, translation, and synthesis: these were the particular forms of scholarship first established at Alexandria. Far more than a place merely to amass scrolls, the library became a place to collate them: to edit and recopy manuscripts, to recombine their contents and add commentary and analysis. In an age before print technology, even the most faithfully hand-copied texts were irremediably inaccurate. The great classics especially circulated in hopelessly many versions around the Mediterranean. Establishing a reliable edition of Homer’s epics thus became Alexandria’s particular point of pride. Disdaining other scholars—at Pergamum, for example—who contented them-

selves with establishing Homer's overall allegorical meaning, Alexandrians set particular store on getting every paragraph, every sentence, every word right.⁷ Quite often this led them to make inferences that did more harm than good to the texts concerned. A line from the *Iliad* in which Aphrodite carries a seat for Helen offended the critics' belief that a goddess would not stoop to serving a mere mortal.⁸ But the decision to elevate precision and rigor over substantive moral message illustrates better than anything else the extinction of classical Athenian speech in Ptolemaic Egypt and its replacement by a text-centered academic culture.

Even more consequential than editing Homer, a Greek poet for Greek speakers, was the translation effort that began to establish the hegemony of Greek learning among non-Greek cultures. Alexandria was a multicultural crossroads with a large (albeit oppressed) native Egyptian population and a wealthy and influential Jewish minority; it was also quite close to the great civilizations of Persia and Mesopotamia. In this unique environment, the Ptolemies undertook to make the most important books of the various Mediterranean peoples—the known world, to them—available in Greek. Included were Roman law, Egyptian history, Babylonian astronomy, and, first and foremost for its impact on later history, the Hebrew Bible. Demetrius himself may have initiated the production of the Septuagint, so named after the seventy-two Jewish scholars, six for each of the Twelve Tribes, reportedly brought from Palestine to Alexandria to translate the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Although each

one was sequestered from the rest, all seventy-two allegedly produced exactly the same text. This proved both the accuracy of the translation and its divine sanction.

Eventually the Septuagint became the patrimony of Alexandria's ever-growing Jewish community, which had already begun to adopt Greek, displacing Aramaic and Hebrew, as its primary language. But its initial production reflected distinctly Ptolemaic interests. Hellenistic rulers combined genuine intellectual curiosity about "alien wisdom" with the politically shrewd insight that governing subject peoples required knowledge of their laws and customs.⁹ As explained in the Letter of Aristeas, one of our few sources on the library's early activities, Ptolemy wanted to gain the allegiance of Jews who had been forcibly relocated from Jerusalem to Egypt by the Persians, as well as a large number of Jews forced to serve in the Ptolemies' own armies: "Now since I am anxious to show my gratitude to these men and to the Jews throughout the world and to the generations yet to come, I have determined that your law shall be translated from the Hebrew tongue which is in use amongst you into the Greek language, that these books may be added to the other royal books in my library."¹⁰ In later centuries, some of Alexandria's most famous philosophers, including the Jew Philo and the Christians Origen and Clement, drew on the Septuagint to reconcile Greek philosophy with divine revelation and forge true theology out of Hebrew monotheism. Few efforts better encapsulate the way in which Hellenistic learning had become enmeshed in the politics of multiethnic empire.

Synthesis was the final accomplishment of Alexandrian scholarship. This simply reflected the influence of Aristotle's encyclopedic approach. The luxury of roaming along endless bookshelves inspired scholars to cherry-pick those choice bits of knowledge that their predecessors had ransacked the world to discover. The truest practitioner of this art was Callimachus (ca. 305–ca. 240 BCE), famous both for his erudite poetry and as the compiler of Alexandria's first library catalog, the *Pinakes*. These "tables" were a vast improvement over first-letter alphabetization, itself invented by Alexandria's first librarian. They enabled Callimachus to search library scrolls for lists of rivers, cities, myths, fish, rituals, gods, unusual words, and strange customs from peoples all around the world. Natural and human wonders, like "salt water which tastes sweet" and "precious metals that grow like plants," became staples of what is called "paradoxography," a genre he invented.¹¹ All this information he kept at hand as a store of references, learned allusions, and fascinating facts with which to pepper his verse. His thematic groupings and cross-references made his collections available to other library scholars—to the detriment of their poetry, in the eyes of their critics. "Soldiers of Callimachus," wrote one vitriolic detractor, "you hunters of grim verbal combinations, who like '*min*' and '*sphin*' [archaic pronouns], and to research whether the Cyclops had dogs, may you be worn away for eternity."¹²

