

Rebirth of a Notion

The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina opens this spring on the shores of the Mediterranean atop the foundations of a great lost legend. Will it be a beacon of intellectual hope and openness for a country sorely in need of one? An ordinary library with none of its precursor's ancient luster? Or simply the world's largest phone booth?

by Amy E. Schwartz

Late this April, in a storied spot on Egypt's Mediterranean coast, international dignitaries will gather for the dedication of a sparkling new building whose tilted cylindrical shape is intended to evoke the power of the rising sun. The granite exterior wall is patterned in alphabets, an assortment of characters and hieroglyphs from 200 different writing systems ancient and modern. They mingle to project the sense that the building is a mysterious receptacle of some sort—a jar, a jug, a scroll—crammed with strange messages. And the impression is exactly right, because the building promises an implausible but somehow still thrilling answer to an old dream. Since 1990 its builders have been claiming that, when it opens, it will be a new, gloriously revived incarnation of the ancient library of Alexandria.

What could be more romantic than the idea of resurrecting the Great Library of antiquity, where the riches of classical learning, accumulated over centuries, were stored—only to be lost in a conflagration whose details remain in shadow? On the other hand, what could be more ridiculous? The ancient library was, after all,

famed not for architecture or material monuments but for the vast store of knowledge it contained, most of it now irretrievably lost. You can rebuild buildings, but you cannot restore a great scholarly endeavor simply by declaring you will do so. It's especially difficult when your site, once considered the center of the civilized world, is located in a nation that, far from reaching out to collect as much as possible of the world's knowledge, has been steadily flirting with book and press censorship, Islamic fundamentalism, and outright cultural repression.

The sponsors have tried. The new Bibliotheca Alexandrina, they say, will be “a lighthouse of knowledge to the whole world”—a not-so-veiled attempt to invoke the aura of the city's other great lost landmark, the Pharos, a lighthouse that was numbered among the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The project's logo is a schematic representation of the Great Lighthouse, the sun rising from the sea behind it. And some steps have been taken that go beyond letterhead, raising hopes that the new Bibliotheca Alexandrina could be, if not an





An Egyptian diver goes face to face with this rare sphinx that has kept its head. It was discovered in the shallow waters of Alexandria's harbor, part of which will become an undersea antiquities park.

instant wonder, then at least a respectable institution.

It wasn't always so. For most of the decade following its formal launch in 1990, the project, when it drew international attention at all, was as likely to evoke a snicker as a thrill. "Mubarak's new Pyramid," suggested a British publication in 1998. A white elephant, insisted others, an immensely sophisticated \$210 million building being erected in a nation with widespread illiteracy and courts that routinely yank books off library shelves lest they pose a threat to Islam. The sponsors of the new Alexandria, this critique runs, have erected a gorgeous edifice and raised a lot of money, but they have only intermittently grappled with the central question that shapes a serious library: What is to be in it?

Worldwide appeals for help brought donations of thousands of outdated textbooks and

obscure volumes of conference proceedings. A project director, pinned down on the lack of quality, conceded that it might be necessary to "swap" some. Even one of the early on-site directors from the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) admitted to me wryly in 1993 that the structural tendencies of his agency tended to push in the wrong direction. "It's a funny thing about cultural projects," he observed. "They have a tendency to migrate towards being architectural projects, which at least we know how to do."

The observation goes to the root of a more general skepticism. Alexandria was the seat of the Ptolemies, the home of geniuses such as Euclid, Eratosthenes, and Archimedes, and of Callimachus, who marshaled the forces of the open and culturally voracious Hellenistic Empire to build the library's collection. Twenty-three centuries after the founding of the ancient library, the main forces

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urging the Bibliotheca Alexandrina into existence are two enormous and lumbering bureaucracies in thrall to myriad political sensitivities: the Mubarak government in Cairo and the vast UNESCO machinery based in Paris. It's fair to say that no one expects either of these institutions to be a fertile seedbed for world-class intellectual endeavor.



In the last two years, stung by such dismissals, both bureaucracies have taken some steps to indicate their seriousness. Most important, they recruited a director of international stature: Egyptian-born urban planner Ismail Serageldin, who left a World Bank vice presidency to accept the job. Serageldin began by seeking and obtaining assurances that he would report only and personally to President Hosni Mubarak—not to Egyptian bureaucrats, religious enforcers, or spies.

