



A few texts & many pictures about my

## : Voyages to Alexandria in Egypt :

Bernd Rohrmann



>> 1974 1979 2006 <<

## INTRODUCTION

Alexandria in Egypt is located at the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, and the western section of the huge Nile Delta. In Egypt terms, it is rather 'young' -- founded in 332 B.C. by Alexander the Great. It is the second largest city of Egypt, and its main harbour.



Alexandria has always been one of the most important Mediterranean cities, politically and culturally.

It was the capital of Ptolemaic and Roman and Byzantine Egypt for almost 1000 years, until the Muslim conquest of Egypt in 641 A.D.



in this essay, five topics will be presented: a concise history, facets of the current city, the famous historic library, the new library, and alexandria's assumed future. the focus will be pictures collected during three visits, 1974, 1979 and 2006.

## BRIEF HISTORY

alexandria was founded in in 332 b.c. by alexander the great., who was king of macedon and leader of the "greek league of corinth", during his conquest of the achaemenid empire. this was done beside a small very old village, called rhakotis. alexander soon left egypt and never returned to his city.



after his leaving, his governor, cleomenes, was responsible for the development of alexandria. after alexander's death, finally his general ptolemy lagides became the sovereign of egypt and thereby of alexandria.

probably during the reign of ptolemy ii philadelphus (285–246 b.c.), the great library of alexandria was erected.



this was a very large one, the most significant library of the ancient world (*see special chapter, further down*). the library had actually been part of a substantial research institution, named "mouseion". none of all its buildings have survived.

there are quite a few images of the historic city plan, based on cleomenes' designs for alexandria - yet they are not correct in a strict sense because they were created at a much later time. all show the main harbour, usually called eastern harbour, side-arms of the river nile, and the famous lighthouse, named pharos.





the pharos of alexandria was one of the "seven wonders of the (antique) world". it was erected around 280 b.c., and destroyed around 1300 a.d. - it is assumed by an earthquake in crete.

it is not known accurately how it looked, because all we have are descriptions and portrayals from later periods. the images presented here show a very large building, which has a light-providing fire on top. most depictions have the lighthouse linked by a dam to the mainland.





estimations are that the pharos was almost 100 m high. unfortunately this monumental building got seriously harmed by earthquakes between 956 a.d. and 1323 a.d., and eventually was an abandoned ruin. around 1480 a.d. the remaining stones were used to build nearby the citadel of qaitbay.

modern research found out that the area where the lighthouse was located, in the eastern harbour, is now flooded. divers can see historic remnants there. however, there aren't sufficient financial resources for a proper archaeological enterprize.



the ptolemaic kingdom was a strong federation; alexandria became the capital city. even though hellenistic by nature, the leaders named themselves as the successors to the pharaohs. the last ruler was cleopatra vii.

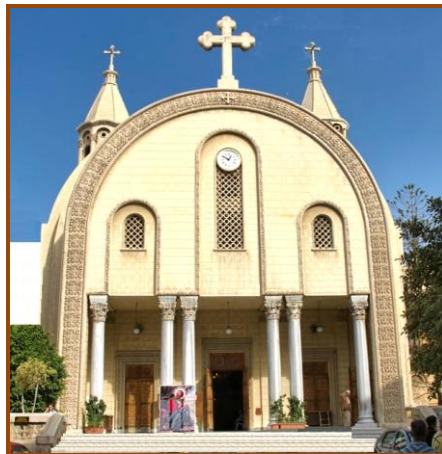
the "power war" within the rome realm, between octavian (later called augustus) and antony, moved to egypt because antony and cleopatra had become lovers, and they resided in alexandria. in 30 b.c. octavian won the final battle, and thereby took possession of alexandria. cleopatra suicided. consequently whole egypt became a roman province

this ended after emperor diocletian, when the roman empire split. constantine (emperor 324-337) ruled both the eastern and western parts of the empire. however, in 330 he made byzantium his capital, after that called constantinople. from then onwards egypt was governed from there, as part of the byzantine empire.

in 312 constantine established christianity as the official religion of the whole empire. so egypt became largely a christian country. this resulted in the the "coptic orthodox church of alexandria".

their cathedral is the saint mark's coptic orthodox cathedral, which is based on a little church from 310. it was many times destroyed yet always rebuilt.

the copts are a special line of christianity, different to the the "(roman) catholic" church, centered in rome, and the "orthodox catholic church", centered in constantinople. copts are a strong religion in egypt.



