THE ARAB STORY OF THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ANCIENT LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA

Qassem Abdou Qassem

The Ancient Library of Alexandria, built by the Ptolemies in the third century B.C., played a very important role in the development of scientific and intellectual activities of the Mediterranean world over several centuries. In some ways, this Library with its annexations can be considered a kind of continuation of the temple libraries of ancient Egypt, but undoubtedly, it was by far the most important and renowned Library in the ancient world.

Since Edward Gibbon first started the debate about the fate of the Ancient Library of Alexandria in the eighteenth century, this subject has aroused vehement controversies among historians during the last two centuries. The revival of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, a few years ago, has stimulated the debate once more and this paper deals with the Arab version of the story of the fate of the Ancient Library.

Notably enough, the Arabic story did not appear until the last decade of the sixth century A.H./twelfth A.D. The earliest Arabic source was by the Muslim physician and traveler, ‘Abd al-Latif al-Baghdadī who visited Egypt in 595 A.H./1200 A.D.; he mentioned that he saw some of the monuments in Alexandria, including what he believed to have been the Library, “set up by Alexander when he founded his city,” and that it was the place where “Aristotle and his successors taught.” He continues to mention in a brief statement that it was, “the book-store which was burnt by ‘Amr, by order of Caliph ‘Umar.” This report cannot be taken seriously as it is undocumented, besides stating inaccurate historical facts.

More important with regard to the story of the destruction of the Ancient Library of Alexandria, is the account given by Jamāl al-Dīn ibn al-Qiftī who lived during the Ayyubid era and died in the year 646

1 Cf. Haikal, “Private Collections and Temple Libraries in Ancient Egypt,” see chap. 2 in the present volume.
A.H./1248 A.D. He came from a family of Qadis (judges), his father was appointed judge for Jerusalem and Jamāl al-Dīn himself, was at one time, judge in Aleppo; he is also the author of an alphabetically arranged biographical lexicon.

In his lexicon, *History of Wise Men*, (Ikhbār al-‘ulamā‘ bi-akhbār al-ḥukamā‘) Ibn al-Qiftī mentions the end of the old Library when he presents the biography of John the Grammarian (Yahia al-Nahwī) who was identified as John Philoponus. He mentions that Yahia was a Jacobite, Coptic priest and a disciple of Severus (Shawary) but that he was deprived of his office owing to his rejection of the dogma of the Trinity. He lived and saw the capture of Alexandria by ‘Amr ibn al-Ās. Ibn al-Qiftī goes on to narrate how ‘Amr was impressed by the erudition and intellect of Yahia and listened with admiration to his logical arguments concerning the Trinity, as well as his other philosophical opinions that were as yet unknown to the Arabs. Emboldened by ‘Amr’s favor, Yahia one day remarked, “You have examined the whole city and have set your seal on every object of value. I make no claim for aught that is useful to you, but things of no use to you, may be of service to us.” He then mentioned the “books of wisdom” in the Royal treasuries which the Arabs had no use for, while he could make use of. He then described how they had been collected by Ptolemy Philadelphus from far and wide and that he had spared no cost in acquiring them. He had appointed Zomeira (Demetrius of Phaleron) to be in charge, and the collection grew till it reached the number of 54,120 books. Still, the King’s hunger for more books was not abated and he ordered that books should continue to be gathered from India, Persia, Georgia, Armenia, Babylonia, Mosul and Greece.

‘Amr’s reply was that he could not dispose of the books without asking for permission from the Caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khattāb. A letter was dispatched, and the answer soon came, “Touching the books you mention, if what is written in them agrees with the Book of God, they are not required, but if it disagrees, they are not desired. Destroy them therefore.” Accordingly, ‘Amr ordered the books to be distributed among the baths of Alexandria and used as fuel for heating. It took six months to consume them. “Listen and wonder” concludes the writer.3

Subsequent Arab writers like Abū al-Faraj, known as Ibn al-Ibrī (Barhebraeus), Abū al-Fidā‘ and al-Maqrīzī, repeated the account of Ibn

---