Serageldin also has the reputation and the Rolodex to accomplish his stated goal of turning Alexandria into “another Davos,” a high-profile conference center that would focus on science and technology issues of interest to the Third World. He has assembled a board of trustees that includes such luminaries as Harvard University biologist Stephen Jay Gould and Italian humanist Umberto Eco. His World Bank brief included significant work on agricultural and food biotechnology issues; he would like to see a comparable scientific and technical focus in Alexandria. Such a vision, though considerably short of constituting a universal library, would nonetheless help the place function—as publicity materials have insisted from the start—as “a window on Egypt for the world, a window on the world for Egypt.”

Serageldin's vision also helps address, if obliquely, the question of whether a library in the venerable, Alexandrian sense is really the way to go nowadays for a city seeking to play a role in world intellectual affairs. Call it the post-library society argument: If scholars nowadays are more likely to work off Web pages on high-speed Internet connections

than from original manuscripts, then all they really need are a lot of clean and comfortable data ports. Building a \$210 million edifice with designer furniture from Norway and granite from Aswan and art from Australia and so forth simply amounts to constructing the world's largest and most expensive telephone booth.

But if arguments like these have done little to slow the construction of massive new libraries in places such as Paris and London, they were hardly likely to receive serious consideration in the romantic atmosphere that marks the Alexandrian project. And if a balance can somehow be struck between topical collections and scholarly research in the library, and connection building and gabfests at the University of Alexandria's conference center nearby, then perhaps a good international book collection will help the place achieve the global stature it desires.

Serageldin has finally put in place a credible collection policy to replace a decade of mounting chaos in the storage bins. As late as 2000, the library's Web site still carried an appeal for book donations, something that reputable library professionals the world over agree nets nothing but unmanageable mountains of trash. Serageldin himself observed after taking office that of 400,000 books already collected, roughly 200,000 should not form part of the permanent collection. That sets the library back considerably in its quest to obtain eight million books in two decades. But it is better so.

The new policy, which commits the library to collect intensively in a few areas, was drafted by Egyptian-born scholar Mohamed Aman, dean of the school of library sciences at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee and an early friend of the project. “Someday the library will have eight million books,” says Aman cheerfully, “but I'll be buried six feet under by then, with a lot of other people on top of me.” His schema calls for an official focus on technology, scientific ethics, Mediterranean area and environmental studies, and selected aspects of the region's rich past, including Islamic history and all periods of Egyptian history. The library is also supposed to amass special col-

>AMY E. SCHWARTZ writes about cultural issues for the Washington Post. Copyright © 2002 by Amy E. Schwartz.

lections in the history of religions, though it's hard to see how that will be accomplished in the present climate. (As recently as March 2001, the government felt it necessary to submit an "urgent report" to the Egyptian parliament denying accounts in Western newspapers that "Jewish money" had been donated to the library.)

The library will also take on the preservation of thousands of manuscripts—8,000 so far—collected from the scattered Christian monasteries of the Egyptian desert and from assorted municipal libraries and museums. It has already acquired the archives of the Suez Canal Company. And it has one other obvious and plausible role: to train a professional corps of Arabic-speaking librarians. Aman has drafted plans to found a badly needed International School of Information Science—a seemingly pedestrian name that gives the school the fetching acronym ISIS—and donated his personal library to the endeavor. In a reminder of the still somewhat nebulous state of the enterprise, the school anticipates offering a curriculum consisting entirely of remote-hookup Internet courses for the foreseeable future.



Dirges for the ancient library echo down the ages. The most recent and vivid was sounded just a few years ago on Broadway, in Tom Stoppard's 1993 play about lost knowledge, *Arcadia*. In it, 13-year-old Thomasina studies the classics with her tutor, Septimus, in England in 1809. They are translating an account of Cleopatra on her barge when Thomasina, who considers Cleopatra "a noodle," is suddenly moved to bewail the loss that, as she was taught, followed on the queen's explosive association with Julius Caesar:

The Egyptian noodle made camal embrace with the enemy who burned the great library of Alexandria without so much as a fine for all that is overdue. Oh, Septimus!—can you bear it? All the lost plays of the Athenians! Two hundred at least by Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides—thousands of poems, Aristotle's own library. . . . How can we sleep for grief?

