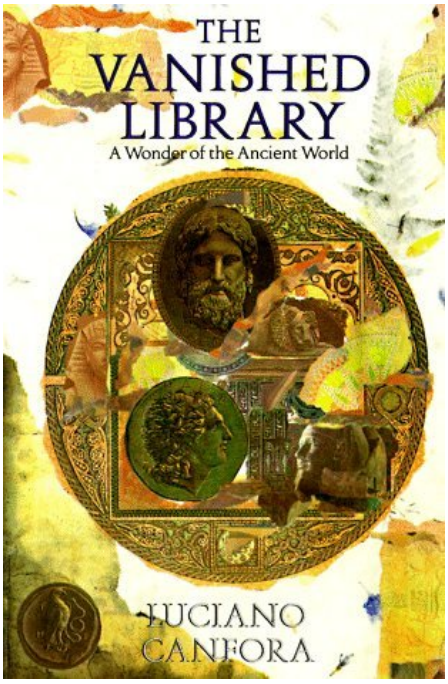

The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World

Luciano Canfora , Martin Ryle (translator)

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The Library of Alexandria, one of the wonders of the Ancient World, has haunted Western culture for over 2,000 years. The Ptolemaic kings of Egypt—successors of Alexander the Great—had a staggering ambition: to house all of the books ever written under one roof, and the story of the universal library and its destruction still has the power to move us.

But what was the library, and where was it? Did it exist at all? Contemporary descriptions are vague and contradictory. The fate of the precious books themselves is a subject of endless speculation.

Canfora resolves these puzzles in one of the most unusual books of classical history ever written. He recreates the world of Egypt and the Greeks in brief chapters that marry the craft of the novelist and the discipline of the historian. Anecdotes, conversations, and reconstructions give *The Vanished Library* the compulsion of an exotic tale, yet Canfora bases all of them on historical and literary sources, which he discusses with great panache. As the chilling conclusion to this elegant piece of historical detective work he establishes who burned the books.

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The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World Details

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From Reader Review The Vanished Library: A Wonder of the Ancient World for online ebook

Lupo says

Sono rimasto un po' sconcertato dalla lettura di questo libro dal quale ho imparato che la biblioteca di Ramsete non è in realtà esistita come sala e poco più. Che la biblioteca di Alessandria sia stata bruciata dagli Arabi ai tempi dell'espansione dell'Islam me lo dissero a scuola elementare, una ventina di anni prima dell'uscita di questo libro nel 1986. Sconcertante è l'uso disinvolto di episodi probabilmente mai avvenuti, come il dialogo tra l'emiro Amr e Giovanni Filopono che probabilmente era ben morto all'epoca dell'invasione araba. Altro documento usato con eccessiva scaltrezza è la lettera di Aristea, notoriamente un falso. Che sia tale, Canfora lo ammette solo nella discussioni delle fonti, ma non viene detto nel testo principale. Restano poi sconcertanti alcuni anacronismi usati nel testo, ad esempio quando Paolo Orosio, vissuto a cavallo tra il IV e il V secolo ad impero romano d'occidente ancora esistente, viene definito portoghese, termine usato solo dal medioevo dopo quelle invasioni barbariche che hanno cambiato il volto della penisola Iberica. Altro anacronismo, una vera e propria fesseria, è dare dell'antisemita ad Apione, un grammatico alessandrino vissuto tra a.C e d.C. Il termine antisemita è un termine razziale e culturale nato nel periodo dei nazionalismi, il XIX secolo. Non è minimamente applicabile a chi è vissuto intorno all'anno 1, come Apione. Inoltre di Apione sappiamo solo che ha scritto un testo contro gli Ebrei e il Giudaismo, di cui abbiamo notizia attraverso la risposta "Contro Apione", opera apologetica dell'ebraismo dello storico romano, nato a Gerusalemme, Flavio Giuseppe, scritta alla fine del I secolo d.C.. A questo punto si potrebbe dare dell'antisemita a Tacito che vedeva col fumo negli occhi il settario monoteismo degli Ebrei!
Insomma, Canfora, di cui ho molto apprezzato altri libri, qui scrive un divertissment pieno di fragili congetture che a me ha però divertito ben poco.

Martina says

Let me open up with an anonymous quot about the destruction of the Great Library of Alexandria:
" This is an act of savagery that future generations will choose to blame on the villains of their own age."
That said, in this age we do have an easy access to a various scholars writing to research the accounts of the history further on.
Beside Bar Hebraeus, also known as Abu’l Faraj,a great syriac history writer there are also accounts of Abd-Al-Latif of Bagdad and Jamal Ad-din al-Kufti. Abd-Al-Latif visited Egypt in the latter part of the sixth century. He mentions that the library which was in Alexandria was burned by Umru bn al-As in compliance to Omar’s orders. Second, Jamal Ad-din Al-Kufti, who was born in Kuft in upper Egypt in 565 A. H., and died in 646 A. H. , declares that the library was burned by Umru Ibn Al-As.

