

In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful

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In the Name of God, Most Gracious, Most Merciful  
Refutation of The Myth of the Library

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Abul Farag Al Ibry fabricated a lie against God, when he declared that the Caliph 'Umar ibn Al Khattab, and 'Amr ibn al-<sup>c</sup>As, the commander of the Arab Conquerors, had burned the Great Library of Alexandria. Refuting this accusation, I have composed a poetic drama entitled *The Jew of Alexandria or The Myth of the Library*.<sup>(1)</sup> published by The World Islamic Council for Da'awa and Relief to the Arabic and Islamic Cultural Centres all over the world.

In this play, I referred to many historical and political Arabic and foreign references, that managed it to gain a good echo in both Britain and the United States. Minerva Publishers, of London, in a letter to me, mentioned that the play is composed on the Shakespearean model, and appended a precious study on the same topic, entitled: "The Destruction of the Great Library", by John Rodenbeck, who had kindly addressed it to me "with gratitude", dated 7 March 94.

I connoted the back cover of my play a quotation from Alfred J. Butler's *The Arab Conquest of Egypt*, supporting my view point, saying:

One must pronounce that Abul Farag's story is a mere fable, totally destitute of historical foundation. My Only concern in this matter has been to establish the truth, not to defend the Arabs. No defence is necessary; were it needful, it would not be difficult to find something in the nature of an apology. For the Arabs in later times certainly set Great store by all the classical and other books which fell into their hands, and in many cases translated. Indeed they set an example which modern conquerors might well have followed. (pp.425,26)<sup>(2)</sup>

This quotation is a good evidence that the truth included in my poetic drama is trustworthy. As for the respectful study of Rodenbeck, it is divided into two main topics ; *first* , is the letter of Bernard Lewis, in defence of 'Amr ibn al- As, and Caliph 'Umar, presented to the editors. *Second*, is : Major occasions Before 641, When the Great Library or the Daughter Library Could Have Been Pillaged , Dispersed , or Destroyed .

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For Dr. Tawfik Ali Mansour, with gratitude . John Rodenbeck, (signature) 7 March ,94 : <sup>(3)</sup>

### **The Destruction of the Great Library**

I. Bernard Lewis in Defense of 'Amr ibn al-'As and Caliph 'Umar says:  
to the editors.

From Professor Hugh Lloyd-Jones's review of Luciano Canfora's book on the library of Alexandria (NYRB June 14), one learns, with astonishment, that the author, and perhaps even to some extent the reviewer, are still disposed to lend credence to the story of how the great library of Alexandria was destroyed by the Arabs after their conquest of the city in 641 AD, by order of Caliph 'Umar.

This story first became known to Western scholarship in 1663, when Edward Pococke, the Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, published an edition of part of the *History of the Dynasties* by the Syrian-Christian author Barhebræus, otherwise known as Ibn al-'Ibri. According to this story . 'Amr ibn al-'As the commander of the Arab conquerors, was inclined to accept the pleas of John the Grammarian and save the library, but the Caliph decreed otherwise: "If these writing of the Greeks agree with the book of God, they are useless and need not be preserved; if they disagree, they are pernicious and ought to be destroyed." The books in the library, the story continues, were accordingly distributed among the four thousand bathhouses of the city, and

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used to heat the furnaces, which they kept going for almost six months.

As early as 1713. Father Eusebe Renaudot, the distinguished French Orientalist, cast doubt on this story, remarking in his *History of the Patriarchs of Alexandria*, published in that year, that it "has something untrustworthy about it." Edward Gibbon, never one to miss a good story, relates it with gusto, and then proceeds: "For my own part, I am strongly tempted to deny both the fact and the consequences." To explain this denial, Gibbon gives the two principal arguments against authenticity—that the story appears some six hundred years after the action which it purports to describe; and that such action is in any case contrary to what we know of the teachings and practices of the Muslims.