The categorization of knowledge, whether in tables, trees, or Dewey decimals, has exerted a fascination among modern-day scholars far disproportionate to its actual importance. Classifi-

cation schemes are arbitrary conveniences. What matters is not whether history is grouped with poetry or with politics and what that says about the ancient mind, but simply whether such schemes make books readily and rapidly accessible to roaming encyclopedic intellects. To judge by the quality of substantive synthetic scholarship emanating from Ptolemaic Alexandria, this is exactly what Callimachus's *Pinakes* and similar works accomplished. Some of the ancient world's best cartography and ethnography was done by scholars who never ventured outside the city walls, or perhaps even the Museum grounds, to gather data but instead simply drew together the best and most reliable maps and travel reports from library holdings. Euclid's geometry falls into the same category: more a synthesis than an original work, it nonetheless ranks as history's most influential mathematical textbook.

Critical reading became "a source for further writing" at Alexandria, spawning new genres like the commentary, the glossary, and the index.¹³ Erudition, eclecticism, and a penchant for system-building, still the vices and virtues of the scholarly mind, were the manifestations of the new scholarly style. This was far from the style of the philosophers, for good or ill, but it is unlikely in any case that true philosophy could have survived outside hothouses like fifth-century Athens. The patronage of rulers made all this knowledge available—in modified form—to others, including ourselves.

Cultural patronage

We may well wonder why great rulers, from the Ptolemies of Egypt to the Medicis of Italy to the sultans, mughals, and emperors of Asia, have so often patronized academic scholarship. It cannot be simple chance, the mere goodwill of powerful figures who happen to take an interest in the life of the mind, that higher learning has prospered under such extensive financial and political support.

One explanation is straightforwardly, even cynically political. It holds that rulers invest in cultural capital to burnish their reputations and paint their rivals as base warlords by comparison. Especially in a culturally unified but politically fragmented world such as the Hellenistic one (or for that matter Renaissance Italy or “Warring States” China), centers of higher learning tipped the balance in an otherwise equal contest among a limited number of rivals. Other means, however, such as the patronage of religion or the construction of monumental architecture, accomplish this goal more directly, by conveying the impression of kingly magnanimity to much larger groups of people. The Ptolemies’ predecessors, the pharaohs, had done exactly this with massive pyramids and temple complexes. Royal patronage of this sort was a millennium-old tradition throughout southwest Asia, and this the Ptolemies well knew.

Somewhat more satisfying is the argument that scholars play a special role in the establishment of languages of power and commerce. After Alexander, Greek had not yet supplanted Aramaic (the language of Jesus Christ) as the *lingua franca* of the

eastern Mediterranean, but it bid fair to become one if the various administrators, sailors, traders, soldiers, and craftsmen hailing from the Greek city-states could be induced to offer their talents to the service of empire. For them, the Museum/library complex, embedded as it was in an ethnically alien host population, acted as a beacon as surely as the gigantic lighthouse the Ptolemies erected in Alexandria's harbor. Then again, it is doubtful that scholars in a birdcage were truly consoling presences to a thin stratum of conquerors acclimatizing themselves to foreign peoples and foreign languages.

Neither of these explanations, in any case, can account for why specifically writing—written scholarship, the mania for collecting books, the penchant for precision, and all that the library represented—offered the Ptolemies the most efficient means of achieving their objectives. For answers to this we must look to antiquity's most writing-centered civilization, the Chinese, and to a situation quite the opposite of the Hellenistic one, in which cultural uniformity already existed but political competition had recently ended.