By the end of her speech Thomasina has collapsed sobbing on the floor, and Septimus, cradling her in his arms, offers the only possible comfort:

By counting our stock. Seven plays from Aeschylus, seven from Sophocles, *nineteen* from Euripides, my lady! You should no more grieve for the rest than for a buckle lost from your first shoe, or for your lesson book which will be lost when you are old. We shed as we pick up, like travellers who must carry everything in their arms, and what we let fall will be picked up by those behind. . . . The missing plays of Sophocles will turn up piece by piece, or be written again in another language. . . . You do not suppose, my lady, that if all of Archimedes had been hiding in the great library of Alexandria, we would be at a loss for a corkscrew?



Thomasina's heartbreak is the classic response, but the project now reaching fruition on the curved cornice of modern Alexandria is pure Septimus. The official stance of the project's supporters is that this is not an impossible attempt to restore the past but simply a "revival" of the ancient library's questing spirit. The resolution has been hard to keep to; words like "rebuilding" and "reincarnation" keep creeping in.

The revival idea started out in the early 1970s as the brainstorm of a couple of professors at the University of Alexandria, who thought an appeal to the mystique of the ancient library would draw funding for construction and put Egypt's neglected second city back on the world's agenda. The idea was an instant seller. UNESCO took it up with alacrity, and by 1990, when a high-powered conference headed by President Mubarak's wife Suzanne released the Aswan Declaration officially launching the project, the concept alone had raised \$65 million in donations from the Arab world.

This was fortunate, because for a long time after that the concept was all there was. Directly on the heels of the Aswan Declaration came the Persian Gulf War. It not only distracted many of the donors (Saddam

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Hussein, before invading Kuwait, had donated \$21 million), it virtually halted Egypt's tourism industry, the first in a series of such blows that punctuated the 1990s as the Mubarak government battled Islamic extremists and extremists targeted tourists. Activity and construction resumed in 1993. Early in the life of the project, the university had deeded it a stunning parcel of its own land, with a view of the harbor and of the 15th-century Mameluke fort Qait Bey. An international competition produced a truly arresting design from the Norwegian firm Snøhetta and Associates—a “rising sun” that managed to call to mind both an ancient scroll and a microchip, with 11 tiered levels rising to the edge of a tilted, grid-covered circle that admitted natural light through the roof.

Depending on how you feel about projects that “revive” rather than study the past, you could call it exceptionally bad or extraordinarily good luck that, since construction started, a rush of unexpected new archaeological information has turned up, all of it pointing to the likelihood that the new library sits not far from the site of the ancient one. Alas, the digging of the foundations probably erased that ancient evidence for good.



E. M. Forster called Alexandria “the capital of memory,” but it is at least as much the capital of forgetting. Here is a history of books collected, then burned; of scientific principles elucidated before slipping into oblivion; of grand monuments raised only to be brought down by earthquakes. The library's hundreds of thousands of scrolls were not the only loss. Alexandria had an official Wonder of the Ancient World, the famed Pharos, which stood looking out to sea for a thousand years until an earthquake swallowed its last fragments around 1320. Even the tomb of Alexander the Great has disappeared without a trace, despite archaeologists' repeated attempts to find it.

The modern city is deeply marked by the invisible past—not just vanished books but vanished streets, vanished ideas, vanished connections on the map. To fly above the sea

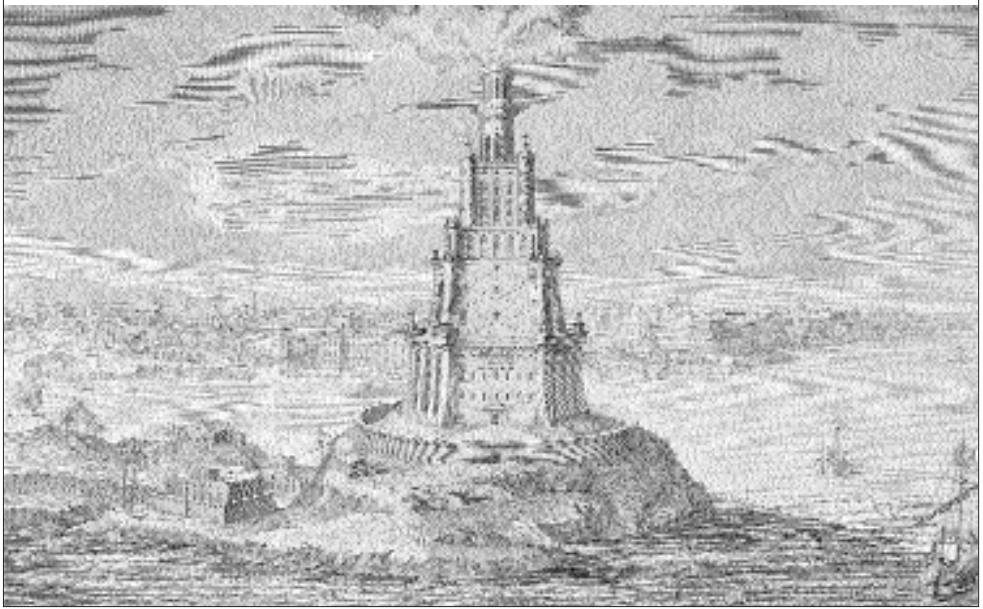
from Athens to Alexandria is to look down on a once-essential trade route, for ideas as well as goods. Greek scholars making their pilgrimages to the library traveled these lanes, as did the original manuscripts of the plays of Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides after Ptolemy III tricked the Athenians into sending him the treasures.