Since then, a succession of other Western scholars have analyzed and demolished the story. Alfred J. Butler in 1902, Victor Chauvin in 1911, Paul Casanova and Eugenio Grillini, independently, in 1923. Some have attacked the internal improbabilities of the story. A large proportion of books of that time would have been written on vellum, which does not burn. To keep that many bathhouse furnaces going for that length of time, a library of at least 14 million books would have been required. John the Grammarian, who according to Barhebræus' story, pleaded with <sup>c</sup>Amr for his library, is believed to have lived and died in the previous century. There is good evidence that the library itself was destroyed long before the Arabs arrived in Egypt. The 14th-century historian Ibn Khaldun tells an almost identical story concerning the destruction of a library in Persia, also by order of the Caliph <sup>c</sup>Umar, thus demonstrating its folkloric character. By far the strongest evidence on argument against the story, however, is the slight and late evidence on which it rests. Barhebræus, the principal source by Western historians, lived from 1226 to 1289. He had only two predecessors, from one of which he simply copied the story, and both preceded him by no more than a few decades. The earliest

source is the Baghdad physician called °Abd el-Latif who was in Egypt in 1203, and in a brief account of his journey refers in passing to: " the library which °Amr ibn al-°As burnt with the permission of °Umar." An Egyptian scholar, Ibn al-Qifti, wrote a history of learned men in out 1227, and includes a biography of John the Grammarian, in the course which he tells the story on which the legend is based. His narrative ends : " I was told the number of bathhouses that existed at that time, but I have forgotten it. It is said that they were heated for six months. Listen to this story and wonder!" Barhebræus merely followed the text of Ibn al-Qifti omitting his final observation on the number of baths. This number is provided by other Arabic sources, in quite different contexts.

To accept the story of the Arab destruction of the library of Alexandria, one must explain how it is that so dramatic an event was unmentioned and unnoticed not only in the rich historical literature of medieval Islam, but even in the literatures of the Coptic and other Christian churches, of the Byzantines, of the Jews, or anyone else who might have thought the destruction of a great library worthy of comment. That the story still survives, and is repeated, despite all these objections is testimony to the enduring power of myth.

Myths come into existence to answer question or to serve a purpose, and one may wonder what purpose, was served by this myth. An answer sometimes given, and certainly in accord with a currently popular school of epistemology, would see the story as anti-Islamic propaganda, designed by hostile elements to blacken the good name of Islam by showing the revered Caliph °Umar as a destroyer of libraries. But this explanation is as absurd as the story itself. The original sources of the story are Muslim, the only exception being Barhebræus, who copied it from a Muslim author. Not the creation. but the demolition of the myth was the achievement of European scholarship, which from the 18th century to the present day has rejected the story as false and

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absurd, and thus exonerated the Caliph ʿUmar and the early Muslims from this libel.

But as the myth was created and disseminated by Muslims and not by their enemies, what could possibly have been their motive? The answer is most certainly provided in a comment of Paul Casanova. Since the earliest occurrence of the story is in an allusion at the beginning of the 13th century it must have become current in the late 12th century--that is to say, in the time of the great Muslim hero Saladin, famous not only for his victories over the Crusaders, but also---and, in a Muslim context, perhaps more importantly for having extinguished the heretical Fatimid caliphate in Cairo, which, with its Ismaʿili doctrines, had for centuries threatened the unity of Islam. ʿAbd al-Latif was an admirer of Saladin, who appointed him Qadi in the newly conquered city.<sup>(4)</sup>

One of Saladin's first tasks after the restoration of Sunnism in Cairo was to break up the Fatimid collections and treasures and sell their contents at public auction. These included a very considerable library, presumably full of heretical Ismaʿili books. The break-up of a library, even one containing heretical books, might well have evoked disapproval in a civilized literate society. The myth provided an obvious justification. According to this interpretation, the message of the myth was not that the Caliph ʿUmar was barbarian, because he destroyed a library, but that destroying a library could be justified because the revered Caliph ʿUmar had approved of it. Thus once again, as on many occasions, the early heroes of Islam were mobilized by later Muslim tradition to give posthumous sanction to actions and policies of which they had never heard and which they would probably not have condoned.

