

## Cleopatra as a Librarian

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Among her many talents, Cleopatra had one that is not too well known: she achieved success as a librarian.

According to Dr. Jason L. Saunders, Professor of Philosophy at the University of California, San Diego, and a student of the history of libraries, the Queen of Egypt showed her ability at book collecting by reestablishing and refurbishing the celebrated library at Alexandria after it had been ravaged by fire.

The library, a collection of inestimable value containing about 700,000 volumes, had been collected by the Ptolemaic kings for about 244 years. It was burned during the wars between Pompey and Caesar.

As a basis for reestablishing the library, Cleopatra used the collection from the Pergamene library which she had received from a fellow book lover, Antony, Dr. Saunders said. The treasures of the library at Pergamum had fallen into Roman hands years earlier.

Accepting the entire collection as a gift, Cleopatra had it brought to Alexandria and housed in the same temple building-- newly decorated-- which had housed the earlier library.

"The collection seems to have grown considerably, with the result that even in the time of the Christian fathers, it was widely known and much used Dr. Saunders said. "The library building itself, the Serapeum, was a temple of massive construction and great size. Much used in antiquity, it was utterly demolished by the Christians after 395, during the reign of Theodosius the Great, and hailed as the destruction of a monument of superstition," he said.

The forerunner of Cleopatra's library in Alexandria was founded by Ptolemy Philadelphus, the son of the first of the Greek kings in Egypt, Ptolemy Lagus.

"Philadelphus seems to have been an early example of an answer to every book-seller's prayer," Dr. Saunders said, "collecting books of all kinds from all parts of the world. He and his library are perhaps best known for the translation of the wisdom of the Hebrews. Gathered in were large numbers of books from the Chaldeans Egyptians, and even from the Romans-- all of which were then translated into Greek.

"It is reasonable to suppose in the time of Philadelphus the library contained perhaps 200,000 volumes with substantial additions in later years by his successors," Dr. Saunders said.

Cleopatra and Philadelphus, while good librarians, were by no means the first collectors of books, according to Dr. Saunders. Collections of books are mentioned in the ancient literature in such ways as to suggest that they date from the earliest days, and were established soon after writing was invented.

"A familiar note is sounded by many ancient authors, agreeing that the art of writing would not have been profitable if books, or more correctly, scrolls, had not been preserved and arranged for current and future use," Dr. Saunders said.

"At first these collections were private affairs, each person gathering for himself and his family," Dr. Saunders said. "In the course of time, it occurred to some of the more affluent and powerful that here might be found a dandy status-symbol."

Book collections quickly became fashionable and kings took up the practice, collecting books not only for use but to add to their renown.

"Of course," said Dr. Saunders, "unless one were a king, the private or home library was a rather slender affair since the process of book-making and particularly of copying books was a slow and expensive one."

The function of a library today, according to Dr. Saunders, is not simply to make available to the reader news of what is now going on. Yesterday's knowledge of art and science is enormously valuable and collection of this knowledge is the function and value of the library, he said.

But in such collections, Dr. Saunders warned, are very often found the pitfalls of libraries, especially university libraries.

"Part of the traditional accumulation in the conventional university is, of course, its library," he said. "A fair deal of what is in such a library is junk in a most precise sense: books and even some periodicals, which were, when purchased, of topical interest only and having no lasting value. The accretion over the years of gifts to the library by alumni and by friends of the university and/or of the library sometimes presents the problem of disposal of many otherwise unwanted, unused, and unneeded books and papers.

"Well-intentioned donors of books and of collections of books will sometimes forget that a library-- and particularly a university library-- is not only hard pressed for space, but that the materials in it have little value if they are not used, at least by a respectable number of specialists," he said.

The general idea is, I should think, that a library is a place where one may go-- perhaps better-- where there are those who do go to use its books. It is not, and should not be allowed to become a rubbish-heap for sentimental but well-meaning library 'friends' to clear their own shelves," he said.

"It might well be that the truest 'friends' of the university library are those who understand its function well enough to share with the university the pleasure of receiving gifts representing the needs of the library, as well as bequests allowing for unrestricted use for the purchase of needed books and collections of books."