

# Alexandria and the Mirage of a Million Book Library

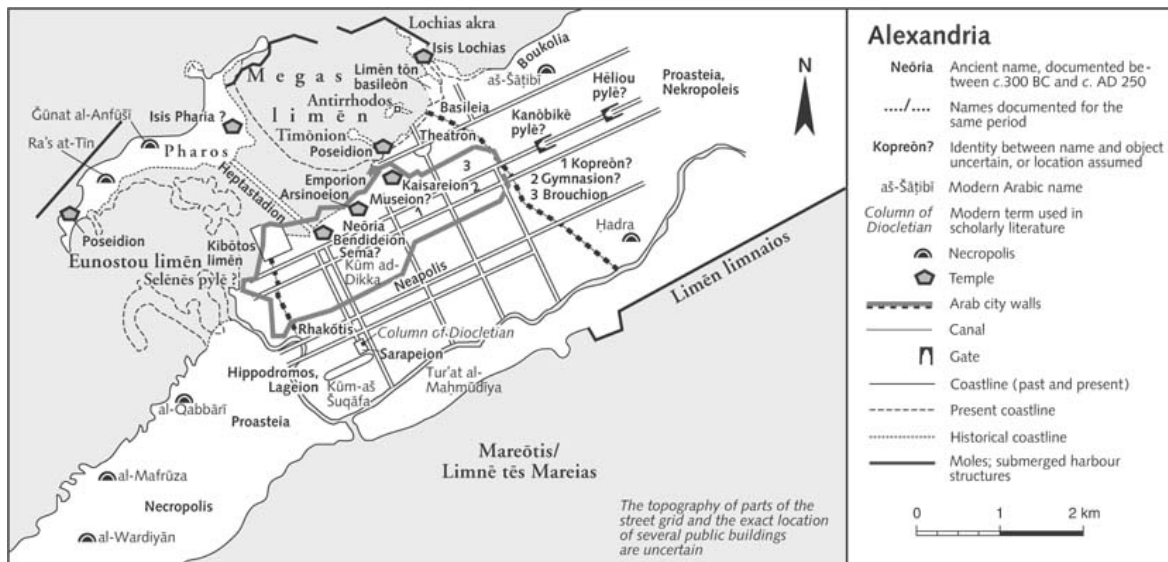
by

Monica Berti and Virgilio Costa

1

ANCIENT ALEXANDRIA

(Brill's New Pauly s.v. Alexandria)



2

Strabo XIII 1, 54 C608

ὁ γοῦν Ἀριστοτέλης τὴν ἑαυτοῦ Θεοφράστῳ παρέδωκεν, ὧπερ καὶ τὴν σχολὴν ἀπέλιπε, πρῶτος ὧν ἴσμεν συναγαγὼν βιβλία καὶ διδάξας τοὺς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ βασιλέας βιβλιοθήκης σύνταξιν.

At any rate, Aristotle bequeathed his own library to Theophrastus, to whom he also left his school; and he is the first man, so far as I know, to have collected books and to have taught the kings in Egypt how to arrange a library.

(...) πάντας τοὺς ἐπὶ συναγωγῇ τεθουμασμένους, Πολυκράτην τε τὸν Σάμιον καὶ Πεισίστρατον τὸν Ἀθηναίων τυραννήσαντα Εὐκλείδην τε τὸν καὶ αὐτὸν Ἀθηναῖον καὶ Νικοκράτην τὸν Κύπριον ἔτι τε τοὺς Περγάμου βασιλέας Εὐριπίδην τε τὸν ποιητὴν Ἀριστοτέλην τε τὸν φιλόσοφον <καὶ Θεόφραστον> καὶ τὸν τὰ τούτων διατηρήσαντα βιβλία Νηλέα· παρ' οὗ πάντα, φησί, πριάμενος ὁ ἡμεδαπὸς βασιλεὺς Πτολεμαῖος, Φιλάδελφος δὲ ἐπίκλην, μετὰ τῶν Ἀθήνηθεν καὶ τῶν ἀπὸ Ῥόδου εἰς τὴν καλὴν Ἀλεξάνδρειαν μετήγαγε.

(...) all who have been celebrated for their large libraries, including Polycrates of Samos, Peisistratus the tyrant of Athens, Eucleides, likewise an Athenian, Nicocrates of Cyprus, the kings of Pergamum, Euripides the poet, Aristotle the philosopher, Theophrastus, and Neleus, who preserved the books of the two last named. From Neleus, he says, our king Ptolemy, surnamed Philadelphos, purchased them all and transferred them with those which he had procured at Athens and at Rhodes to his beautiful capital, Alexandria.