the rule of the byzantine empire ended in 619, when alexandria was briefly seized by the sassanid persians. the crucial change happened in 642, when an arabic armeer, after a year-long siege, captured alexandria. this was the essential part of the muslim conquest of egypt. the capital was moved to fustat, later cairo.

a lot of mosques were built then, predominantly in cairo, yet at first in alexandria, egypt's capital for almost 1000 years.



soon the importance of alexandria went down, and eventually, around 1200, it became "number 2" behind cairo. yet as the vital harbour it maintained significance.

salah ad-din (short name: saladin) became, in 1171, the first sultan of egypt, and was the founder of the ayyubid dynasty. his building program focussed more on egypt than alexandria.

however, about 1480, the circassian mameluke sultan al-ashraf qaitbay fortified alexandria, as part of his coastal defensive devices against the turks, who were threatening egypt at that time. he built the citadel, after him named "qaitbay", and placed a mosque inside. it was earnestly maintained for hundreds of years, and is still there today.





even if "only second", alexandria nevertheless continued to go well, partly because of its affluent history, partly because of its importance as egypt's indispensable seaport.



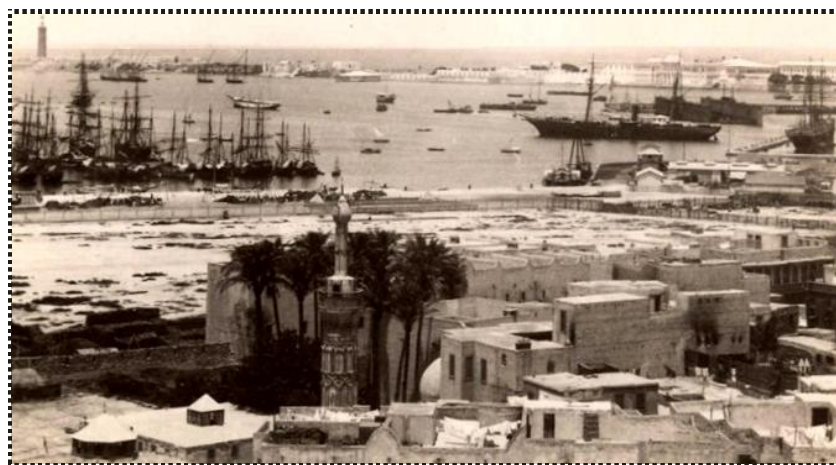
then, besides main roads, alexandria finally got railway connections and a tram system, both still operating today.



and both in its centre and in suburban areas, large high-rise residences became common.



a couple of historic photos give an idea how alexandria looked like about a century ago.



in economic terms, it was of course essential that the harbour facilities were updated and modernized, especially for large freight ships, and that was indeed done to a reasonable degree.



so, after a long history of 2300 years, alexandria seems still set up to master the future.



the map of the inner city shows current alexandria. all main buildings, including forts, mosques, churches, synagogues, and the railway station are marked, as well as the bibliotheca alexandrina.

at the end, alexandria's coat of arms is presented below.



## EXPLORING THE CITY

well, to explore alexandria is almost a fulltime job, so manifold are the places to inspect. a suitable concept may be to begin with the oldest features.

building-wise, almost nothing of the ptolemaic empire, which ended 30 b.c., has survived - because of many wars, and because of an earthquake after which both royal and civic sectors sank beneath the eastern harbour.

however, there are facets from the roman empire. two examples are: a large greek-style column, called "pompey's pillar", about 30 m high, and the noteworthy remains of the theatre.

