

[Transcript] The Rest Is History / 361. The Lost Library of Alexandria

The year is 48 BC. Your name is Bayek of Siwa, Medjai of Egypt, Protector of the Weak and Defender of the Innocent, and you have a job to do. Your mission is to meet your wife Aya, an agent of the Exiled Cleopatra, in perhaps the most celebrated building in all Alexandria, the Great Library. And as you step inside, the sheer spectacle takes your breath away. The marble pillars, the stone statues and mosaic floors, the vast effigy of the god Serapis, the Greek scholars huddled at their desks, and above all, the bookcases, lined with more than half a million scrolls and parchments. Here, before your awestruck eyes is the learning of the entire ancient world, with a copy of every book ever written, from Aristotle and Aristophanes to Homer and Herodotus. And above the shelves in Greek is an inscription. For this, it says, is the place that will cure your soul.

And that, Tom Holland, is your first sight of the Great Library of Alexandria in the video game, Assassin's Creed Origins. Now Tom, they got historians to help them develop the game. And to be fair, this is the image of the library that you will find in most books about the life of Cleopatra and the age of the Ptolemies, isn't it?

It is. But I think that Assassin's Creed deals with myth and archetype, as well as hardcore historical research, doesn't it? You astound me, Tom.

I think that the Great Library, the Great Library of Alexandria, is most potent as a myth. In a way, the fact that it hasn't survived, that no trace of its remains exist, that all its texts have vanished. And we'll be talking about how and why they might have vanished later in the show. I think it's that that enables it to endure in the imagination as a kind of embodiment of ultimate learning, repository of everything, that every book that has ever been compiled. And I think it kind of feeds into all kinds of fantasy. So there's a wonderful short story by Jorge Luis Borges, the great Argentinian short story writer.

I wondered if we'd talk about that.

The Library of Babel, which contains not just every book that's ever been written, but every possible book that might be written, every conceivable permutation, and the whole universe has become a library. And I think that that kind of fantasy ultimately derives from this kind of the mythic quality that the Library of Alexandria has come to have. Do you think?

Oh, wonderful. Yeah, I think that's a really good way of putting it. And of course, Borges' Library is kind of one of the models, isn't it, for the Library in the name of the Rose? Yes.

So it's not based on Borges' Library. So actually, the idea of the Library of Alexandria, the idea, I mean, it's a classic thing in science fiction, actually, get it in Doctor Who and things, these images of kind of vast libraries, spreading, taking entire planets in which all the knowledge of the world, as opposed to some extent, you could say the internet, isn't it? Or the ambition of Wikipedia or something. I mean, these things are...

Or Dominic, that actually the dream that emerged in the Enlightenment of developing a universal library. So I wanted to do this episode because I'm a trustee of the British Library, which I was very proud. I looked up to see what the world's largest libraries were, and British Library is listed, number one, just ahead of the Library of Congress.

No, that's very gratifying, Tom.

And the British Library was set up 50 years ago, but it draws on, of course, collections at the British Museum and then before that, other private collections. And it is, in a way,

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an embodiment of that dream that we associate with the Library of Alexandria to essentially, to be universal in the scale of learning that it offers. So it offers, you know, 170 million different items printed, digital archives of books and manuscripts and journals and everything, works of art, patents. And it has objects that are thousands of years old. It has tweets that were sent out a few hours earlier. And I think that libraries like the British Library, Library of Congress, Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and so on, that these also stand in a line of descent from the Library of Alexandria. I think it is that fantasy that came to obsess people in Europe in the Renaissance and then through to the Enlightenment that kind of explains the existence of these universal libraries, wouldn't you say?

Yeah, I think that's nice. First of all, I think the British Library Press Office will be delighted with that, Tom. So I hope all sorts of rewards will be flowing your way.

Well, I'm very, very honored to be a trustee of this great library.

Yeah, it's so unlike you, actually, to be talking about your own, your own honors on this podcast. It's never happened before.

But I guess the idea of the National Library and the idea of a single repository of learning that contains all learning, that is a sort of, I mean, most nations have national libraries, don't they?

And I suppose all of these things derive ultimately from this idea of this

platonic ideal of a library, ironically, given that it must have had the works of Plato.

Absolutely. But of course, that then raises the question of where did the people who founded the Library of Alexandria, where did they get their idea from? Is the idea of constructing libraries as old as civilization? And in one sense, it does seem to be, I think that the moment

that writing is developed, the instinct to collect texts and assemble them in one place does seem to have been pretty universal. So in Egypt, where they manufacture papyrus, which is the writing material in which the scrolls in the Library of Alexandria are kept, the priests seem to have used temples as repositories for scrolls that are connected with the specific cult. I mean, none of them have survived because papyrus disintegrates.

But in the Near East, they use clay. And if clay gets fired, then it remains almost undestroyable. And so archaeologists, when they dig up these ancient cities across the Near East, have every so often found these incredible depositories of vast numbers of clay tablets. So I think the oldest is a place called Ebla, which is about 30 miles southwest of Aleppo in Syria, which dates back to 2300 BC. There's the great capital of the Hittite Empire, which is 17th to 13th centuries BC. I mean, huge amounts of texts there. Absolutely invaluable for informing us not just about the Hittite Empire, but about the Near East more generally.