The confusion begins once one arrives. Few cities with so resonant a past offer so little to the eye. The traveler with a head full of C. P. Cavafy and Cleopatra sees only a dusty industrial town, streets a charmless jumble, nothing but the sea and the cornice above it to provide a graceful note. Considering the detailed descriptions of Alexandria's glories in classical sources, its ruins are paltry. Pretty much the only universally agreed-upon remnant of ancient times is the inaccurately named Pompey's Pillar, a soaring reddish-brown column erected in honor of the emperor Diocletian some 300 years after Pompey's death.

“You must forget Athens and Rome,” admonishes the French archaeologist Jean-Yves Empereur, who did as much as any other single figure during the 1990s to bring Alexandria's tangible past out of the shadows—or, more precisely, out from under the waves. “Here, there is no temple standing, no Parthenon, no antique monuments integrated into modern architecture. . . . Nothing, either, of the library or the Mouseion, nothing of the royal palace or the famous Soma, the tomb of Alexander.” The Soma was last attested to by eyewitnesses in the third century A.D.

And yet, with patience, an attentive visitor can feel the shimmer of place beneath the shabby urban skin. The principal modern streets follow Alexander's ancient grid—laid down, as he instructed, so as to catch the cool breezes wafting from the sea. Under the streets, some 400 cisterns were attested to in classical times. About 10 have been located. A story persists of a young woman coming home from the movies on Rue Nabi Daniel who suddenly slipped beneath the pavement into one of those old cisterns and was never seen again.

By 1993, when I had my first look at Alexandria and at the site, tensions between the library's ambitions and its sponsors were



One of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, Alexandria's Great Lighthouse guided ships for a thousand years before two massive earthquakes destroyed it early in the 14th century.

running high. The architectural project was going fine, after an embarrassing confrontation in which local preservationists and archaeologists appealed to the international media to stop the library's sponsors from bulldozing the site without excavating it first. But the cultural project was suffering. Experts in book selection and preservation from 15 countries were gathering there for a meeting at which contracts would be signed and final strategies plotted; once they arrived, though, it was impossible to disguise that neither preservation nor selection had yet caught the attention of anyone making decisions. Office space in the "executive secretariat" a few blocks from the site was rigidly divided between the UNESCO people—including the Italian project director Giovanni Romerio—and the Egyptian representatives of the General Organization for the Alexandria Library, or GOAL, who were set to take over from Romerio's team as soon as the contracts were done. Each delegation had a brand-new computer system; the systems were not connected.

Romerio and a friendly cataloguer took me over the premises and into the book-sorting offices, which were stacked high with an estimated 35,000 volumes already "collected," including mathematics textbooks and copies of *Let's Go: Greece and Turkey*. Though

some were donations, others had been bought at the Cairo or Frankfurt book fairs under pressure of an annual use-it-or-lose-it book budget. The cataloguer noted that these books could now be tucked away easily—nobody was sure where, but perhaps in the basement of the conference center. At that, a high-ranking preservationist from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris leaped to attention. "Is it *climatisée*?" he barked. He swept Romerio off for an impromptu meeting. I waited several hours until finally a tired Romerio was released, admitting that, actually, he had not had time to think about whether the proposed book storage had air conditioning.