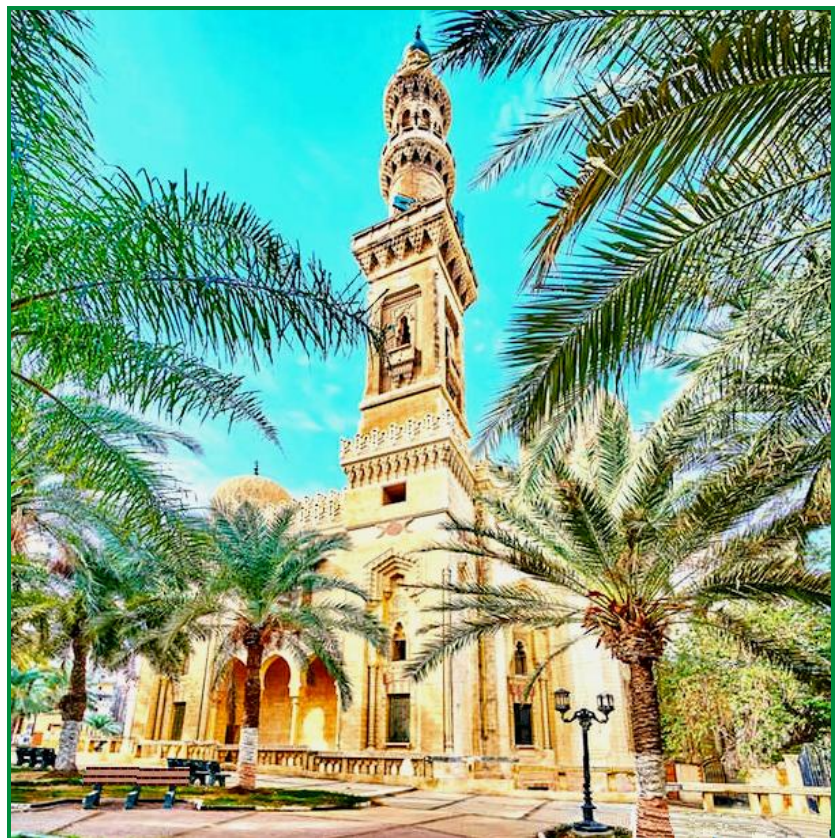




another historic monument looks old but it isn't - the "qaitbay" citadel, set up at about 1480.



once egypt and thereby alexandria had become muslim, from 641 a.d. onwards, a lot of mosques were built. the grandest is shown here, the el-mursi abul abbas mosque.





impressive churches (based on the christian copt populace) and synagoges can be seen as well, some older and some newer than mosques.



in the 19th century, when egypt was to become a british protectorate, alexandria still prospered. eminent palaces and public buildings such as bridges are examples.





even cases of progressive architecture did occur.



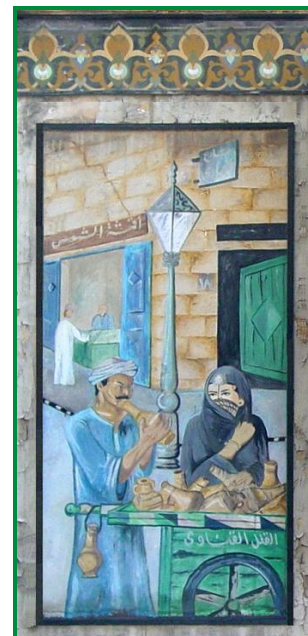
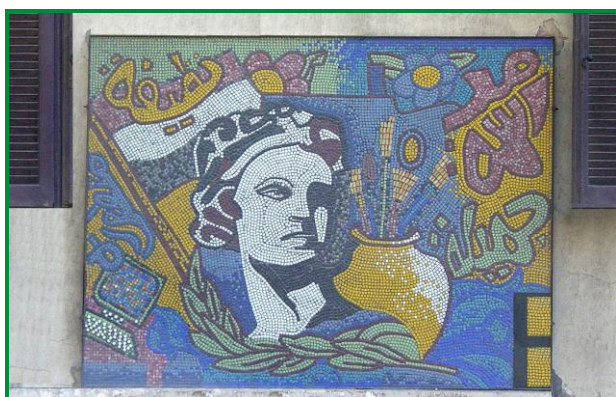


however, when walking through alexandria's central areas, one will also notice lots of building which are not fully taken care of. therefore these show many signs of eradication - indicating lack of concern or lack of money.





yet in these streets of a luckier past, one can also see pleasant marks, such as notable wall paintings on houses.



very impressive is a huge wallpainting on a medical faculty building of the university.



many city sections are plain shopping quarters - as about every else in the world, crowded with advertisements.



fortunately, beside these (pseudo-)modern shops alexandria still has traditional markets, well maintained, where one can buy everything from normal necessities to beautiful art pieces.





of course there are lots and lots of cafes, and beside getting a coffee you can also smoke waterpipes there (as i did, oh oh).



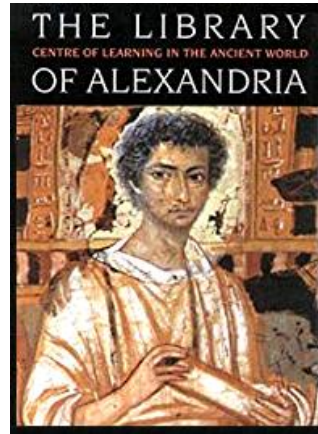
finally, one can drive, or better walk, on the "corniche", around the eastern harbour, seeing the sea on one side and the stately city on the other side.