Assyrians seem to, you know, they're famous as a militaristic, imperial people, very prone to wiping out cities, but they seem to have adored libraries. So actually, the oldest library whose founder we know was founded in 1100 BC by an Assyrian king with the splendid name of Tiglath Pelasa. That was a good name. So it would make a great name for a cat, actually. Yeah, or a beer, an Indonesian beer. The mellow hops of a Tiglath Pelasa. But the most famous Assyrian library is the one founded by Ashurbanipal. There was a wonderful exhibition about Ashurbanipal in the British Museum a few couple of years ago. And Ashurbanipal, who was notorious among his subject peoples for his oppressive militarism, he's shown with a kind of pen tucked into his belt as an emblem of his ability to read and write. And so there were kind of 30,000 clay tablets in that. Most of them were, they were kind of prophetic writings, omens, spells for warding off evil spirits, that kind of thing. But there were a few kind of classic literary

texts of which Gilgamesh is the most famous. The oldest epic. Yes. So, I mean, incredibly important archive. And that seems to have had a cataloging system. And it seems to have had librarians who get stressed out about books being stolen. So there are all these kind of warnings saying, you know, if you steal one, then the spirits will come and get you. May Nabu decree his destruction is my favourite. Brilliant. I think all libraries should still have that. So Tom, on these libraries, isn't there an argument that civilization, which is obviously identified with kind of urbanism, that part of that is the control. I mean, you have a monopoly of violence. That's one of the elements of having a state, but also a monopoly of information, control of information, of records, of laws, of regulations and codes, of property ownership. And to have all that, you actually need a library of some description, don't you? You need to place a single repository where all the stuff is stored, where the king can go or the emperor can go and say, I want to find out what did we do last time? What are the laws on this? I mean, it has to be written down somewhere.

Yes. And so a lot of these libraries, so the text found at Persepolis as well, which gets burnt by Alexander, these are to do with the administration of the empire very often. So the library of Asher Bannipal seems to have been definitely set up by the king himself. He has a personal stake in it. But this seems to be because the king has a responsibility to the dimension of the supernatural. So he's employing all kinds of people who can forecast the future, ward off evils from both the king and the empire. And that is basically, I think, what his library is all about. It's a kind of reference library for diviners, for soothsayers. So even the epics are probably there because they have kind of divinatory roles. So it's not quite like the dream of the universal library that we have in the modern world. And it's also, I think, kind of subtly different from the ambitions that the kings of Egypt who found the library in Alexandria have. And I think to properly get a handle on what those ambitions are and the way in which the library of Alexandria does seem to have been something quite different from the libraries of the Near East that preceded them, you need to put it in context. Because actually, cultural artifacts like libraries are expressions of the culture that think that they are worth founding and maintaining.

Yep. I couldn't agree with you more, Tom. And does this give us an opportunity to talk about Alexander the Great, great founder of the rest of history?

I think it does, yeah.

Oh, wonderful. Wonderful. So if you thought this was all going to be about a little boring or books, you're greatly mistaken because we're now going to be talking about one of the world's great conquerors. And an inspiration, Tom, to a new generation of boys and girls, thanks to the Adventures in Time series.

Yep. You're very, very inspirational. You're very inspirational ending of your book on Alexander the Great, encouraging children to go out there and conquer the world.

We all have an inner Alexander.

Yep.

So tell us about Alexandria. I love Alexandria. We're often asked on the rest of history, where would you most like to go back to? And I love Alexandria as this syncretic place. It's partly Greek. It's partly Egyptian. It's founded by Alexander himself, isn't it? I mean, that's the legend at least.

I don't think it's a legend. I mean, I think he does found it pretty much from scratch.

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He needs a harbour, doesn't he? He needs a harbour on the North African coast that's not part of the...

Of Egypt.

You know, the old priestly elite.

This is in 331 BC. He's conquered most of the Near East. He's conquered Egypt.

He's been crowned in Memphis, which is the ancient capital of Egypt as Pharaoh.

But he wants a city that can control Egypt from the coast and obviously have shipping links to the Mediterranean world beyond. And he chooses this site.

It's a kind of narrow bar of land between the Mediterranean Sea and a lake called Mariotis.

And it provides a great complex of deep water harbours.

And that's the key reason that he chooses it.

It's also... You've got the winds blowing in off both the lake and the sea.

So in the summer, it's pretty cool.

And it is a landscape of absolutely dazzling artificiality.

So it's a kind of grid system of the kind that you get in New York,

all laid out personally by Alexander. And after Alexander's death,

it gets appropriated by his childhood friend and lieutenant Ptolemy,

who grabs Alexander's body, brings it to Alexandria, buries it there.

So the tomb of Alexander is a kind of marker of Ptolemy's claim to be the true successor of the great conqueror. There are other wonders there. There's the pharaohs,

this great lighthouse built on an island. It's kind of joined to the mainland,

where Alexander is by a mole. And this is the largest building ever built by the Greeks.

It's the first city to have numbered addresses, which I think is kind of wonderful detail.

It had slot machines. It had automatic doors. It had international banks.

Automatic doors. I love that detail.

So it's an incredible place. It's a place of wonders.

And the wonders, in a sense, have to be built partly because Ptolemy is trying to establish his very part of a new regime as the inheritor both of the pharaonic greatness of Egypt

and of the great empire conquered by Alexander. But also, because as an upstart city,

it needs to attract people and it needs to have things that people want to come and see.

Yeah. So it's a little bit, I think, like kind of Dubai or somewhere like that.