It is surely time that the Caliph ʿUmar and ʿAmr ibn al-ʿAs were finally acquitted of the charge which their admirers and later their detractors conspired to bring against them.

Bernard Lewis

Letter in *The New York Review of Books* 27 September  
1990.

## **II. Major Occasions Before 641 When the Great Library or the Daughter Library Could Have Been Pillaged, Dispersed, or Destroyed**

- 202 Revolt of Macedonian troops against Agathocles, the guardian of Ptolemy V Epiphanes Eucharistos.
- 169 Revolt against the guardians of Ptolemy VI Philometor.
- 131-130 A mob sets fire to the Palace of Ptolemy VII Euergetes II.
- 89 To pay his army in Syria, Ptolemy X Alexander I Kokkes ("Red Berry ") also known as "Pereisaktos" ("Sneaked-In-Beside") steals and melts down the golden sarcophagus of Alexander.
- 81 Forced to marry his step mother and cousin Berenice. Ptolemy XI murders her and is then slaughtered himself in the Gymnasium by an Alexandrian mob.
- 48 The Alexandrian War. See Bernard Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* The destruction of the Great Library during this war is not specifically mentioned in Caesar's own *Civil War* or the anonymous account of the Alexandrian campaign later subjoined to it. Caesar himself does describe setting fire to some 72 ships docked in the Great Harbor that served the Royal Quarter, however, where the Library was situated; and this conflagration is alleged, on good authority, to have spread, destroying the Library. The destruction of the Library in this manner is described two generations later, for example, by Lucius Annaeus Seneca (Seneca the Younger, ca. 4 BC-AD. 65), in *De animi tranquillitate* IX.5, as well as by Marcus Annæus Lucan (AD 39-65), his nephew, in the *Pharsalia* ( *Bellum Civile*) x. 440ff, 486-505. As members of Nero's court

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- circle, both had access to all available memoires and other documentation. Marcus Annæus Seneca (Seneca the Elder (ca 55 BC-AD 41), father of the former and grandfather of the latter, was in Rome as a young man and had undoubtedly known veterans of Caesar's campaign personally. The burning of the Library is also mentioned in Plutarch (ca 46-120) in his *life of Caesar*, xlix, as well as by Aulus Gellius (ca. 123-165), *Noctes Atticae* VII.17.3, Dio Cassius (155-235), *History of Rome*, XLII.38 Ammianus Marcellinus (ca 330-390), *History of the Roman Empire* XXII,16, 13, and Orosius (fl 417) *Historiae adversus paganos* VI.15.31.<sup>(5)</sup>
- 30 BC The fall of the Ptolemaic Dynasty, with the subjugation of Egypt. followed by the removal of many architectural items and *objets d'art*, probably including books and manuscripts.
- AD19-20 Riots, probably provoked by the transfer of temple property to the State, i.e., the emperor.
- 38 Strife between Hellenes and Jews erupts into violence with the passage through Alexandria of Herod Agrippa, a favorite of the Emperor Caligula, son of Aristoboulos and Berenice and grandson of Herod the Great. (Herod the Great was the sponsor of the Massacre of the Innocents: Agrippa himself was responsible for the beheading of the Apostle St. James and the imprisonment of the Apostle St. Peter.) Agrippa succeeds in having the current Prefect disgraced, but is unable to secure a favorable hearing in Rome for the delegation of Alexandrian Jews headed by Philo (See "Philo's Little Trip" in Forster's *Pharos and Pharillon*).
- 66 Gang Wars break out between Hellenes and Jews, leading Titus Julius Alexander, the Prefect, himself a