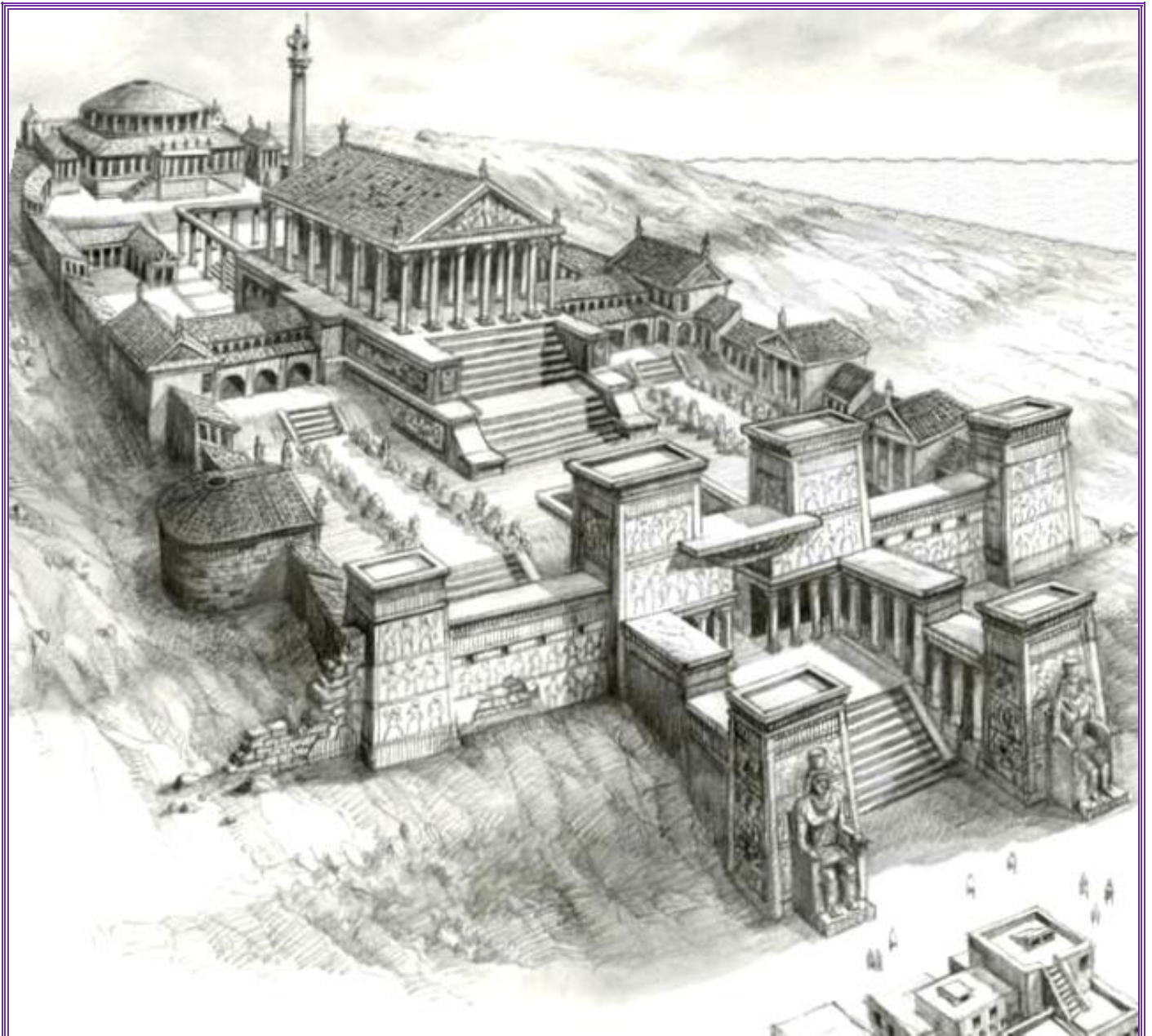
## THE HISTORIC LIBRARY

as stated earlier, probably during the reign of ptolemy ii philadelphus (285–246 b.c.), the "great library of alexandria" was erected. it may have been the largest one, and it certainly was the most significant library of the ancient world - known by everyone who was looking for knowledge and insights. the title of one of the very many books about it says: "centre of learning in the ancient world".