I was about to say it's like a Dubai or it's like it's got a little bit of Las Vegas about it.

So it's all quite Azats, but because it lasts for centuries.

So at that point, it's not really Azats. I mean, it's its own thing.

But it's also got the slight air of one of those planned capitals like

Brasilia or somewhere, hasn't it? Yes.

You know, they've established a new site.

They get top architects to come in and build all these fantastic buildings.

Actually, I know it sounds silly to some people that we started with the video game,

but that video game is set in Alexandria and it does give, I mean, lots of archaeologists

worked on it and it does give, if you ever played the game, it gives you a wonderful sense of the layout of the city, the sheer spectacle and the grandeur of it and the fact that it's in this

kind of desert landscape or the scrubby landscape at the edge of the desert, I suppose.

Yeah. And it's an extraordinary, I mean, it's like a Las Vegas like Mirage.

Is it Dubai that has the extension of the Louvre and the Saudis bought the Leonardo, didn't they? So there's this sense that by investing in culture, you are boosting the prestige of your city. And that is very, very Ptolemaic. So the Ptolemies are all about kind of boosting trade, boosting the idea of Alexandria as a great trading capital because that then raises finance. They also have the money from Egypt. They have the loot that they get from kind of foreign conquest. So there's a lot of money going around. And just like the oil shakes in the Gulf, Ptolemyne is in a position to spend. And like the oil shakes, he recognizes that culture is something that can boost his prestige. And this is, you know, this is a kind of tradition in the Greek world for autocrats. So Pisistratus, who was the tyrant in Athens before the establishment of the democracy, he sponsors the drama festivals that will culminate in the great, the great tragedians and comedians of the Athenian golden age. And he sponsors a kind of standard edition of Homer, Kings of Macedon, likewise, who, you know, they're very conscious that they look down on by the Athenians and the other peoples of kind of classical Greece. And so they are very keen on inviting intellectual luminaries to their court. So one of the Macedonian kings invites Euripides, the great Athenian tragedian, to go and stay with him. Philip himself, the father of Alexander, famously employs Aristotle, the greatest philosopher of his age. And so Ptolemyne is very much the heir to this. But it's precisely because he is now thinking on a global scale. He has ridden with Alexander, he has seen the limits of the earth, that it seems his ambitions are much greater than simply to employ, you know, a playwright or a philosopher or two. He wants much more than that.

He wants the greatest conglomeration of texts and philosophers that money can buy him. It's worth saying about Ptolemyne, by the way, he's a clever man. He writes a memoir, doesn't he, of his time with Alexander. I mean, he is a literate, shrewd, intelligent man. So there is part, maybe it's not just, you don't have to be cynical about it. I mean, maybe he probably really does like the idea of scholarship and learning and all these things, don't you think?

I don't think that he would see any tension between it. I mean, he doesn't see that promoting his own brand and his own city is anything to apologize for. I mean, he's all in favour of that. But I think he genuinely does believe in this kind of radical concept of learning for its own sake. You know, that's what differentiates him, say, from Ashurbanipal. I think Ashurbanipal's library is all about the ability to look into the future, to read bad omens and so on. I think for Ptolemyne, it's about, in a sense, preserving everything that is best about Greek culture.

Well, also, he too has been educated by Aristotle because that's where he and Alexander had met. They had studied together wherever it was in that grove where Aristotle, they all gathered all the lads from the court or the young lads.

So, absolutely, he must be influenced in the same way that Alexander was.

Well, no, but I think you're absolutely right to mention Aristotle because I actually think that Aristotle, who, as you say, has taught Ptolemyne, is an absolutely key figure in this, because Aristotle, after he has done his tutoring in Macedon, he goes back to Athens and he settles at a temple to Apollo called the Lyceum. And this is kind of quite well known as a place where philosophers go to talk, so Socrates had gone there and Plato had gone there. But Aristotle found something that is kind of more enduring and ambitious. So, it's basically a kind of, I suppose, a research center, something like that. The reason that he needs a research center