John Szalasny says

This is two books in one - a historical story which takes up the 1st 100 pages and short historical background on individual topics & historical written references which take up the final 97 pages. The story is easy to read, although unsurprisingly, somewhat jumpy as it spans about 1500 years of history. The second half of the book would be a good starting point for scholarly research, but is more like Cliff Notes written for the non-scholar.

Frans Vermeiren says

The Vanished Library is an unconventional book. In a scientific book most readers expect to find an introduction, a structured defense of the author’s thesis, a clear discussion and rejection of opposing viewpoints, maps and footnotes if necessary, summaries and a conclusion. The more, from a professor we seem to expect some kind of textbook, which Canfora doesn’t offer.

This doesn’t mean that the subject is not discussed scientifically and comprehensively. The first half of the book contains different small chapters that at first sight only connect loosely, but together they make sense and they provide a comprehensive discussion of the fate of the Alexandrine library throughout Antiquity. The second part discusses the sources used in the first part, but in fact it is a continuation of the discussion on a different level. Professor Canfora is not teaching first years students but he addresses intelligent and independently thinking readers, he is giving a master class. He puts his readers to work, they have to reflect on the subject themselves, weigh the arguments and draw their own conclusions. Not the easiest reading, but rewarding.

Independently of the main subject of the book, on different occasions Canfora shows the common practice of altering, forging and interpolating books in Antiquity, which is an important additional insight.

To a certain extent this book reminds me of the works of W.G. Sebald, one of my favorite authors.

Duane says

This is far more than the story of the mysterious library at Alexandria, and more than merely a fascinating literary and historical detective story. Herein one learns about such things as the competition between the libraries at Alexandria and Pergamum, and how the latter was forced to develop parchment technology which despite its apparent relative crudity produces a more durable product. The analysis of the fire which Caesar set, burning up 70,000 books which were apparently just commercial products, is another fascinating subtext - I mean, who knew that there were commercial publishing houses in Egypt which were selling books to the Romans?

Most importantly, one can begin to follow the manner in which literary and historical scholars transited the Mediterranean, how the conquest of Egypt by Alexander and the subsequent reign of the Ptolemies fostered the accumulation of the library, how the contents thereof including the writings of Aristotle which lie at the very core of Western civilization transited from Greece to Egypt to Rome... and all of that in the first 100 page section of this remarkable book.

The second section of the book, which details the historical sources for the author's analysis, is nearly beyond the reach of anyone other than a specialist in ancient history. But it provides yet another fascinating subtext much akin to trying to solve a centuries-old murder with only traces of hearsay information. For any given claim, such as the actual location of the library, the author gathers together the claims of the available testimonials and the timelines in which they were made, and then tries to extract therefrom which authors used what earlier sources. Then he looks for how the claims and descriptions can be reconciled to each other, even considering differences in language. It is hard for me to imagine how one could accumulate the

necessary knowledge to even attempt such a task...

But somehow he manages, and the verdict does seem clear, despite the efforts of later apologists - including Gibbon, who does not acquit himself well on this issue despite his reputation for profundity - to whitewash the facts and transfer the blame. The Library, which apparently was not an actual separate building as anyone would expect, but just a collection of scrolls piled on shelves in a long hallway - although there were tens if not hundreds of thousands of them - were burned up by the Moslem conqueror of Egypt, Amrou el-Ass (and I am not making that up) on the orders of the second Caliph, Omar, who - and this bigoted quality of thought will sound very familiar to anyone familiar with our contemporary Taliban - said that since all knowledge is contained in the Koran, if the books in the library agreed with the Koran they were superfluous, and if they disagreed they were heretical, so they should be destroyed in either case.

And so, el-Ass used them to heat the 4,000 baths of Alexandria, requiring several months to burn them all - which, as they say in the FBI, "sounds like the moose-head truth" - i.e., it is a combination of details that *nobody* could have fabricated.

Aveugle Vogel says

"Everything Thucydides Left Unsaid"

Matt says

This book is a bit perplexing. At times it offers clear, oversimplified narrative that fills in many historical gaps. At other times it offers deep detailed analysis of primary and secondary sources. These two types of narrative sometimes run together. The effect is a bit unnerving. I was comfortable reading this book because of my expertise in ancient history, but a lay reader is likely to be lured into a false sense of confidence and then really overwhelmed by the book's shift in tone and focus.

That isn't to say that this isn't a great book. This is a one stop shop for all things Library of Alexandria. It's a lot like Kallimachos: The Alexandrian Library and the Origins of Bibliography. Both books are quite dense and recondite. They are also prime examples of the national scholarship of their authors. Blum writes good German scholarship: detailed, well-sourced, dry, and precise. Canfora writes more like an Italian. He still tackles important questions, but does so in a less linear way. There is more speculation and reconstruction. The writing has a verve that German scholars rarely exhibit. The chapters are short and readable (to varying degrees). This is a great book for anyone with a little experience studying the ancient world.