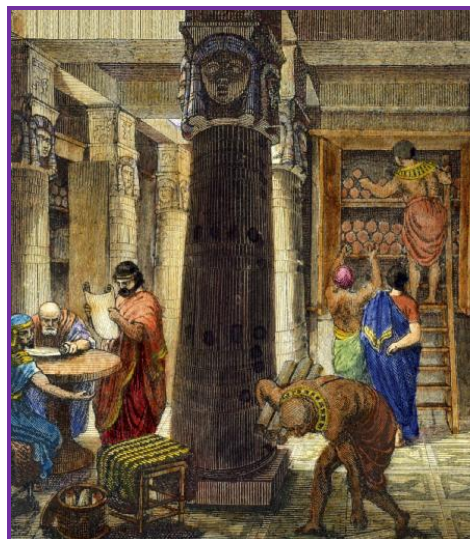
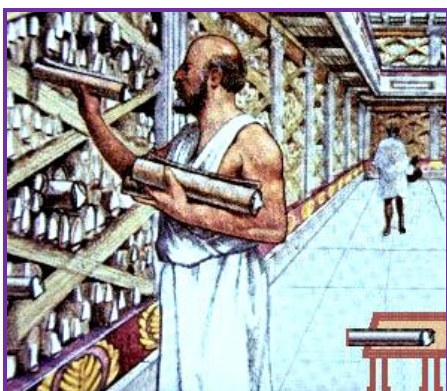
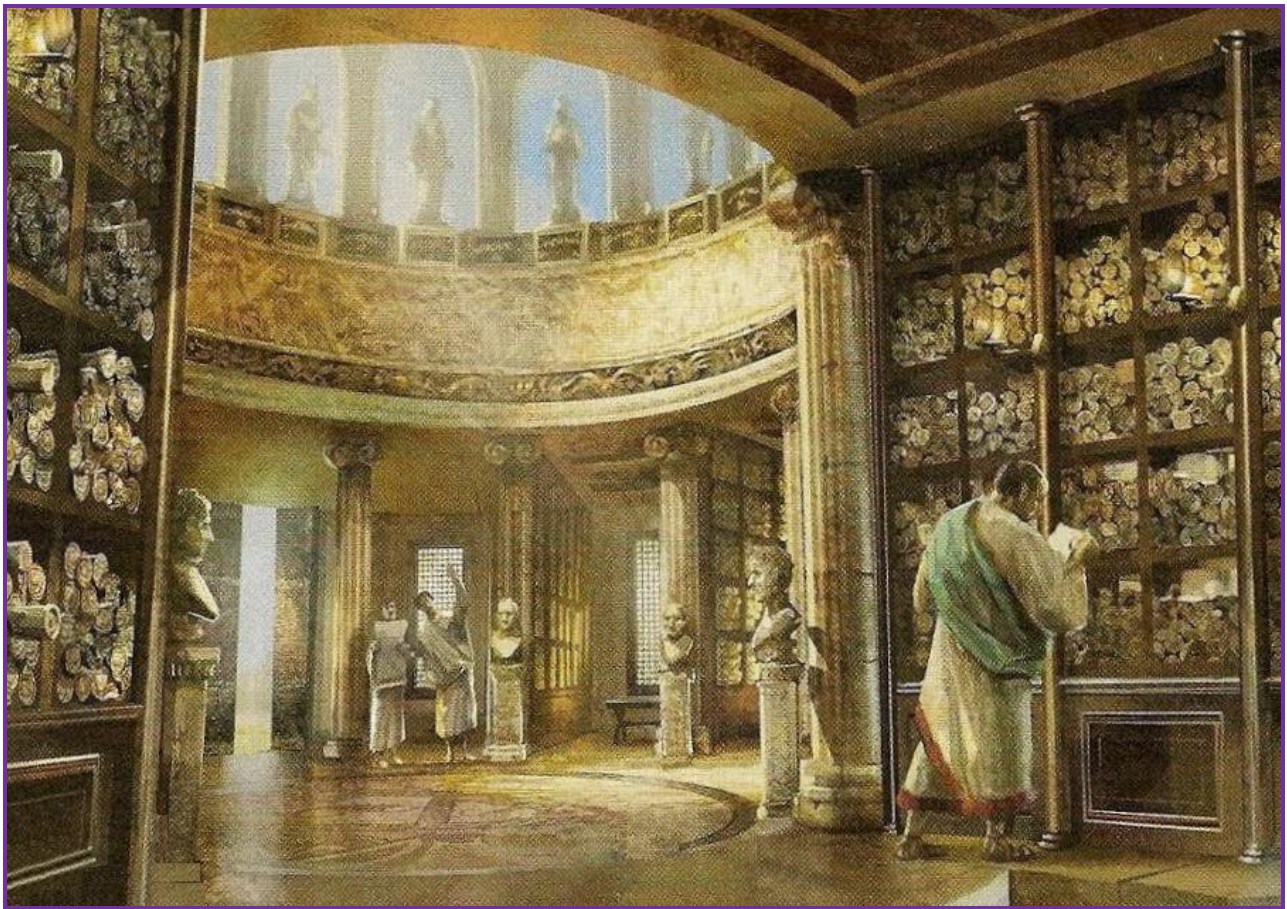
the library has actually been part of a substantial alexandrian research institution, named "mouseion".



