

# Is Qumran a Library?

*Ian Werrett*

To say that Pergamum and its rulers, the Attalids, lived in the shadow of their rivals the Ptolemies would be a massive understatement. In virtually every way possible, save the desire for greatness and prestige, the Attalids lagged far behind their Egyptian counterparts. At its zenith between the third and second century BCE, Alexandria, the capital city of the Ptolemaic dynasty, was an economic, artistic and intellectual juggernaut; boasting the wonder that was the Pharos of Alexandria, the largest library in the ancient world, and intellectual luminaries such as Euclid, Archimedes, and Eratosthenes. In the decades leading up to the turn of the millennium, the Ptolemies, through a series of aggressive acquisition tactics and financial enticements, succeeded in luring hundreds of scholars to Alexandria and securing over 500,000 scrolls for the city's edification. So enormous were the city's literary holdings that the Ptolemies were forced to open an annex or "daughter" library in a temple dedicated to Serapis, a syncretic god displaying Greek and Egyptian features that was created as a polemical tool by Ptolemy I (r. 323–283 BCE) to promote the successful blending of the Hellenistic and Egyptian cultures.

When Eumenes II (r. 197–160 BCE), the Attalid ruler of Pergamum, attempted to create a library that would rival that of Alexandria, Ptolemy V (r. 204–180 BCE) took drastic measures: he imprisoned his head librarian, Aristophanes of Byzantium (c. 257–180 BCE), thereby dissuading Alexandria's literati from relocating to Pergamum.<sup>1</sup> More damaging than this, however, was Ptolemy's decision to prohibit the exportation of papyrus. The Attalids responded to these slights by inventing parchment, or so the author Varro would have us believe, and although Varro's account is clearly apocryphal parchment undoubtedly played a part in the Attalids' ability to amass a significant collection of scrolls for their library.<sup>2</sup> This success was short-lived, however, as Marc Anthony (83–30 BCE) would eventually confiscate and gift some 200,000 scrolls from the library of Pergamum to his Egyptian lover, Cleopatra VII Philopater (69–30 BCE), sometime before the Battle of Actium in 31 BCE.<sup>3</sup>

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1 Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven: Yale Note Bene, 2002), 52.

2 Pliny the Elder, *Nat.* 13.21; see also Frederic G. Kenyon, *Books and Readers in Ancient Greece and Rome* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1932), 86–88.

3 Michael H. Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World* (4th ed.; Lanham, Maryland: Scarecrow Press, 1999), 48.

In spite of the extensive literary holdings that were purportedly housed in Alexandria and Pergamum during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, archaeologists and scholars have yet to identify a single scroll, fragment of papyrus or scrap of parchment from either library. With the exception of a handful of foundation stones, column bases and broken statuary, very little of the building that has been identified as Alexandria's Serapeum has survived down to the present day.<sup>4</sup> Even more surprising is the fact that archaeologists have yet to identify a single artefact or piece of material culture from the Library of Alexandria proper. And the situation with Pergamum is little better. At the end of the 19th century, the German archaeologist Alexander Conze identified four rooms at Pergamum as a library, but this identification is far from certain.<sup>5</sup> Although one of the rooms in question contained the remains of a low podium, twenty or so evenly spaced sockets in the surrounding walls, and a pedestal where a statue of Athena was recovered, the adjacent rooms, which Conze identified as adjunct storage space, contained no such features.<sup>6</sup> Complicating matters even further is the fact that there are no analogues from the Hellenistic period to which to compare the archaeological evidence from Pergamum and Alexandria, thereby leaving us with more questions than answers when it comes to the architectural features of Hellenistic libraries.<sup>7</sup>

Had the writers and intellectual elite of the ancient world, such as Galen, Aristaeus, and Strabo, not recorded the existence of the libraries in Alexandria and Pergamum, it is unlikely that the aforementioned archaeological ruins would have been identified as such. And while the witness of the ancient sources with regard to Alexandria and Pergamum is, both in terms of its quantity and quality, highly persuasive and significant,<sup>8</sup> there is precious little evidence beyond this to support the notion that these cities housed massive

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4 Judith McKenzie, Sheila Gibson, and A.T. Reyes, "Reconstructing the Serapeum in Alexandria from the Archaeological Evidence," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 94 (2004): 73–121; Roger Bagnall, "Alexandria: Library of Dreams," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146/4 (2002): 348–362; Jon Thiem, "The Great Library of Alexandria Burnt: Towards a History of a Symbol," *Journal of the History of Ideas* 40/4 (1979): 507–526.

5 Alexander Conze, "Die Pergamenische Bibliothek" in *Sitzungsberichte der Königlichen Preussischen Akademie der Wissenschaften* (Berlin, 1884), 1259–1270.

6 Lora L. Johnson, *The Hellenistic and Roman Library: Studies Pertaining to their Architectural Form*. (Ph.D. Diss; Brown University, 1984), 44–61; Elzbieta Makowiecka, *The Origin and Evolution of Architectural Form of Roman Library* (Warsaw: Wydaw-a UW, 1978), 14–19.

7 Donald S. Robertson, *Greek and Roman Architecture* (2nd ed.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 289.

8 Jenő Platthy, *Sources on the Earliest Greek Libraries* (Amsterdam: A.M. Hakkert, 1968), 159–65; Johnson, *The Hellenistic and Roman Library*, 62–67.