is because he's committed to this idea that to love wisdom, which is what philosophers by definition do, you have to train the mind in the skills that enable you to access the laws that govern the universe. And you can only do that over the course of an entire lifetime. So, there needs to be kind of a concentrated opportunity for philosophers to ponder and read and research and write and chat among their peers, because otherwise they're not adequately going to be able to fathom what makes the universe tick. So, Plato, who we talked about in the context of Atlantis, Plato's great theory is that if you want to discern reality, reality lies beyond the, there is an ideal, say, of a table. So, if you want to know the essence of a table, that's what you have to access, rather than kind of making a survey of every table that there is in existence. Aristotle has a slightly different perspective. He thinks you really do need to have a kind of totalizing sense of the entire world. He's an encyclopedist, isn't he? Well, but he's more than an encyclopedist. He's an empiricist. He's about, if you want to fathom the scope and sweep of the animal kingdom, you actually have to get your hands dirty. So, he slices open the stomach of an elephant, it seems, to investigate it. He cuts up cuttlefish. He famously, he seems to have investigated the semen of Indians and Ethiopians to discover whether, as Herodotus has said, it was black, and he demonstrates that it wasn't. So, in every sense, hands-on, hands-on research. I mean, it's surely quite easy to demonstrate that, Tom. I mean, he wouldn't need to do an experiment. I mean, whatever, let's not go there. And also, Aristotle is interested in the range, say, of different political systems across the world. So, he compiles a great kind of glossary and analysis of all the different democracies and oligarchies and whatever. So, this is what's going on. He's got all kinds of people who are doing this. And the Lyceum is basically a kind of complex where they can live. So, there are living quarters, there's a kind of communal dining center, and there are porticoed walkways. So, it's a peripatos in Greek. It's where you kind of walk around this kind of cloister, chatting away a bit like the cloisters in an Oxford or Cambridge College. And the philosophers who go to the Lyceum and who follow in Aristotle's wakes are known as peripatetics after this. And the thing is that this may sound like a kind of contemporary modern-day research center. And to a degree, it is. But it is also a cult center. And it is sacred to the Muses, who are the nine sisters, who are the patrons of all the various kind of arts and academic and literary disciplines. And so, this Lyceum, this research center that Aristotle has established, is known as a museon, a temple to the Muses, which Angosized is Museum. So, that is lurking in the background, I think. Now, what happens when you transplant that idea to a city as immense as Alexandria? Well, we've been talking about how Alexandria is artificial. It has no roots. Previously, in a city like Athens, or the cities in Ionia, where philosophy begins, the philosophers are drawing on the cultures and the traditions of the cities that they belong to. But in Alexandria, these don't exist. And what is more, the Macedonian domination of the Greek world means that these traditions are slightly in abeyance, they're in deep freeze. So, there are all these kind of scholars who are drifting around just waiting to be scooped up by a wealthy patron. And when they come together, their perspective inevitably is going to be cosmopolitan. And that cosmopolitanism, which is absolutely bred of the age of Alexander and his conquests, that, I think, is the essence of the Great Library. That is what the library is bringing. Right. This has always fascinated me because when I was writing my own Adventures in Time book about Cleopatra, I had a scene with her in the library. So, these are books for children, sort of bringing history of life for children. I had a scene with her in the library because I

wanted to describe the library for child readers, but I also wanted to put Cleopatra in it, reading a book. And one of the things that was interesting was when I was reading all the books about Cleopatra, the scholarly books, I mean, they themselves differ on whether the library is part of the museum or the museum or not. And actually, they're not really certain what the museum is. So, what do you think it is? Okay, I think we are pretty certain what the museum is, because we have a relatively detailed description of it. By Strabo. From the age of Augustus, a geographer called Strabo. So, he says that the museum, the museum, let's call it the museum, is part of the Great Palace complex, the Bracheon, as it was called. So, it is part of the fabric of this enormous complex of buildings in which the Ptolemies live. Yeah, it's a whole court of the city, the palace complex. Yeah, it's huge. And Strabo says that it possesses a peripartus. So, that's the colonnade, like the Lyceum had in Athens, that it has a columned hall and it has a dining hall, both of which the Lyceum had. And in this hall, the men who are the members of the museum, they meet in common to dine. So, again, rather like the fellows in Oxford or Cambridge College. It's like All Souls College, which is famously dedicated to research and has no students. Yes. And like All Souls, you know, the delightful surroundings, free food, people to wait on you hand and foot, you know, you don't have to do your own housework. Tom, I knew somebody who won a prize fellowship to All Souls College, Oxford. And when he was there, he was told his job as the most junior fellow was that he was in charge of providing the wine at all the dinners. And his official title, would you believe, was the Chief Screw. Right. So, that I think is pretty much the gig that is being offered by the Ptolemies to... Chief Screw.

These intellectuals who were members of...

I suspect in Alexandria that would have had a double meaning.

There is repeatedly, you know, an emphasis on the food and the wine that you get.

And there's definitely a sense of jealousy on the part of those who aren't there.

So, there's a kind of very celebrated satirical comment on it by a guy called Timon of Flius, who clearly had not been offered, you know, a scholarship to the museum, who says, in the land of Egypt, where they jabber in a whole range of languages, many now find a rest home as royally funded hacks, endlessly quarreling in the bird cage of the muses.

Sounds brilliant.

Yeah. So, that sense of kind of subsidized scholarship and academic bitchiness is...

I mean, it does seem familiar to anyone who's...

Well, anyone who listened to our Oppenheimer podcast, when Oppenheimer went to run the School of Advanced Study in Princeton and endlessly fighting about seminar rooms and visits by TS Eliot and stuff, that's exactly what that is.

Exactly. But I think there is a risk in assuming that it is totally like a kind of modern college or something, because there are elements that remind us of its roots in cult practice.

So, the man in charge of the museum is a priest appointed by the king, and it seems from Strabo's description that the museum is directly contiguous to the tomb of Alexander.

So, next to it, right next to it, is separate building, though, probably?

Part of the same complex, I suspect, and it may be that the model for this is actually coming from pharaonic Egypt. So, the tomb of Ramesses II, which the Greeks were very,

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very interested in, which had supposedly a cult center, it had lots of books, and had a tomb, and it was all part of the one complex.

So, it may be that that's a kind of direct inspiration for it.

But the question that is hanging here is, well, what about the library?

Because Strabo does not mention the library. Exactly.

And this is the puzzle. Now, most scholars, I think, by and large, have assumed that the library is a separate building from the museum, and there is definitely a post of chief librarian who is also tutor to the crown prince. So, there's definitely a sense that, you know, there are books here. I mean, there's no question about that.

So, therefore, the question is, where are these books?