Romerio explained later that book selection continued to be a hostage to bureaucratic sensitivities. UNESCO wanted the library to collect materials related to the city's classical and humanist heritage. This would not only prevent its becoming a Mubarak vanity project but also help draw broader support—from great Western libraries and governments as well as from Gulf sheiks. But the Mubaraks, and others in the bureaucracy, were known to be uneasy at the suspicion that this library was less for Egypt than for some abstract entity called the world—from the sound of it, the *Western* world. They wanted to start with the collections that would help

Egypt now—mathematics, computer science, a good basic business-management training curriculum. Some Egyptian bureaucrats were not pleased at the eager role Greece was assuming. Could this project, this enormous investment to revive the glory of Egypt, be simply a masquerade for Westerners yearning to recreate their imperial, colonial past on Egyptian soil?

Though exaggerated, this possibility was not quite imaginary. Ignoring a nation's workaday present in favor of its glorious past is an easy mistake for visitors and foreign residents alike to make, and some of Alexandria's most celebrated modern writers—from Cavafy to Lawrence Durrell—have seen the city more in the context of its splendid Greek heritage than in the context of the Islamic world. Alexandria's first flowering can be successfully sold as belonging to the general patrimony of mankind, but its recent history is inevitably more polarized. It is understandable that Greeks involved with the library project look back with some nostalgia to the large and prosperous Greek community of the first half of the 20th century, when a quarter of Alexandria's population was foreign. After the "Arab socialist" Gamel Abdel Nasser overthrew the monarchy in 1952 and began to institute his nationalization program, that number was reduced to 800 persons out of four million. It is equally understandable that Egyptians view this period differently.

"When you're in Athens and you talk to people about this project," says Rosalie Cuneo Amer, an Italian-born librarian who runs a Friends of the Library group in California, "it's *their* project." And Egyptians? Over the years, Amer says, "Egyptians have internationalized a lot in their views" of the endeavor. But the tension remains bilateral. When the Hellenic Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina proposed to donate a statue of Alexander the Great to stand at the entrance to the executive secretariat, local authorities initially blocked it, citing Islamic prohibitions on the human image. Another UNESCO-affiliated observer is more blunt: "Naturally, it's a Greek concept—the whole idea of a library. But you can't very well say that after Nasser kicked them all out."



The competing explanations for the original library's disappearance are themselves a lesson in the politics of memory. Start with what is known: Alexander the Great founded the city in 332 B.C., choosing the location based on a reference in Homer's *Odyssey*. The well-defended harbor fostered vigorous trade and cultural exchange. Soon two linked institutions arose in conjunction with the royal palace: the Great Library, which aspired to collect all the written knowledge of every known country (and at its height probably contained between 500,000 and 700,000 scrolls), and the Mouseion—temple of the Muses—which came as close as anything in antiquity to a research university faculty.

For the Mouseion, scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek, determined the circumference of the Earth to within a few miles, developed a science of textual criticism that allowed them to produce an authoritative text of Homer, established that the seat of human thought was the brain rather than the heart, and invented the practice of alphabetization for book cataloguing. The library also had a shelf list, the famed Pinakes of Callimachus, an annotated bibliography of all of Greek writing that ran to 120 volumes.

All lost, of course. But how and why? An account in Plutarch, long taken as definitive, said that Julius Caesar accidentally burned the library in 48 B.C. when, caught in the civil war between Cleopatra and her younger brother, he seized the upper hand by setting fire to the ships in the harbor. The classicist Lionel Casson, in *Libraries in the Ancient World* (2001), suggested that the library was finally laid waste around A.D. 270 when the emperor Aurelian put down a rebellion, destroying the palace district. In his *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Edward Gibbon, who had a special dislike of religious fanaticism, laid the destruction of the library to the rioting Christian zealots, who destroyed the Serapeum, the preeminent pagan shrine, in A.D. 391.

The best-known story is at once the most colorful and the least likely. In this account, the Muslim conqueror of the city, Amr Ibn

al-As, sends word to Caliph Omar in A.D. 642 to ask if the books might be spared. The caliph's word comes back: "If the books accord with what is in the Koran, they are not required; if they do not accord with it, they are not desired. Therefore destroy them." In this telling, the half-million scrolls are consigned to the fires that heat the city baths. It takes six months to burn them all.