Jennifer says

Canfora's "history" is something of a Jekyll & Hyde, split evenly between two parts so wildly dissimilar as to make you check the binding occasionally to see if you're still reading the same book. The first part, which I suppose we're to refer to as "narrative history," offers a series of semi-imagined scenes more or less related to the Library of Alexandria in the gossipy tone of a psuedo-Hesiod. The second part presents in a dry

recitative all the citations missing from the first bit, belated providing sources to reassure the reader that Canfora didn't just get a little drunk and decide to fill in some historical blanks. Neither part works as well as a fully integrated whole would have.

Frankly I spent the first half wondering where the hell the footnotes were to factually back up the episodes being illustrated, and wishing that Canfora had deigned to explain who a few of the main players in his little dramas were. (Or at least not to refer to an entire line of sovereigns simply as "Ptolemy," no matter which one he happened to be talking about.) By the time I got around to the second half, I admit to already being annoyed, a feeling that only increased when it became clear that as the author elucidated his sources he felt no particular need to link them back to the initial narratives.

Perhaps if the writing were stronger the scenes that make up the first half would have swept me up enough to make me forget my quibbles over footnoting, but given that most of them seemed to center on important but unromantic details like nitpicking the number of scrolls or the placement of rooms, I doubt even that would have helped. Sadly, I left *The Vanished Library* not much enlightened and more than a little bored.

Fraser Sherman says

2.5. On the plus side, this has lots of fascinating detail about the Library of Alexandria and its history. On the down side, Canfora tells the story as a series of anecdotes from different eras, which leaves it feeling incredibly jerky, and with no real effort to fill in the gaps between eras. About half this book is a discussion of the sources he used to derive his narrative — less of that and more background would have made this better.

Brian says

I read this book to account for my lack of adequate knowledge of the context of the fate of the Library at Alexandria, as a primer really. I learned a lot, and I can see myself going back and rereading sections to refine and strengthen my sense. I think the overriding impression is the need to always remember how little verifiable definitive history is available to tell the story of what happened and when. There are many threads of active debate surrounding issues that collectively paint the broader picture of this institution's considerable relevance, and its enduring value as a symbol of mankind's need to know.

Martin says

An immensely fascinating book if you get past the second chapter. Instead of trying a literary fiction or a pure biography, Mr. Canfora has opted to string together a number of anecdotes from various early sources to tell the story of the Library of Alexandria. Unfortunately as a reader you have to add a lot yourself. An introduction would have been nice or a small paragraph before each chapter that explains why the text is relevant to the famous library.

Even so, I would highly recommend this short book to anyone learning or teaching about the reality behind the legend of both the library and the city of Alexandria.

Kameel Nasr says

Luciano Canfora's book is well written and well researched, but his conclusion, that Muslims destroyed the great library of Alexandria, is mistaken. Canfora does not take into account that the library was not talked about for three hundred years before the Muslim conquest of Egypt. We also know that a Christian crowd destroyed Alexandria's second library located in the Temple of Serapus, and another Christian gang brutally killed Hypatia, the director of the great library. There should be little doubt that Christians destroyed that library.

T Campbell says

A fascinating string of well-researched anecdotes, full of violence and politics and life. Consensus has moved on somewhat from the book's conclusions about the library's ultimate fate, but this read is nevertheless awe-inspiring for any book-lover who wonders how books intersected with everything else in ancient European culture.

Elizabeth Saunders says

The early chapters are pretty fascinating. Later digressions left me pretty confused. It's as if a grad student discussed every reference they consulted in depth in their dissertation, rather than ever getting to the topic and conclusion of the dissertation. Pictures would be really helpful – the few sketches in the book make no sense, especially with some typos in the written descriptions (perhaps a translation error). For example, the largest statue in the land is purported to be in the room with the low, 25-foot ceiling.

The book also assumes a lot of reader knowledge and vocabulary. Most of the names are familiar –Ptolemy (various ones), Alexander, Caesar (as in Julius?) – but so many names and cities are thrown about that those of us not steeped in Italian history will struggle. This English translation could use some footnotes and a map.

Lissa Notreallywolf says

This book falls under poetic history. Although the author is infinitely familiar with the topic there are no footnotes as a far as I can recall, merely the mental reconstruction of the climate and purposes of the Alexandrian library. It was a project of the Ptolemy's, confusing because they recycle the same names for generations. Alexandria was the site of a Roman intelligence gathering project for militaristic ends-if one can control the memory of a people or their religion victory was certain. This is the site of the Septuaguint, composed by Jewish scholars from an oral tradition and Hebrew documents into Greek. The Letter of Aristeas, falsely named because it is more a novel than a letter, tells the story of the Setuaguint.For anyone who had enjoyed the concept of the Alexandrine library as destroyed by war, as a symbol of the destruction of human efforts by ambition. For more scholarly resources with footnotes, contact me. Or look under Richard Dawson.