And I think the most convincing explanation for this is in a book called *The Vanishing Library* by the Italian scholar Luciano Canfora, who argues Strabo does not mention the library for the simple reason that it did not constitute a separate room or building.

And there is evidence for this in the argument given by the author of *Ptolemaic Alexandria*, PM Fraser, kind of the great definitive volume on it, who points out that the Library of Alexandria, or the Museum of Alexandria, I should properly say, inspires a kind of copycat example in Pergamum,

which is another capital in what's now Turkey. And there, there are sufficient remains for archaeologists to reconstruct the floor plan, and there is no separate library there.

So, that implies, almost certainly, that the library is not a separate building.

And I think that what makes this such a convincing argument is that the original word for library in Greek is actually the shelves on which books are kept. So, I think that what that suggests is that you had this kind of museum complex, and you have shelves, and the scrolls are kept on the shelves, and they are part of the structure of the general complex, and that, therefore, what comes to be called the library is a feature that is kind of running throughout the museum. I like that argument, Tom, but let me just raise one quick objection. In the video game that we mentioned at the beginning, *Assassin's Creed Origins*, the scholars who worked on that game based the design for it on an existing, a library that we know existed, very famous, one of the most famous Roman remains, which is the Library of Celsus in Ephesus. Now, that's quite a bit later. It is. So, that's in the, when's that, about 92 AD. So, that's a Roman building, not a Greek building. But we know that, therefore, that the Romans, or in a Greek-speaking area of the Roman Empire, and in an area that undoubtedly would have had trade links with Alexandria, that there were separate libraries. There is a possibility, surely, given that so many records of Alexandria are lost, that they could have been a separate building. The Romans, a bit like American plutocrats in the Gilded Age, or indeed now, to be honest, they have the money and they are envious of the cultural prestige of the Greek world. And so, they start amassing vast collections of books. And Egypt, actually, because it's providing papyrus, becomes a great, great centre of the book trade. Huge numbers of copies are made,

are sent to Rome. The capital itself, of course, has the largest number of libraries, but you also have one in Herculaneum, very famously. There's a villa with all kinds of manuscripts that people stream, ultimately, of deciphering. So, the Roman library is, I think, different from the kind of library that is being set up in the Age of the First Ptolemies. More self-conscious, in a way. It's more self-conscious. It's more self-aggrandising.

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It's kind of Nouveau-Riche. Right. Not that the Ptolemies weren't Nouveau-Riche, because, of course, they were. The Ptolemies are Nouveau-Riche, but the Ptolemies are closer to, you know, they are, they're Macedonians, so they're heirs to that tradition of cultural sponsorship that was practiced by the kings. And they are pretty much direct heirs to the traditions in Athens that Peter and Aristotle embody. So, I think there is a difference there. And I think that the libraries that you get in both Imperial Rome and in the provinces, I think those libraries, by that point, the idea of a library is a kind of a distinct building that you construct, essentially, to kind of show off how much learning you have. And that can be done by individuals or it can be done on a civic basis. I think that that is something that is different from the Library of Alexandria. I mean, I can understand if, you know, in a computer game, you need to make it visible, they would be kind of a useful crutch. But I think that Canforra's argument is a better and more convincing one.

Very good. Okay. So, on that bombshell, we're going to take a break to consult our own collection. And when Tom has done his research, we'll return. So, for you, I mean, Tom works so quickly, you'll probably just have time for one or two ads. And then you come back after the break. Yeah, come back after the break. And Tom is going to tell us what was in the library and how it was destroyed. Very exciting. See you after the break.

Hello, welcome back to the Rest is History. We are in the Library of Alexandria. And Tom, the Library of Alexandria, I mean, people have this fantasy of it, don't they, is the repository of all the world's wisdom, all kinds of scientific discoveries are happening, thanks to the books in the library, the scholars who are working in the museum are pushing the boundaries of knowledge. And then actually, there's this very common view, which you see repeated in kind of popular histories and things, which is that with the loss of the Library of Alexandria, which was destroyed for reasons that we will go on to discuss, the world was plunged into a darkness, the cause of science was set back. How much truth is there in this? And I can kind of guess what your answers are going to be. Yeah, so there are two elements to that. There's the idea that the Library of Alexandria alone contains everything, and therefore its loss cripples the world so much that we're plunged back into the dark ages. And that if that hadn't happened, then history would have been set on a far greater, smoother progress towards industrialization and spaceships and cures for cancer and all kinds of things like that. So this idea that the Library of Alexandria is a kind of scientific research center, that it's kind of MIT or Silicon Valley or something like that. Yeah, the University of Wilbampton. Not getting that far. The truth about the Library of Alexandria is that its focus is overwhelmingly literary and Greek. So the scholars who are in the library seem to have seen as their mission essentially the rescue of the vast mass of Greek literature. And they're doing this as people who have basically emancipated themselves from the city politics of classical Greece, and therefore have a sense of the entirety of the writings of Greece. And they're anxious, I think, that amid all the wars that have plagued Greece for the past 200 years, the previous 200 years, there's every possibility that these texts will be lost. And so that's an absolutely kind of key part of it. And this combines with the obsession of the Ptolemies for collecting, because once you have the kind of ideal that you're going to get as many books as possible, that's tremendously fun if you're a king with very, very deep pockets. And so the Ptolemies are sending agents out across the Greek world, particularly to Athens, particularly to Rhodes, where they have the largest book markets. There are kind of almost