GREEK VS. CHINESE

A first glance at ancient China seems to confirm, if not the magnanimity of the Ptolemies, then at least the advantages of Greek competitiveness over the monolithic repression of oriental despots. China's "Warring States" epoch had been philosophically brilliant, a lot like classical Greece: this was the era of Confucius, Plato's rough contemporary, and of a host of dynamic rival

schools—Legalist, Daoist, Mohist, and many others. But in 221 BCE, the Qin (“Chin”) emperor, from whose dynasty China gets its name, put an end to this. First he brought the warring states to heel and created China’s first unified empire. Then his chief minister, Li Si,* himself an accomplished Legalist scholar, clamped down on all rivals to the Qin state philosophy, Confucianism especially. The philosopher-potentate proceeded to mandate a general burning of the books. In a notorious memorial to the emperor, Li Si explained that having access to private learning meant that scholars trusted their own teachings instead of the emperor’s orders. A direct correlation could be drawn between the multiplicity of philosophical teachings and the fragmentation of China. Only one recourse remained: “Your servant suggests that all books in the bureau of history, save the records of Qin, be burned; that all persons in the empire, save those who hold a function under the control of the official scholars, daring to store the classical literature and the discussions of the various philosophers, should go to the administrative and military governors so that these books may be indiscriminately burned.” The punishment for noncompliance would also be severe: “Those who dare to discuss the classical literature among themselves should be executed and their bodies exposed on the marketplace. Those who use the past to criticize the present should be put to death together with their relatives.”¹⁴ Diversity and dissent perished in this holocaust, or so goes the argument, and

*Pronounced “Lee Suh,” and also spelled Li Ssu.

political unity was bought at the steep price of cultural conformity. Thank goodness none of the Ptolemies or their ministers were ever in a position to enact such a scheme.

However great the temptation to demonize Li Si as the anti-Demetrius, his book-burning policy is inseparably connected with another, more positive cultural policy: the standardization of written Chinese. China's beautiful, complex script has long signaled a greater fascination with writing than the somewhat utilitarian alphabets of the Mediterranean. Whereas Greek writing developed from the commercial scrawl of Phoenician merchants, China's nonalphabetic characters were objects of timeless aesthetic and religious veneration. Dynasties of remote antiquity, starting with the Shang, made inscriptions on stone, jade, and especially bronze to communicate with ancestors and gods as well as with future generations. Calligraphy, an elegant art intended for learned cultivation, carried a prestige unimaginable to a Greek scholar dictating to a slave. But Chinese characters came in many historical, functional, and even regional variants. Li Si and his associates eliminated these variants, made characters simpler to write, and established a trend, which culminated several generations later, replacing the curvaceous ancient "seal" script with the recognizably angular characters Chinese has today.¹⁵ As with the book-burning, he intended to clear the cobwebs of history and establish Qin as the zero hour in China's subsequent development.

It is little exaggeration to say that in doing so, Li Si saved Chinese civilization, which depends on the uniformity of its

writing system. Chinese was and is an exclusively written language in that its script bears an arbitrary relation to the sounds people speak. It lacks not only an alphabet but a syllabary: seeing a written character offers no reliable help in how to pronounce it, and conversely, each spoken syllable corresponds to multiple written characters. Alphabets, by contrast, whether Greek, Hebrew, Roman, or other, provide at least rough guides to pronunciation and as such are tied to the everyday tongues spoken by common people as well as scholars. The Chinese cultural region, which includes Japan, Korea, Manchuria, Mongolia, and Vietnam, is as linguistically, topographically, climatically, and ethnically diverse as the ancient Mediterranean and the Near East combined. Yet the latter never counted as a coherent unit, certainly not under the Greeks, whereas China (or at least China proper) did—and does. This is because Chinese scholars speaking different dialects, precisely because they could not understand each other face to face, had to communicate in the purely imaginary realm of writing. This gave them a cohesiveness and common bond they most certainly did not have with the uneducated hordes with whom they daily rubbed shoulders. China was an empire of scholars. Its unity reposed in its textual tradition. Dynasties came and went, but the Chinese classics, and the script that unlocked them to understanding, kept the dream of a unified Chinese civilization alive during epochs of upheaval.

