

# Bibliotheca Alexandrina

## Towards the Encyclopedism of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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The New Alexandrian Library is to be inaugurated at the end of 1998 on the royal site of the great ancient metropolis, that is, on the site of the Museum founded by Ptolemy I to enclose his mythical collection of books. This ambitious project of a “public research library “ was undertaken on the initiative of the Egyptian government and has, since 1986, received the support of UNESCO.

The goal was not to reconstruct the ancient Alexandrian Library – the total absence of architectural and archaeological evidence would in any case not make that possible – but to revive its symbolic force and its radiance: at the threshold of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the Bibliotheca Alexandrina’s purpose is to be a gathering place for literature, ideas, and sciences at the crossroads of the Mediterranean cultures of yesterday and today, of the West and the Near East. Equipped with the most modern technological resources, it will be a major research site for the Egyptian and international communities on the history of the great Mediterranean civilizations, as well as in the fields of science and technology.

The ancient Library was founded by Ptolemy I at the beginning of the third century B.C.: it was accompanied by a Museum, intended to welcome a community of scholars and learned men from throughout the Hellenized world. The Ptolemies proposed to collect every book in the world and thus to perpetuate, symbolically, Alexander the Great’s dream of universality, the founder and eponym of their capital: they endeavored to assemble in their palace not only the written patrimony of Hellenism, but also that of non-Greek peoples whose great texts, like the Pentateuch of the Jews or Zoroaster’s corpus, were translated. Alexandria was therefore an intellectual center of the first order, not only under

the Ptolemaic dynasty, but also during the Roman Empire, despite the vicissitudes of history that eventually brought about its ruin. There is hardly a discipline, whether literary genre or intellectual field – from medicine to philology, cartography to mechanics, astronomy to poetry – that was not enriched and transformed by the unknown conditions of this great eastern Mediterranean metropolis. The Alexandrian Library was a privileged place of communication among disciplines, cultures, and religions. More generally, it played a decisive role in promoting a certain model of intellectual work, one that relied upon reading and writing, and in disseminating Antiquity's heritage to the Byzantine and Arab worlds, as to the West.

The collections of the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina will include approximately four million printed volumes (a number that is expected to double), one hundred thousand manuscripts, ten thousand rare books, fifty thousand maps and plans, and a large number of digital and audio-visual resources, which will make it a dynamic center in the network of Egyptian libraries. To perpetuate a multimillenary heritage, adapting it to the new demands of contemporary information and fostering dialogue between the cultural traditions that flourished around the Mediterranean – such is the primary mission of an institution whose conception and realization have enjoyed a high degree of international participation.

*Translated from the French by Janine Alexandra Treves.*

## Select Bibliography

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### *Also relevant:*

- "Libraries" in *Diogenes*, n° 141, (Spring 1988), with articles by: G. Lapouge, "Books in Flames"; M. El-Abbadi, "Aspects of Scholarship and the Library of Ptolemaic Alexandria"; J. Bingen, "The Library of Alexandria: Past and Future."
- "Les Bibliothèques d'Alexandrie" (project directed by C. Jacob, with the contributions of L. Canfora, F. Lombard, D. Meeks, M. Melot, A. Miquel, F. de Polygnac, C. Orrieux), *Préfaces*, 12 (March-April 1989): Editions du Publication of the Cercle de la Librairie.