certainly apocryphal stories that Ptolemy III, who is the grandson of the First Ptolemy, that when ships dock in the harbor of Alexandria and if they're carrying books, the books will be removed, they'll be marked with the slogan from the ships put into the library copies made and given back to the disgruntled merchants. And an even better story, which is almost certainly definitely not true, is that Ptolemy III wants the original copies of the plays of the three greatest Athenian tragedians, Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides. And he asks the Athenians and the Athenians say no, and he keeps pestering them. And finally, the Athenians say, okay, but you'll have to pay an absolutely kind of crippling deposit, because we don't trust you. So Ptolemy hands over the deposit and then just pockets the tragedies. And the Athenians are left with the deposit. So I mean, this story develops clearly out of the sense that there is something faintly maniacal about the determination of the Ptolemy's and the librarians to get all these texts. And what they do then having got all these texts, it seems is basically to establish the definitive editions of pretty much all the classical texts that we have today.

So you're Homer's and Herodotuses and things.

Absolutely. So you can measure this in the papyri that you find out in the deserts in Egypt, that from about 150 BC, so really once all the textual work has been done, you start getting standardized texts of the Iliad and the Odyssey that, you know, the ancestors of the ones that students are using today. So that is a very, very great achievement. I mean, it's an absolutely astonishing achievement, but it's not perhaps on a level with curing cancer or building space rockets,

which is really what I think people want to believe that was going on in the library.

And the truth is that there are kind of amazing discoveries and breakthroughs at the library that are not to do with literature. So the classic example of this is the calculation to an astonishing degree of accuracy of the circumference of the earth, which is done by a scholar called Eratosthenes. And Eratosthenes essentially creates the mathematical foundations of geography and cartography. So the fact that you have all these texts that you can consult them, and then you can put them together to construct kind of maps of the world that are more accurate than any that had previously existed. Again, this is a fruit of the, you know, the sense of a research institute that you have that without this vast compendium of texts, that probably wouldn't have been possible. But it's really important to emphasize that for the Greeks, theory always triumphs over experiment. And there's a line in Plato's Republic that I always think of in this context where Plato says, you know, when we're looking at astronomy, we must approach it as we approach geometry by way of kind of working out problems and ignore what's in the sky.

So in other words, the mass of astronomy is what really matters. You know, the pinpricks of light in the sky, that's kind of completely irrelevant.

But all of that said, Tom, all of that said, they do have coin-operated slot machines.

They do have automatic doors. They do have steam engines.

Yes, steam engines, exactly. Practical inventions.

But what they don't do is apply any of those to what we would recognize, say, as industrial policy.

Yeah. You know, the steam engines are being used to power various gizmos and temples.

Yeah.

They're not being used to power railway trains that can be laid out over the desert to go and attack enemies or anything like that.

No. Those Ptolemaic armored trains would have been brilliant, though.

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So Arnold Toynbee famously, you know, this was one of his what-ifs that the Library of Alexandria had actually been technically minded. And he's obviously kind of thinking of imperial British expeditions at the time when he was writing it.

The Library of Alexandria is not a great center of technology. That is not what it's about. And the other, I think the other myth is that it is universal in the sense of aspiring to contain all the wisdom of the world. Really, its focus is Greek.

And the reason that we have this idea that it might have been universal is because of a very famous myth, which is that Ptolemy II, it is said, wants to know the scriptures of the Jews. So there are lots of Jews that have been settled in Alexandria.

They are a sizable part of the population. And the story goes that Ptolemy II sends to Jerusalem for people who can translate the Hebrew scriptures into Greek.

And he has sent 72 scholars, six from each of the 12 tribes of Israel.

And they are put up on the pharaohs, the island with the lighthouse, and they come up with a Greek translation for the Royal Library.

And this is the Septuagint. The translation of Hebrew scripture into Greek, Septuagint comes from the Latin for 70. So it's a rounding down from the 72.

But this is, as I say, it's a myth. It's contained in a letter supposedly written by a guy called Aristas in the second century BC, so long after it's meant to have happened. And essentially, it's making a case for the Jews to be a part of Hellenic culture in Alexandria. There's chronic antisemitism in Alexandria. He is making a pitch to the Greeks to say, look, our learning is a part of the universal corpus of human knowledge.

The Ptolemy's are interested in it. It's gone into the Mosaic, on into the library, you know, but the intention of that is very palpable.

But one more counter argument. This is an unusual position because you're very much the revisionist here. And I'm sticking up for the orthodox interpretation of the library, the more romantic one, I would say it's on, which is usually you're the more romantic presenter of the rest of this issue. But so Cleopatra, we're told, I think, by Plutarch, that Cleopatra spoke Greek, Egyptian, Ethiopian, Aramaic, Syriac, Median, Parthian, and Arabic language and the language of the troglodytes. Doesn't that speak to a kind of universalism and multiculturalism at the heart of the... Because presumably, if she did speak any of these languages, she would have learned at least some of them from the scholars working in their museum and the library. No, because Cleopatra is famously the first of the Ptolemy's to speak Egyptian. Right. But maybe that's because Egyptian is regarded as a lower level than some of the others. And there's a... It doesn't mean that there isn't a kind of great swirl of language. I mean... Well, I think by our lights, it's astounding that the Ptolemy's over all these generations that they've been ruling Egypt don't learn to speak Egyptian.