as nothing is left of the library buildings, historians and artists have tried to envisage how it was and looked like, based on reports published at a much later time. the most imposing est image is this one:



there were no books at that time -the texts and sometimes pictures were stored on papyrus rolls, called scrolls. a well-established library would have thousands of them.







the paintings above show how artists imagined the spaces of the library and the many scientists working there. it is estimated that this enormous library owned at its prime time at least 400000 scrolls, and thousands of scholars did their research there. this included famous scientists, such as archimedes. at a later time, when the library got space problems, it opened a satellite collection in the serapeum of alexandria.

what was the fate of this magnificent library? this is a sad tale.

the misery began when in 48 b.c. parts of the library were burned by julius caesar during his civil war.

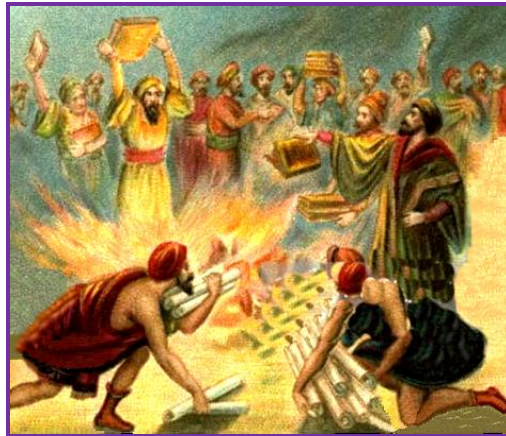


the information sources are foggy - yet nevertheless many paintings of this (assumed) firestorm were made.

the library dwindled anyway during the roman empire, due to lack of funding and support. many philosophical quarrels contributed to this.

in 272 a.d., the roman emperor aurelian's troupe fought to recapture the city of alexandria from the forces of queen zenobia (palmyra). during this fighting, the broucheion quarter of the city, in which the main library was, got destroyed.

the 'end of the end' came in 642 a.d., when an arabic army conquered alexandria. some sources (questionable ones) say that caliph omar declared "if those books are in agreement with the quran, we have no need of them; and if these are opposed to the quran, destroy them".



whatever actually happened, the - once so famous & prominent & celebrated - "great library of alexandria" had in muslimic egypt no significance anymore

nowadays there are almost no ruins of the main library, but some of its second section, the serapeum.



to end this chapter -- yes, for everyone who loves libraries it is indeed a truly sad saga!

## THE NEW LIBRARY

the governors of alexandria were always aware of the alexandria library's demise. eventually, in 1974, efforts to re-create it became serious - the university of alexandria selected an area for this, near to the location of the gone library. the concept of endowing the mediterranean region with a center of cultural and scientific excellence got supported by the unesco, and a main ally was the former egyptian president hosni mubarak.

in 1988 an architecte competition was organized by unesco. both functionality and heritage were essential targets. more than 1000 entries were submitted - and, surprisingly, a norwegian architectural company, bysnoehetta, won.

construction work began in 1995 and after hefty expenses of more than 200 million (us-)dollars the immense complex was officially inaugurated in 2002, named "bibliotheca alexandrina".