- Jew by birth, to call out his troops. The Jewish Quarter, adjacent to the Royal Enclosure, is Sacked and 50 thousand Jews are said to be killed.
- 73 Jewish recalcitrants, refugees from Jerusalem, which had fallen to Vespasian's forces under his heir Titus in AD 70, during the Jews unsuccessful insurrection against Roman rule, create disturbances that are forcefully quelled.
- 114-117 The Jewish Revolt. Widespread destruction of buildings, with all their contents, e.g, the Nemesion, a temple of Nemesis near the Serapæum, and probably the Serapæum itself. <sup>(6)</sup> One probable result is Trajan's order for construction of a new fortress at Babylon; another is the foundation by Hadrian of a new Library for archives, placed under the protection of Serapis in AD 127; and a third is his erection of a new Serapæum.
- 122 Riots on the occasion of the consecration of the Apis bull.
- 153 Riots in which the Prefect is killed, to the serious displeasure of the Emperor Antoninus Pius, who had given the city its Sun and Moon Gates, as well as its Hippodrome.
- 181 Fire destroys the Hadrianic Serapæum, which is rebuilt.
- 262-264 Lucius Mussius Æmilianus, appointed prefect in 258, finds himself compelled to accept the position of emperor by the Alexandrian mob, rules vigorously until captured and sent to Rome by the new prefect, Theodotus. The city is left devastated.
- 269-271 Alexandria occupied by the Palmyrenes under Queen Zenobia.
- 272 Revolt led by the rich merchant Firmus, a Hellene



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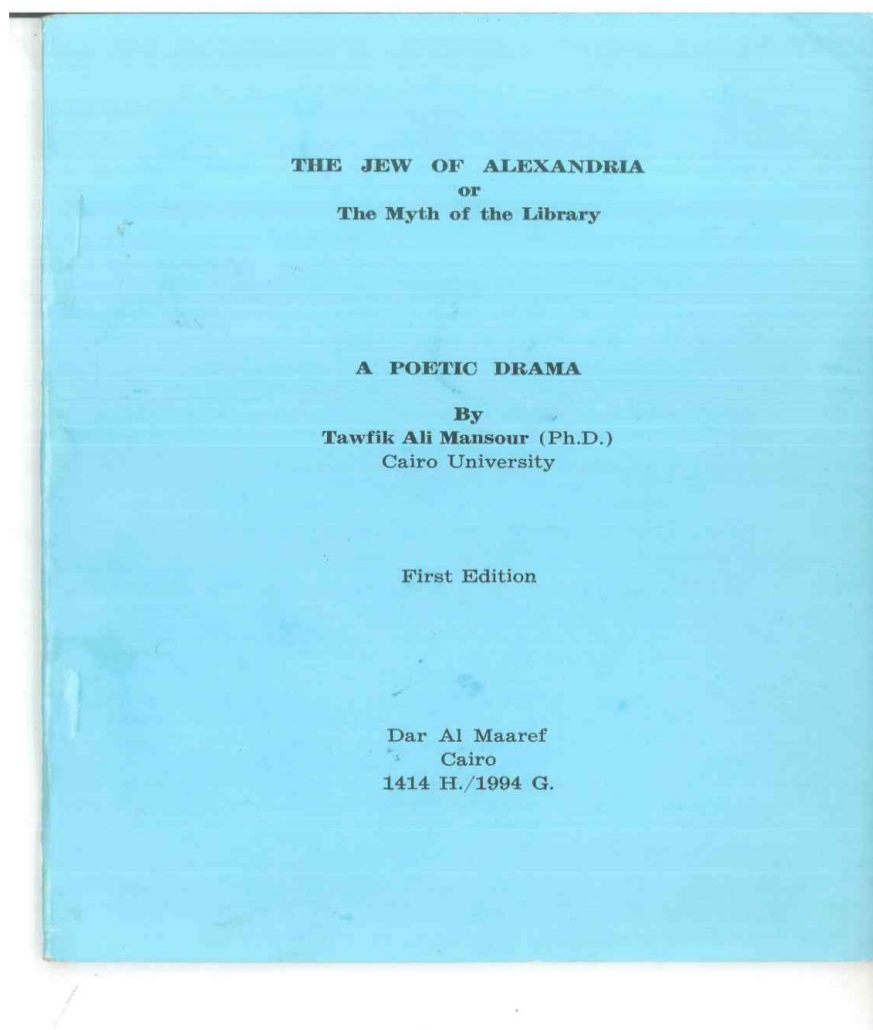
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- from Seleucia, during which the Brucheion quarter and the city walls are destroyed.
- 296 -297 Revolt, led by Lucius Domitius Domitianus, known as Achilleus, who names himself emperor. The Emperor Diocletian conducts a successful eight-month siege of Alexandria in person. During the sack that follows a large part of the city is destroyed.
- 361 The accession of Julian as Emperor is followed by riots. Orthodox Bishop George, who had proposed a special imperial house-tax, is murdered by a mob of Monophysite Christians and pagans.
- 385 The Emperor Theodosius I orders the closing of any temples in which sacrifices are still offered. Troops under Prætorian Prefect Cynegius and Christian mobs under Patriarch Theophilus seize the Alexandrian temples, which are converted into churches.
- 391 The Serapæum is destroyed by Christian mobs, who dismantle it under Theophilus direction and cart it off piecemeal, to convert its stone and statuary into lime. A Monastery and Church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, who bears a strong iconographic resemblance to Serapis, are built on the spot.
- 415 More Christian riots; encouraged by Patriarch Cyril. The Jewish Quarter is sacked again, the Jews are expelled, and the philosophical schools are attacked. Hypatia, daughter of the last recorded member of the Mouseion, herself the last of the neo-Platonic philosophers, is seized by a mob and torn limb from limb in the Church of the Cæsaræum, once dedicated by Octavianus to the Divine Julius Caesar, but originally built by Cleopatra as a temple to the genius of Antony.