But Timon of Flius, you had in the first half, in the land of Egypt, where they jabber in a whole range of languages, he said. So there is a kind of multiculturalism there in the land. There must be. No, because he's dismissing it. He's saying it's not even Greek. Most of the people in Egypt speak some barbarous language. I mean, that's what barbarian is. It's someone who doesn't speak Greek. It goes, ba, ba, ba, ba. But isn't the implication there that some of... He's talking about the scholars specifically, that some of the scholars... Maybe they are all speaking Greek, but they're coming from different places and there is a kind of exchange.

Yeah, but they're all Greek speaking. They're only interested in Greek. They're not interested

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in anything else. Which to our way of thinking, can't possibly equate to universal, but to the Greeks it does. For instance, you will note that Cleopatra isn't speaking Latin, which is amazing considering that her two boyfriends are both Roman.

How did she speak to them, Tom? Did they both speak Greek?

Yes, because there is assumption that Greek is the only language that you need.

Well, I suppose that's the thing, isn't it? That Greek is perceived as being the language of learning and of culture across the Mediterranean in this period.

Yeah. So basically, I think that the Library of Alexander isn't nearly as universal as people think. So that essentially is one myth. The other great question is what happens to it?

Where does it go? And that is usually framed as who destroys it. The assumption is that someone or some kind of great sweeping catastrophe of fire has wiped the library out.

So a favourite candidate, as you all know Dominic, because you write about it in your book on Cleopatra is Julius Caesar. Exactly.

Are you convinced by that? No. Caesar causes a fire. There's no doubt about that.

When he's trapped in Alexandria, having visited Egypt as part of his war against Pompey, he's installed himself. He's taken possession of the palace quarter.

He ends up being shackled up with Cleopatra. He's fighting against her brother, isn't he?

Ptolemy. Yeah, of course, they're all called Ptolemy. And in the course of this,

there is a big fight down at the harbour. And Caesar, it seems, if you were to believe the accounts, sets fire to his own ships to stop the enemy getting hold of them. And in the course of that, the fire spreads from the ships to the warehouses and the books there are damaged.

But I mean, as you will know, Tom, the library is not at the docks.

So it's conceivable that fire spread, but it would have to have spread a hell of a long way.

Yeah. What do you think about it?

Well, so the confusion is caused by Plutarch, who does say the library is destroyed in this fire.

And we don't quite know where he gets that. Well, we do know where he gets it from, because it's evident that large quantities of books were destroyed. And this is recorded in a number of sources, all of which seem to go back to Livy, who is the great Roman historian who's writing shortly after the lifetime of Julius Caesar in the reign of Augustus. And he says that there are warehouses that contain grain and books. Another detail that seems to derive from Livy is that 40,000 scrolls were stored there by chance. So that by chance is crucial, because it's saying, you know, they're not there as part of a permanent collection. They happen to be there. And why would they happen to be there? Well, we talked earlier about this great trade in books, taking books, taking scrolls to Rome and to Italy and to the great plutocrats of the Roman world. And probably that's what this is.

Well, you said yourself Egypt is a great exporter of papyrus.

Yeah, absolutely. And I think we have pretty conclusive proof that the library, whatever it was, whether it was part of the museum or whether it was something separate, was still in existence in the reign of Domitian, who is end of the first century AD, because Suetonius, he's describing a fire that sweeps Rome in Domitian's reign and how Domitian sends scribes to Alexandria to make copies of the texts that have been lost in the libraries in Rome. So there's this sense that Alexandria remains the great depository of texts where you would go. So then the question, well, if not Julius Caesar, then when? And the fact is that over the course of the third century and into the fourth, when the Roman world is ravaged by civil war and all kinds of catastrophes, there are any number of disasters that might have destroyed the museum and the library. So there's

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a great cycle of destruction under a caracala at the beginning of the third century, Aurelian, who is the emperor who kind of stitches the empire back together after it seems to be disintegrating in the mid third century. And it's specified that the bouquet on which is the area with all the palace that Aurelian had destroyed it. So if he's destroyed the palace, then he must have destroyed the museum as well. And then we're told that there was another cycle of destruction in the reign of Diocletian at the end of the third century. So I would say that the odds on anything remaining of it by the end of the fourth century would be minimal.

Not least because, Tom, Alexandria is not just a city of tremendous sophistication and culture and so on, but it is notorious as a city of mob violence, of rioting. The Alexandrians are famously given to civic disorder, and they're always burning down bits of their cities, smashing things up. So it's hard to imagine that in that intervening period of time, from the end of the time, it's all the way through to the fourth century, that the library would have survived utterly unscathed given that they're always having these ruckuses and riots.

Right. Except that, the most famous example of mob violence actually happens in 391.

So that is almost a century after Constantine's conversion to Christianity. And it is when a Christian mob turns on the great temple of Serapis, who is this syncretic artificial deity who'd basically been invented by the Ptolemies to try and provide a focus for both their Greek and Egyptian subjects. But this is a very kind of vast, impressive building. Anyone who's seen the film Agra with Rachel Weiss, it's the centerpiece of that. It's brilliantly well done.

And the theory is that there was a library in there that this was either a part of or a subdivision or a rival to the main library of Alexandria, and that this Christian mob attack the Serapam and destroy it and deliberately target the library. Now, this is a myth that emerges basically in the writings of Edward Gibbon, the author of The Decline of Fall of the Roman Empire, who has, I mean, he has his own reasons to present Christians as bigots and...