Κατασταθεὶς ἐπὶ τῆς τοῦ βασιλέως βιβλιοθήκης Δημήτριος ὁ Φαληρεὺς ἐχρηματίσθη πολλὰ διάφορα πρὸς τὸ συναγαγεῖν, εἰ δυνατόν, ἅπαντα τὰ κατὰ τὴν οἰκουμένην βιβλία· καὶ ποιούμενος ἀγορασμοὺς καὶ μεταγραφὰς ἐπὶ τέλος ἤγαγεν, ὅσον ἐφ' ἑαυτῷ, τὴν τοῦ βασιλέως πρόθεσιν.

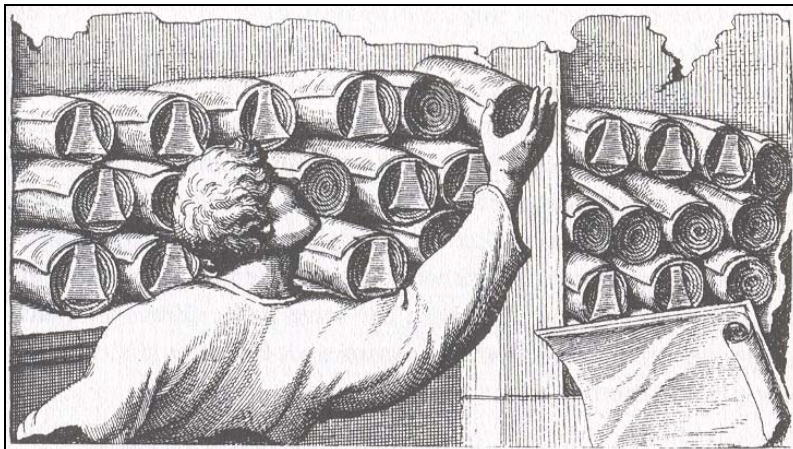
Demetrius of Phalerum, the president of the king's library, received vast sums of money, for the purpose of collecting together, as far as he possibly could, all the books in the world. By means of purchase and transcription, he carried out, to the best of his ability, the purpose of the king.

τῶν δὲ βασιλείων μέρος ἐστὶ καὶ τὸ Μουσεῖον, ἔχον περίπατον καὶ ἐξέδραν καὶ οἶκον μέγαν ἐν ᾧ τὸ συσσίτιον τῶν μετεχόντων τοῦ Μουσείου φιλολόγων ἀνδρῶν. ἔστι δὲ τῇ συνόδῳ ταύτῃ καὶ χρήματα κοινὰ καὶ ἱερεὺς ὁ ἐπὶ τῷ Μουσεῖῳ τεταγμένος τότε μὲν ὑπὸ τῶν βασιλέων νῦν δ' ὑπὸ Καίσαρος.

The Museum is also part of the royal palaces; it has a public walk, an exedra with seats, and a large house, in which is the common mess-hall of the men of learning who share the Museum. This group of men not only hold property in common, but also have a priest in charge of the Museum, who formerly was appointed by the kings, but is now appointed by Caesar.