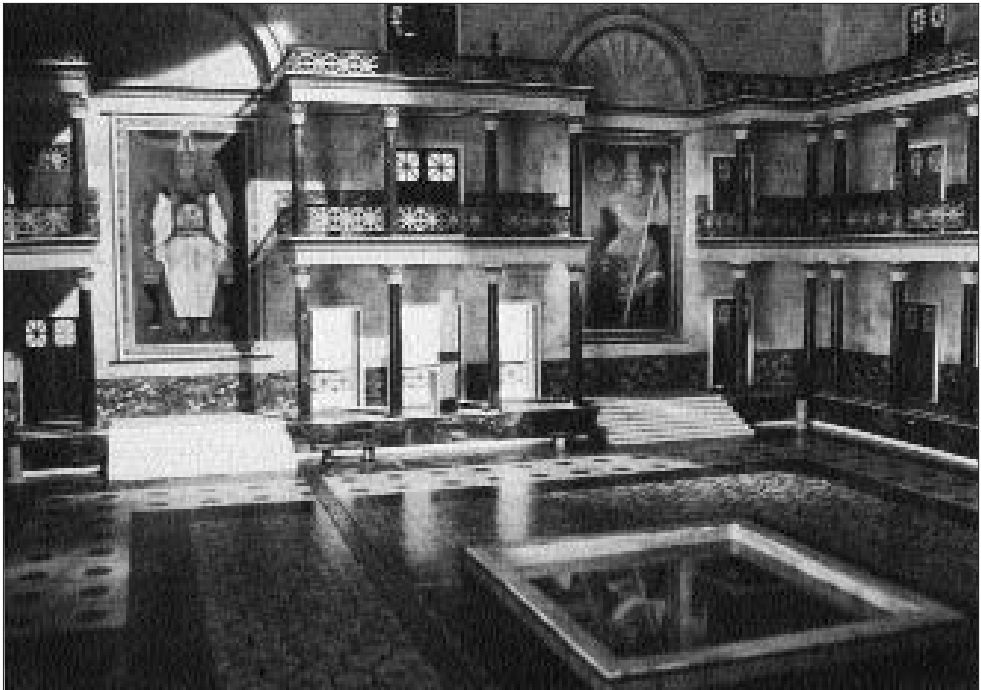
Authorities overseeing the Bibliotheca project have been keen to see this last story—popular in 19th-century Europe—debunked as a base canard on Islam. Mostafa el-Abbadi, one of the University of Alexandria classicists who conceived the project in the 1970s, took on this challenge in *Life and Fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria*, published by UNESCO in 1990. El-Abbadi subscribes firmly to the Julius Caesar theory. His book concludes, after detailed argument, that the story about the caliph was dreamed up by Islamic (not Western) historians many centuries later as a way to make it seem less egregious that the caliphs of the time were selling off the contents of famous libraries to pay their armies.

From a scholar's point of view, all the theories are problematic, riddled with textual and

logical difficulties. If Caesar burned the library, why did it continue to be mentioned regularly for the next 300 years? If Amr did it, why does the first account turn up only in the 1300s? Perhaps the library suffered more than one phase of destruction. The storehouses burned by Caesar were said to contain only 40,000 books, a tiny fragment of the whole, and the "mother" library in the royal enclosure could have been lost centuries before the "daughter" library lodged in the Serapeum. Another recent scholar, the Italian Luciano Canfora, wrote in *The Vanished Library* (1987) that none of the stories was likely true; the most probable culprit was the moist Nile River Delta climate, which, unlike that of arid Upper Egypt, ensured that no manuscript written on papyrus could long survive.



Between 1994 and 1998, something happened that greatly magnified the city's ability to call forth its past to residents and visitors alike: Alexandria exploded with archaeological discoveries. It was an unlikely renaissance. Urban renewal generally destroys the ancient core of cities. The mod-



A reconstruction based on scholarly evidence of the Great Hall of the ancient Alexandria library.



The new Alexandria Library is a simple circle inclined toward the sea, its design calling to mind three elements not usually linked together: the rising sun, an ancient scroll, and a microchip.

ern city of Alexandria is built squarely atop the old one, making ordinary excavation impossible. Steady subsidence over the years, not to mention earthquakes, means excavators often find themselves digging in water once their trenches reach the Ptolemaic period. Atop all this history sit fin-de-siècle mansions protected as landmarks.