Among such upheavals, the Qin book-burning was no exception but rather the best illustration of the rule. Despite aiming to

eradicate past wisdom, it had the unintended effect of preserving it. Not only did it spare writings on medicine, pharmacy, divination, and agriculture, but it exempted state scholars by aiming its fire only at “private teaching” and suffered from limited and ineffective enforcement, so that many, many books survived. The whole episode functioned less to damage China’s literary heritage than to awaken in subsequent dynasties a sustained determination to recover the knowledge believed lost.

China’s first imperial libraries date to the Han dynasty, which supplanted the Qin and aimed to recover all it had destroyed, especially the Confucian classics. Han scholars charged with this task confronted problems of textual editing and collation even worse than those of their Alexandrian counterparts. China’s standard writing materials, bamboo and silk, were far more perishable than the papyrus and parchment used by Greeks. Chinese books were also more prone to physical collapse and discombobulation than their Mediterranean counterparts. Characters were often inscribed vertically on bamboo strips which were then tied together; when strings broke, texts fell to pieces and coherence was lost. Loss of sequence was much less of a problem with the smaller number of ten-foot-long scrolls that composed even the longest Greek book. Some modern Sinologists even believe that the Han restoration, which involved piecing together lost texts, rearranging their contents, and sometimes fabricating missing elements, all on the basis of dubious inferences and subjective editorial decisions, arguably did more harm to the authenticity of ancient literary works than the Qin book-burning itself.¹⁶

But the Han imperial library followed a political logic that easily overrode the sort of philological scrupulousness found at Alexandria. It was paramount not only to save China's literary heritage, but to reconstitute it in full as a perfect mirror of a lost Golden Age. This imaginary double for the present would act as its guide during periods of turmoil and stability alike.¹⁷ The drive for permanence and canonization accounts for the Han dynasty's most impressive act of scholarly patronage, one certainly comparable in scope and vision to the Alexandrian library. Han scholars, having laboriously reconstructed the corpus of Confucian classics, then erected them on massive stone tablets. Begun in 175 CE and lasting eight years, the effort required between forty and fifty refrigerator-sized slabs to record the 200,000-plus characters comprising the six Confucian classics.¹⁸ These were arranged just outside the National Academy in Luoyang. Scholars from all over China flocked there by the thousands to make rubbings of the inscriptions and thereby acquire indisputably reliable copies of these canonical texts. Only a unified empire could command the resources—the manpower, the materials, the commitment and organization—to stage such a feat. Only a unified empire could enforce a decision to canonize a particular set of works by fiat. Only a unified empire could then set out in later centuries to produce a far-flung elite of loyal scholar-officials by indoctrinating and testing them in a single corpus of literary texts—the basis of the Confucian examination system, which provided government officials until 1905.

The use of permanent materials, not to mention the mechanical reproduction it made possible, was unknown in the Hellenistic academic world. The Chinese carved characters on stone, bronze, and jade; the Mesopotamians wrote cuneiform on clay tablets; the Egyptians under the pharaohs etched hieroglyphics on obelisks and temples; the Greeks themselves made numerous epigraphic inscriptions. But durable writing was never a part of either the Greek or the Hellenistic *scholarly* tradition. The multiplicity and indeed practical infinitude of scholarly writings simply made permanent public inscription a moot prospect.

Scholars at Alexandria would doubtless have turned down any opportunity to inscribe their achievements in stone even if they had had the chance to do so. And here we come to the point of this comparison: whereas Chinese libraries were founded to stem the decay of a vanishing and partly destroyed intellectual tradition in their own homeland, Hellenistic libraries developed to render an existing body of knowledge reliably reproducible and physically portable. The Greeks, both by inclination and by circumstance, lived in the present. Newcomers to the world stage, peripheral to the great Asian empires, they lacked the sense of deep time and rootedness in place that oriented Chinese scholarly culture so decisively toward reconstructing the historical past.