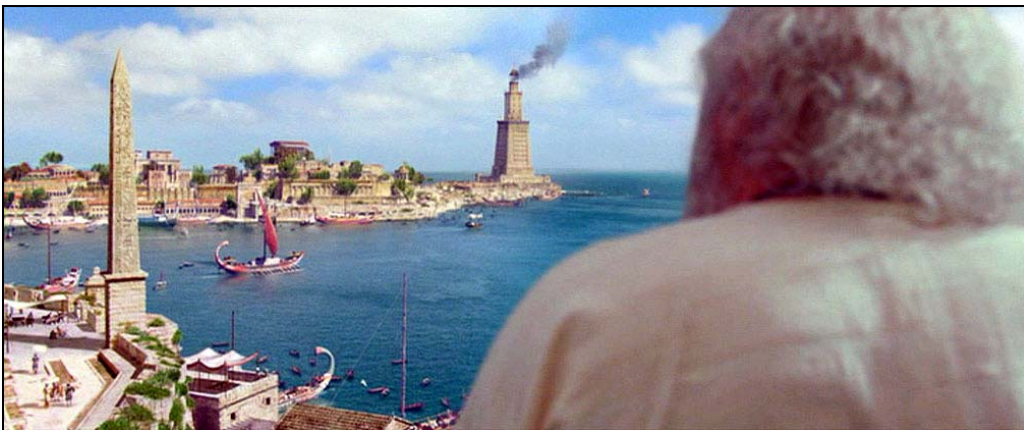
Καλλίμαχος, υἱὸς Βάττου καὶ Μεσάτμας, Κυρηναῖος, γραμματικός, μαθητὴς Ἑρμοκράτους τοῦ Ἰασέως, γραμματικοῦ· γαμετὴν ἐσχικῶς τὴν Εὐφράτου τοῦ Συρακουσίου θυγατέρα. ἀδελφῆς δὲ αὐτοῦ παῖς ἦν ὁ νέος Καλλίμαχος, ὁ γράψας περὶ νήσων δι' ἐπῶν. οὕτω δὲ γέγονεν ἐπιμελέστατος, ὡς γράψαι μὲν ποιήματα εἰς πᾶν μέτρον, συντάξαι δὲ καὶ καταλογάδην πλεῖστα. καὶ ἐστὶν αὐτῷ τὰ γεγραμμένα βιβλία ὑπὲρ τὰ ὀκτακοσία· ἐπὶ δὲ τῶν χρόνων ἦν Πτολεμαίου τοῦ Φιλαδέλφου. πρὶν δὲ συσταθῆ τῷ βασιλεῖ, γράμματα ἐδίδασκεν ἐν Ἐλευσίῃ, κωμυδρίῳ τῆς Ἀλεξανδρείας. καὶ παρέτεινε μέχρι τοῦ Εὐεργέτου κληθέντος Πτολεμαίου, Ὀλυμπιάδος δὲ ρκζ, ἧς κατὰ τὸ δεύτερον ἔτος ὁ Εὐεργέτης Πτολεμαῖος ἤρξατο τῆς βασιλείας. τῶν δὲ αὐτοῦ βιβλίων ἐστὶ καὶ ταῦτα· Ἰοῦς ἄφιξις, Σεμέλη, Ἄργους οἰκισμός, Ἀρκαδία, Γλαῦκος, Ἐλπίδες, σατυρικά δράματα, τραγωδία, κωμωδία, μέλη, Ἴβος (ἔστι δὲ ποίημα ἐπιτετηδευμένον εἰς ἀσάφειαν καὶ λοιδορίαν, εἷς τινα Ἴβον, γενόμενον ἐχθρὸν τοῦ Καλλιμάχου· ἦν δὲ οὗτος Ἀπολλώνιος, ὁ γράψας τὰ Ἀργοναυτικά)· Μουσεῖον, Πίνακες τῶν ἐν πάσῃ παιδείᾳ διαλαμψάντων, καὶ ὧν συνέγραψαν, ἐν βιβλίοις κ καὶ ρ, Πίναξ καὶ ἀναγραφή τῶν κατὰ χρόνους καὶ ἀπ' ἀρχῆς γενομένων διδασκάλων, Πίναξ τῶν Δημοκράτους γλωσσῶν καὶ συνταγμάτων, Μηνῶν προσηγορίαι κατὰ ἔθνος καὶ πόλεις, Κτίσεις νήσων καὶ πόλεων καὶ μετονομασίαι, Περὶ τῶν ἐν Εὐρώπῃ ποταμῶν, Περὶ τῶν ἐν Πελοποννήσῳ καὶ Ἰταλίᾳ θαυμασιῶν καὶ παραδόξων, Περὶ μετονομασίας ἰχθύων, Περὶ ἀνέμων, Περὶ ὀρνέων, Περὶ τῶν ἐν τῇ οἰκουμένῃ ποταμῶν, Θαυμάτων τῶν εἰς ἅπασαν τὴν γῆν κατὰ τόπους ὄντων συναγωγή.

Son of Battus and Mesatma, of Cyrene. Grammarian. A pupil of Hermocrates of Iasus, a grammarian. He married the daughter of Euphrates of Syracuse; his sister's son was the younger Callimachus, who wrote on islands in epic verse. He was so diligent that he wrote poems in every metre, and compiled very many works in prose; in fact, he wrote more than 800 books. He lived in the time of Ptolemy Philadelphos. Before he became connected with the king, he taught grammar in Eleusis, a small village in Alexandria. He survived until Ptolemy, called Euergetes, in the 127th Olympiad, in the second year of which Ptolemy Euergetes' reign commenced. His books are as follows: The Coming of Io; Semele; The Founding of Argos; Arcadia; Glaucus; Hopes; satyr plays; tragedies; comedies; lyric poems; Ibus (this is a poem deliberately made obscure and abusive, addressed to one Ibus, who was an enemy of Callimachus: he was in fact Apollonius, who wrote the Argonautica); Museum; Tables of Men Distinguished in Every Branch of Learning, and their Works (in 120 books); Table and Description of Teachers in Chronological Order from the Beginning; Table of Democrates' Rare Words and Compositions; Names of the Months by Nation and City; Foundations of Islands and Cities, and their Changes of Name; On the Rivers in Europe; On Astonishing and Paradoxical Things in the Peloponnese and Italy; On the Changes in the Names of Fish; On Winds; On Birds; On Rivers in the Inhabited World; Collection of Marvels in the Whole World, Organised by Place.



3.1 Line drawing of a relief of the Roman period showing rolls, most with identifying tabs, stacked on a shelf in three levels.

(from L. Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*,  
Yale University Press, New Haven & London 2001, p. 39)



(from the movie *Alexander* by Oliver Stone, © Warner Bros. Entertainment)



(from the movie *Alexander* by Oliver Stone, © Warner Bros. Entertainment 2004)