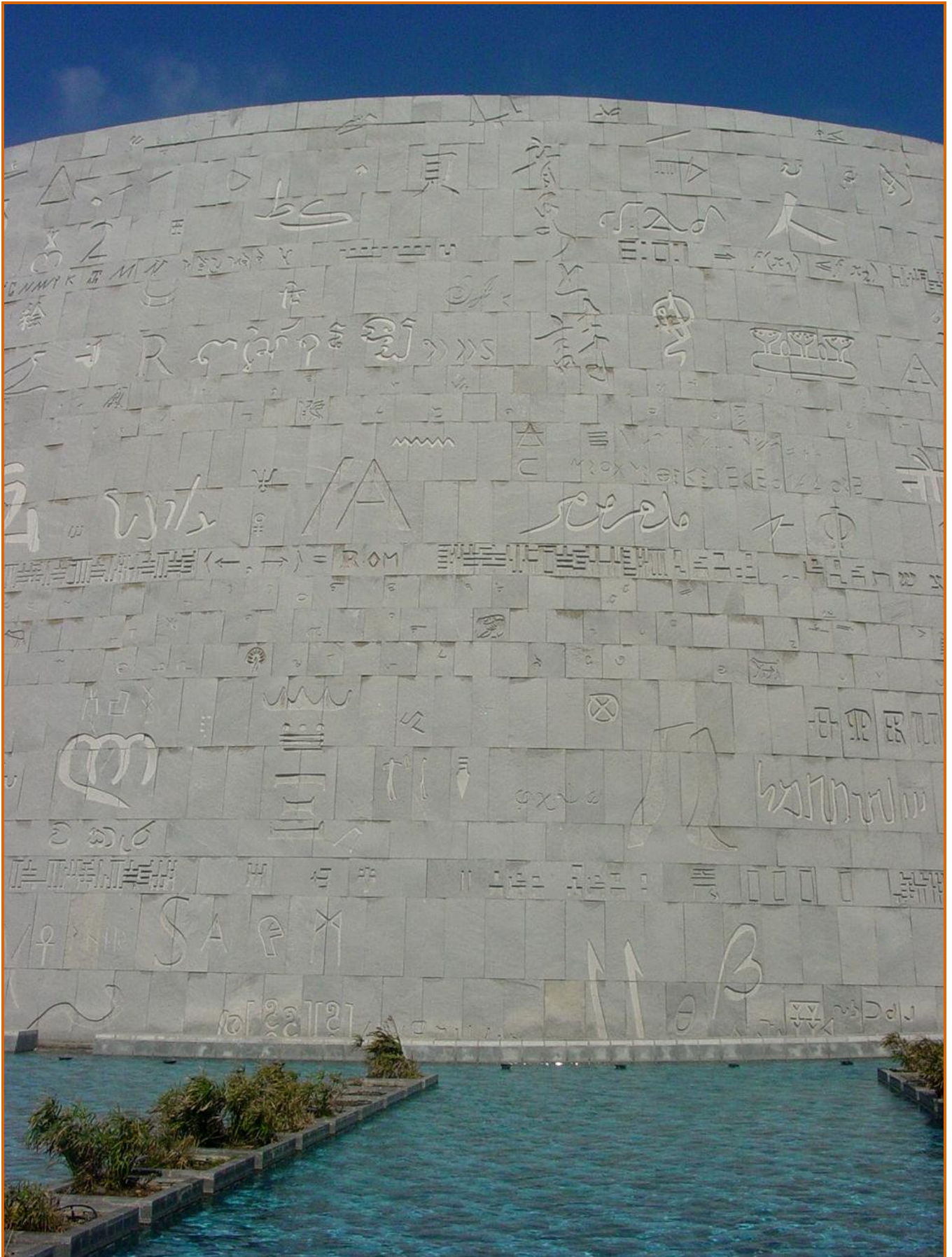


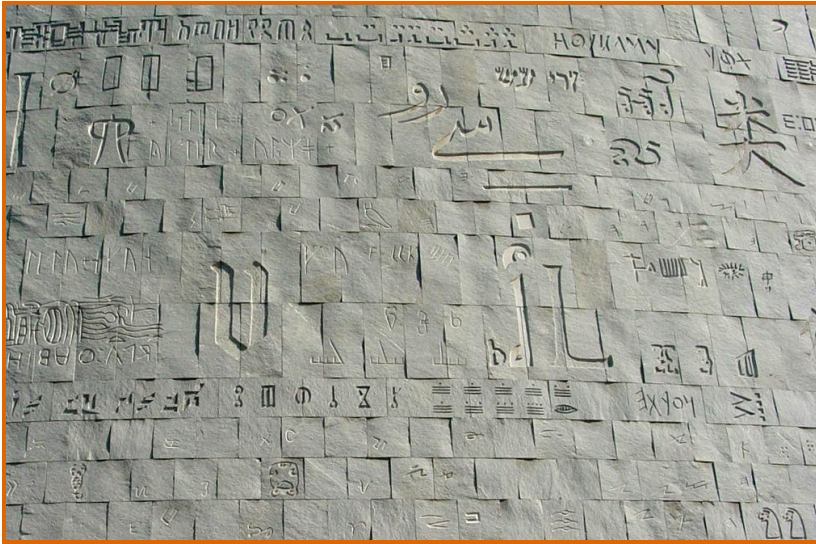
this was almost a wonder, given the frail status of egypt, and would not have happened without weighty international help.

the design of the main building is genuinely sensational. it is placed in the center of a pond, and appears twisted.



its outer wall, created with lots of grey aswan granite stones, contains hundreds of words, in countless languages and presented in varying sizes.





in the inside are huge pillars up to the roof, and the ceiling contains apertures which present coloured light.



in the main hall are several large-scale statues, created in modern-art style by egyptian artists. plus, along one wall is a big 'arty' design using wires and metal pieces.



the library is trilingual, covering classical arabic, english, and french. the vast design means that there is space for eight million books.

in addition to the library, bibliotheca alexandrina also contains facilities for book fairs, educational courses, exhibitions, festivals, theater shows, workshops, a considerable conference center and a planetarium.



beside that distinctive building is a statue of alexander the great - reminding that all this goes ultimately back to him.