This made the Greeks forward-looking, innovative, explorative. It also made them historically shallow and sometimes startlingly naive. The two most famous historians of classical

Athens were Thucydides, who wrote only about events he himself witnessed, and Herodotus, who wrote about foreign peoples with notorious credulousness. Nothing in their cherished epics, set in a familiar Aegean world ringed with monsters and marvels, prepared the Greeks to rule and understand foreign peoples. And yet in Egypt they confronted a civilization they recognized as vastly more ancient than their own. Ruling the land of the pyramids, the Ptolemies styled themselves after the pharaohs and may even have built the Museum after the plan of Ramses' temple at Thebes.¹⁹ Above all, Greeks abroad acquired a new self-consciousness about their own history.²⁰ The Alexandrians were the first to canonize the Greek achievement, to view their own scholarship, however creative, as derivative from it, and to establish a precedent whereby the spark of Hellenic wisdom might migrate from one place and political system to another and yet be seen as part of an organic tradition—what we now call “the West.”

TALES OF DESTRUCTION AND LOSS

Regarding the destruction of Alexandria's library we know precious little; indeed, there are several rival accounts, none of them factually satisfying. One holds Julius Caesar responsible. The great Roman general, having pursued his enemy Pompey into Egypt, soon took up with Cleopatra, the last of the Ptolemies, and supported her rise to power around 47 BCE. In the ensuing warfare, Caesar found himself trapped in the royal palace complex and had to burn his way back to his ships. Since the palace

complex included the Museum and the Museum contained the library, a large number of books reportedly went up in smoke. Some scholars doubt the accuracy of this story, arguing on the basis of literary detective work that the great conflagration must have been confined to some waterfront storehouses far away from the palace complex.²¹ Others, accepting the basic fact of Caesar's destructiveness, repeat a well-worn and probably apocryphal anecdote whereby Mark Antony, when *he* was courting Cleopatra a decade or so later, stole 200,000 books from the rival library at Pergamum and gave them to Alexandria as compensation for its past losses. If this is true, it helped the library to go on after Rome finally conquered Ptolemaic Egypt in 30 BCE.

These variants hint at the essential truth, yet none captures it: that Greek knowledge, and libraries in particular, benefited enormously from Roman conquest. The Roman general Sulla loved Greek books so much that after he conquered Athens, he carted off its entire library to Italy, complete with the original texts of Aristotle's works. Later Roman emperors continued appointing library directors at Alexandria for several centuries, helping the city retain its reputation as a center of scholarship. More important, they caused other libraries to be built all over the Mediterranean and especially at Rome itself. Sometimes as stand-alone temples, sometimes as adjuncts to public baths, they had spacious reading rooms and wings for both Greek and Latin and stood open to men and probably women as well. Julius Caesar became a great patron of libraries, and his adoptive son and dictatorial successor, Augustus, an even greater

one. The Byzantine Empire, as the eastern Roman Empire became known after its split, tended Greek texts for fully a thousand years, long enough to transmit them to Renaissance Italy before its own capital was sacked by the Ottoman Turks in 1453. Whatever the ultimate reason the Ptolemies had for building libraries, then, their conquest by the Romans did nothing to end the precedent they set for imperial patronage of scholarship.

The same holds true for another tale of military destruction, this time coming from the East at the hands of the Arabs. Some say that in 640 CE, an Arab Muslim general, in the course of evicting the Byzantines from Alexandria, came across the library and sent a message to his superior, the caliph Omar, asking what to do with the books. Omar, known more for his military zeal than for his tolerance or intellectual subtlety, apparently replied with an inescapable syllogism: if the books at Alexandria conflicted with the Quran, they were heretical and should be burned; if they did not, they were superfluous and should likewise be burned. Again, there is reason to doubt, if not the facts of this story, then certainly the message it conveys about Muslim bigotry. Omar's dictum was not the final word on Islamic policy toward Greek "philosophy." Dubbing it *falasifa*, Muslim scholars soon appropriated Greek learning wholesale, first from Syriac translations and then from the Greek originals.²² They also did more than the Romans to spread libraries and scholarship geographically, founding learned centers from Baghdad's House of Wisdom in the east to the libraries of medieval Spain in the

extreme west; from Samarkand, on the Eurasian silk road, to Timbuktu, south of the Sahara Desert.

