Alexandria and the Mirage of a Million Book Library

by

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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.
(...)

(3) all who have been celebrated for their large libraries, including Polycrates of Samos, Peisistratus the tyrant of Athens, Euclides, 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.

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Aristeae epistula ad Philocratem 9

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.

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Strabo XVII 1, 8 C794

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.
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 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 Democrats' 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.
Rolls with identifying tabs

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


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Alexandria at the time of Ptolemy I

(from the movie Alexander by Oliver Stone, © Warner Bros. Entertainment)
The library of Alexandria

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