## ALEXANDRIA'S FUTURE

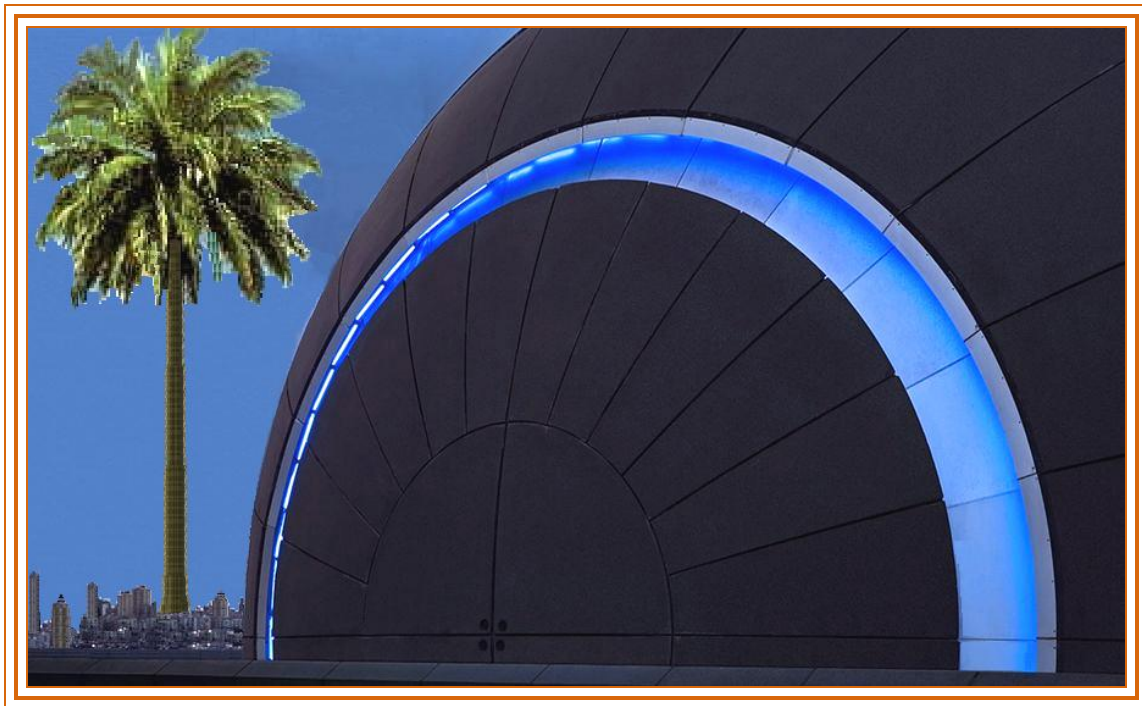
what future do cities in egypt have? there are certainly grand plans, especially for its captal cairo - yet are there also grand realizations? and alexandria is after all only second.



it seems crucial that alexandria focusses on issues in which is already strong - to be egypt's largest harbour, to be a major industrial site, to be a significant education place, and to be a strong tourism target.

alexandria should focus on its specific strength, above all, that it is still, at least to some degree, a multicultural society and thereby with multi-cultural spirits - apparently more

than any other egypt city. and the most stunning element of his history are libraries - the "great library of alexandria" from around 270 b.c. to about 250 a.d., and since 2002 the "bibliotheca alexandrina" as modern library and cultural center .



the historic background of alexandria, being founded by alexander the great, and belonging first to the hellenistic and than the roman world for many centuries, clearly chaped its culture.

by the way, its many "sister cities" include cities from very different worlds, such as marseille (france), odessa (ukraine), shanghai (china) and st petersburg (russia).

it appears that alexandria, certainly a crucial egypt city, may endeavour to be more, namely, to also become and open-minded and vibrant world city.



*and hereby my essay about alexandria, based on three visits, 1974, 1979 and especially 2006, focussed on both its historic and its modern facets, shall end.*