Well, they're the villains of his book.

So he writes, the valuable library of Alexandria was pillaged or destroyed and near 20 years afterwards, the appearance of the empty shelves excited the regret and indignation of every spectator whose mind was not totally darkened by religious prejudice. So the idea that the books would be destroyed, but the shelves left, I mean, is obviously Gibbon is thinking of the shelves of the Bodleian being stripped, I think there.

And that's just an idea that is immensely popular today among writers. I think about, for example, of the few years ago, the book The Darkening Age by Catherine Nixie, where she basically argued, all this tremendous learning of the classical world was destroyed by the Christians that Christianity was responsible for plunging the world into a darkening age, as she calls it.

On that, that we have five accounts of the destruction of the Serapaeum. So it is one of the best authenticated episodes in the whole history of Alexandria, but none of them mention the destruction of a library. And to the degree that classical texts have survived, it's down to the efforts of Christian copyists, Christian scribes. Without them, we would have nothing. So I don't think the Christians did it, and I definitely don't think the Muslims did it, but they also have been fingered as culprits. So the story goes...

There's lots of stuff on the internet saying that they're the bad guys in the story.

Right. So this is even more improbable. But the story is that the Arabs sweep into Egypt, they conquer it, they lay siege to Alexandria, they capture it, the commander of the Arabs,

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Amar writes to Omar, the Caliph, and says, well, you've got all this, you know, this great city, this enormous library, it's full of books. What should we do with them? And he waits, and then Omar's reply comes back. If the content of the books you mention is in accordance with the Book of Allah, we may do without them, for in that case, the Book of Allah more than suffices. If, on the other hand, they contain matter not in accordance with the Book of Allah, there can be no need to preserve them. Proceed then and destroy them.

We have no need of other books.

Yeah. I mean, it's so clearly not true. This is not, again, the Muslims had huge respect for the legacy of Greek philosophy. The reason that this survives is that it's kind of in accordance with what people who are very hostile to institutional religion like to imagine about it.

Of course.

You know, that it's all bigots who have no time for anything other than their own holy books.

It's a kind of enlightenment myth, really.

So, do you think the idea that there was one single moment when the library was destroyed is simply a product of the 18th century, a fantasy, a projection, I suppose. And actually, what happened was that the library probably fell partly into disuse, bits of it were perhaps burned in fires, who knows. And then actually, just the collection was split up and who knows, it wasn't even an event, actually, but a slow process that nobody even noticed.

Yeah. I think the idea of there being a dark age, you want to think, well, why was there a dark age?

And it's much more dramatic if you can blame it, say, on the destruction by fire of a single, vast repository of learning. But actually, right at the beginning of this episode, we talked about how unlike clay tablets, which survive when they're fired, papyrus is incredibly fragile. You don't actually need a fire to destroy it. If you're keeping all these scrolls in, they're not air conditioned, they're not temperature check, they're a mice, they crumble away. They crumble when you're reading them. Absolutely. Unless those texts are being

rewritten and rewritten and rewritten, they're going to fall away. I mean, it may be that, I mean, we're told that the buildings of the palace complex are destroyed by Aurelian. I mean, maybe that is the final terminus for it. But I suspect that most of the texts had already gone long, long before that. And actually, the person who comments most wonderfully on this is Gibbon, who, as well as being an enthusiast for various enlightenment-infused myths, is a brilliant, brilliant scholar who has studied and investigated all the available sources for the narratives that he's telling. And he writes that, I sincerely regret the more valuable libraries which have been involved in the ruin of the Roman Empire. But when I seriously compute the lapse of ages, the waste of ignorance, and the calamities of war, our treasures, rather than our losses, are the object of my surprise.

So don't mourn what we've lost, but celebrate what we've retained. I mean, that's actually quite a nice message, isn't it? Very un-Gibbonian, given that he's normally so skeptical and so sort of... Well, no, I think the decline of all is a great monument to the amount of texts that are there. And I guess that Gibbon is, that's what he is expressing. Thank God I don't have to do any more reading. That's what he's thinking.

But to repeat, again, what we said at the beginning, I think the fact that the Library of Alexandria is no longer there is precisely what gives it its potency as a kind of mythic symbol of libraries. What a wonderful story Tom, I really enjoyed that. And actually,

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that's fired me up for two things. One is the city of Alexandria would be a fantastic story, actually, to do in the rest of this history, the rise and fall of Alexandria. But also, the Ptolemies, the Ptolemaic dynasty, the Hellenistic world, we haven't really done much about them.

We did Cleopatra. But I love the story of the Ptolemies. It's very complicated because they're always marrying each other, aren't they? And they're all called Ptolemy.

And they're all called Ptolemy, which might be an issue.

But they have amusing nicknames, which we could...

Yeah, it's one of the eight, Fatty. Yeah, Ptolemy, yes.

He married his sister and his niece at the same time.

Great stuff.

Fantastic behavior. Right. On that bombshell, thank you so much for that, Tom. That was really good fun. And do you want to plug your library again?

British Library, yes. It's 50th birthday, all kinds of exhibitions and specials on at the library. So if you're in London and have a chance to go and sample them, please do.

And Harafa Libraries, basically, because without them, we wouldn't be able to do this podcast.

No, no, especially the Bodleian Library. Right. We'll see you all next time, everybody. Bye-bye.