- 455 Riots follow the Emperor's nomination of the orthodox Proterius as Patriarch of Alexandria. Rebel leaders are driven into the remains of the Serapæum, which is burnt; and the city is sacked to teach it a lesson in humility.
- 543 Justinian closes the temples and philosophical schools, orders all the surviving artworks removed to Constantinople.
- 616 Persian invasion and occupation. Alexandria is taken with the help of a traitor, pillaged and sacked, with many inhabitants put to the sword, after which a peaceful decade ensues.

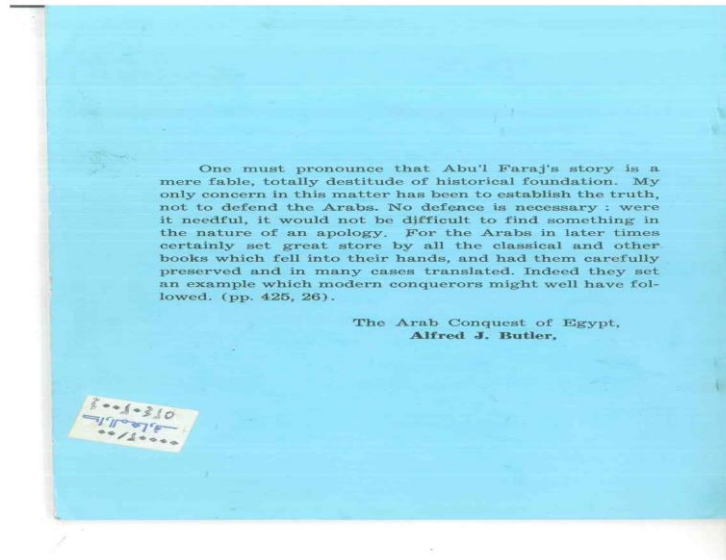
Thus , the presentation of these foreign studies , supports the fact issued in my poetic drama , *The Myth of the Library* declaring that Abul Farag's story is a mere fable , and announcing that both Caliph <sup>C</sup>Umar and 'Amr ibn al- 'As, are innocent of the destruction of the library , as alleged by al Ibry .