Islam, like Byzantium, is often viewed as a passive caretaker of Greek learning until it could be transmitted to the more dynamic societies of Western Europe. But the Muslims were no more passive or derivative than the Romans, who likewise pursued knowledge on a firm Hellenic foundation. Islamic scholarly institutions were in fact for centuries a good deal more vibrant and original than Western Roman ones, but to appreciate this we have to wait for Europe to catch up.

The final story of destruction and loss at the Alexandrian Museum concerns one of its last attested members, Theon, and his daughter, Hypatia. Theon was a respected mathematician, astronomer, and poet. He was also a devotee of alchemy, astrology, and divination, three “Hermetic” arts that reflected a kind of synthesis between Greek science and Egyptian folk magic.²³ Hypatia, who presided over a school of Neoplatonic philosophy, was even more accomplished than her father. Comfortable among men of power, she owed her reputation to her virtue and wisdom, not to her femininity, and reportedly once repulsed an infatuated male admirer by producing her sanitary napkin. But in 415 CE, five years after Rome was sacked, Hypatia was brutally dismembered by a bloodthirsty paramilitary force set upon her by Alexandria’s Christian bishop, Cyril. Cyril had spent his early days in office launching a pogrom against Alexandria’s Jews, a campaign Hypatia actively opposed. He then turned against Hypatia for resisting this anti-Semitic power play. Accus-

ing her of black magic, Cyril's followers stoked popular rumors surrounding her father's interests in the occult. In reality, Hypatia was immune to the otherworldly mysticism that marked the waning Roman Empire.²⁴ What really infuriated the rabble-rousing Cyril was that Hypatia was the last of the pure Hellenists, a true, albeit elitist, follower of Plato dedicated to virtue, dialogue, and spiritual ecumenism.

The point of this story is no more to castigate the Christians than the point of the previous one was to exonerate the Muslims. Late antique Alexandria was rife with religious tension and communal violence on all sides, pagan, Jewish, and Christian. Political authorities were simply losing their power to hold this mix of cultures together, and Greek learning had lost its role as intellectual arbiter among them. Knowledge was now the contested patrimony of a fractious multicultural metropolis. Jews and Christians used it, as we saw in the case of the Septuagint, to refine their religious doctrines. Hermetics used it to lend prestige and give depth to Egyptian folk magic. Hypatia's colleagues threw around their philosophical weight—unsuccessfully—to defend the pagan Serapeum temple (home to the Museum's daughter library) against Christian onslaught. But philosophical pagans no longer had anything like a lock on Greek thought or the power it had in the past.

For centuries, under the Ptolemies and then the Romans, *paideia*—Greek learning—had given men of widely different ethnic and geographic origins the chance to compete on a level playing field, as elite possessors of what for many of them was

not in fact their native language and culture. The power of persuasion, first incubated in Athenian democracy, welded together these elites even under authoritarian rule, as the empire-wide currency of political influence.²⁵ But between the caesars and the caliphs, Greek learning, borne aloft by spiritual ferment, had leapt the Museum walls. Nothing better illustrates this than the fact that its last devotee was a woman. Learning was now tied to the fortunes of the city as a whole. It would prosper as long as political authority—Ptolemaic, Roman, Byzantine, or Muslim—provided at least the semblance of order. This is precisely what the empire west of Rome now lacked. Even the maintenance of order back in Alexandria was not enough to save the library itself. Put simply, the famous scholarly complex now had no one left to tend and preserve it. Its collection ebbed away rather than burning up, and decayed as the result of neglect rather than destruction.