That leaves little room for excavation except in the occasional, short-term gaps left when commercial buildings are replaced. And this, with economic liberalization, was what started to happen in Alexandria in the 1990s. When developers began tearing down old movie theaters and other commercial buildings, archaeologists saw their first chance in years to glimpse what might lie below. In 1992, the Egyptian Antiquities Organization turned to Jean-Yves Empereur and his Centre d'études Alexandrines for

help. Their presence was partly fortuitous: Empereur, a noted French authority in a mostly neglected late-classical field, Hellenistic commerce, had established the center only two years earlier after a stint in Athens. He spent serious effort refining the techniques of “salvage archaeology,” rejoicing rather than complaining when an oncoming bulldozer afforded him a chance “to slip between the phases of destruction and reconstruction” to check on what lay beneath.

His team had an even more dramatic stroke of luck when authorities asked them to examine the likely impact of sinking a protective concrete breakwater in the harbor off Fort Qait Bey. For reasons partly technological, partly military, no one had ever managed to dive in the shallow, rough waters just off the Alexandrian coastline. And yet the Great

Lighthouse was known to have fallen after repeated earthquakes; its foundations were generally thought to be right under the fort's. It was known that other rulers of the city had dumped large chunks of masonry in the water to block the entrance to the harbor when under attack. Would six centuries of silt have left anything for the eye to see?

Empereur's team started diving in 1994, and stumbled immediately upon a vast field of ruins. Stone blocks, sphinxes, and other statuary covered acres and acres of the seabed. Diving in relatively shallow waters—around 30 feet deep—the expedition began to generate pictures that entranced a worldwide audience: a diver nose to nose with a sphinx; a sling raising a monumental block from the depths. More exciting still, a few of the monumental, decorated blocks had cracked in two or three pieces, suggesting that they had fallen from a great height—possibly, even probably, from the Pharos.

This apparent discovery of the remains of one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World is a reminder that the past is never so definitively gone as the surfaces of the modern world would suggest. Modern projects may wipe out the vestiges of their predecessors, but in Alexandria, at least, there always seems to be one more surprise.

In 1998 I paid another visit to the library project and spent some time with Empereur's divers, a young and lively group who dived when the weather was fair and plotted their finds onto an elaborate computer grid when it wasn't. They were up to 2,250 blocks and still counting. Some 30 especially dramatic objects—sphinxes, great Pharaoh-style statues of the Ptolemies—had been shipped on a worldwide tour of museums. The new dream of the local authorities—in which Empereur enthusiastically assented—was to create a brand-new tourist buzz around Alexandria by turning the remaining ruins into an underwater antiquities park.

It was Empereur who, at four o'clock one morning in 1993, had heard bulldozers working on the not-yet-excavated site of the new library. He alerted the chief local preservationist, Mohammed Awad. Between the two of them, they created enough noise in *Le Monde* and other high-profile European

media that UNESCO bestirred itself and the library project was prevailed upon to follow the rules. And what did they learn when two gorgeous mosaics—mosaics fine enough for Cleopatra's slipper to have trod—were unearthed? For one thing, that the new library may actually be located within the precincts of the old royal palace. But not much more because, of course, the exigent construction schedule required that they pull the mosaics out of the ground and put them on display somewhere else, rather than, as archaeologists prefer, study them in situ.



I was scheduled to meet Mohsen Zahran, one of the project directors, for a tour of the nearly finished facility a few years ago. I almost didn't go. The divers and preservationists had left me overwhelmed with a sense of the strange beside-the-point nature of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, the immense and expensive weight of it, the intellectual comer-cutting it seemed to demand. It was four years and change since I had seen the site—by chance, I had been there watching on the day they cut out the second mosaic—and as I walked down the cornice toward it I half expected it still to look like a half-finished excavation, a pale-pink conference center next to a field of muddy holes.

But the giant building that we strolled through in the obligatory hard hats was nothing at all like an excavation. Its scale, even after all the talk, was astonishing. Most of the 11 tiers were done: Some were polished, marble-clad, carpeted; others still lacked their wiring, or else were wet, slippery, or open to the sky. What struck me most was that the building was not invisible. It was not a carefully labeled grouping of evocative fragments; it was not a vanished legacy. It was being constructed, put together, put up. Leave open for now the matter of what—if anything—will come from the books and databases, from the scientific conferences, from drop-in readers and the still-hypothetical scholars. In a city shaped by the endlessly repeated experience of losing what has been built and learned, there has to be a value—surely there is great value—in seeing, for once, the tape run the other way. □