## Notes

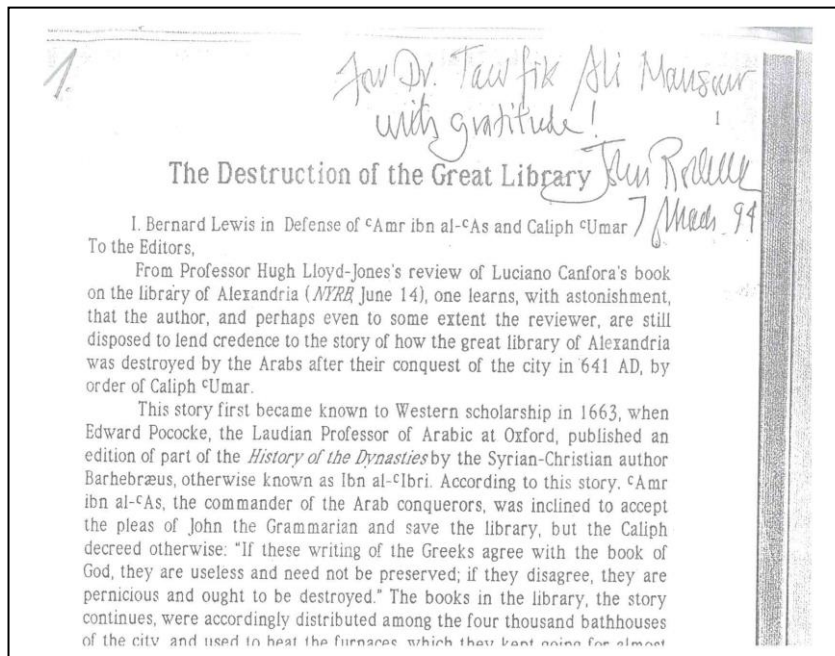
- (1) Tawfik Ali Mansour, (Ph.D.), *The Jew of Alexandria or The Myth of the Library*, a Poetic Drama ,(Cairo : Dar Al Maaref , 1994):



(2) Alfred Butler's *The Arab Conquest of Egypt:*



(3) John Rodenbeck's dedication: For Dr. Tawfik Ali Mansour:



- (4) A fact quite obviously unknown to the outraged Arab (whose name, out of charity, has been suppressed here), clearly an adherent of the "currently popular school of epistemology alluded to by Lewis, whose letter of protest was published in the *Guardian* a few days after a review of Canfora's book; declaring, mistakenly, that Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadi was a Jew, he suggested that this medieval Muslim myth was concocted by Baghdadi as part of a proto-twentieth-century-Zionist-Orientalist-anti-Islamic plot.
- (5) See Moustafa El-Abbadi, *The life and fate of the ancient library of Alexandria* (Paris UNESCOUNDP, 1990), pp.145-154. Dios's version is presumably as trustworthy as his account of the invasion of Britain, the unique source for that campaign and regarded as reliable. El-Abbadi also observes that the Great Library is not mentioned by Strabo, who lived in Alexandria from 24 to 20 B.C., and has left us the fullest ancient description of the city. It is also to be noted that in 48 BC the books in the Library would have been on papyrus, which unlike vellum (cf Lewis letter above) burns merrily.
- (6) See Alan Rowe, *Discovery of the Famous Temple and Enclosure of Serapis at Alexandria, Supplement aux Annales du Service des Antiquités de l'Égypte, Cahier numéro 2* (Cairo: Imprimerie de l'Institut Français de l'Archéologie Orientale, 1946).

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﴿ I only desire (your) betterment , To the best of my power ,And my success ( in my task )Can only come from Allah .

In Him I trust ,And unto Him I turn ﴾.

(*The Holy Qur'an* ,Sūrat Hood: 88) .