

# Library

AN UNQUIET  
HISTORY

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## CHAPTER TWO

## Burning Alexandria

To John the Grammarian, a Coptic priest living in Alexandria at the time of the Arab conquest in A.D. 641, the Muslim conqueror Amr must have seemed something of a novelty. When John was named adviser to the general, he was delighted to discover that the city's new governor was not so bored with music, poetry, and learning as barbarians are supposed to be. Soon John grew bold (and hopeful) enough to ask Amr what might be done with the "books of wisdom" held in the "royal treasuries"—the famous library contained in the palace of the Ptolemies. No doubt, he hoped the general would entrust the library to his hands. The general replied, however, that he could not decide the fate of the books without consulting Caliph Omar. The caliph's answer, quoted here from Alfred J. Butler's *Arab Conquest of Egypt*, is infamous: "Touching the books you mention, if what is written in them agrees with the Book of God, they are not required; if it disagrees,

they are not desired. Destroy them therefore." According to tradition, the scrolls were bundled up and delivered as fuel to the city's baths, where it is said they fueled the furnaces for six months.

It's too bad that such a colorful tale, fit as it is for the *Thousand and One Nights*, carries only the rudiments of truth. In fact, the story as we know it may have been invented by one Ibn al-Qifti, a twelfth-century Sunni chronicler. According to the Egyptian classicist Mostafa el-Abbadi, al-Qifti may have invented the story to justify the sale of books by the twelfth-century Sunni ruler Saladin, who sold off whole libraries to pay for his fight against the Crusaders. Despite its possible Islamic origin, however, the story has been handed down in the West as an Orientalist lament for the fate of Hellenic learning in the heathen East.

In fact, by the time the caliph's army arrived at Alexandria in the seventh century A.D., the city's storied library had seen at least one major fire already, and perhaps more. There had been not only one library but two: a great library founded in the third century B.C. within the Mouseion, or temple of the Muses, and a smaller "daughter" library. Built in the following century, the latter was placed in the temple of Serapis, a Hellenized Egyptian deity and divine patron of syncretistic Alexandria, whom the theologically resourceful Ptolemies had conjured for themselves. Both collections were housed in the royal precinct, the Brucheion, and are often spoken of as a single entity. Outside the royal quarter, books would have been found throughout the city in great quantities: home of the papyrus industry, Alexandria was the center of the book trade throughout the Mediterranean almost from its founding to the third century A.D.

When Julius Caesar came to the aid of Cleopatra in her war against young Ptolemy XIII in 48 B.C. (by which time the libraries were already nearly three hundred years old), he burned the ships in Alexandria's harbor to prevent his enemy from taking the city by

sea. According to Seneca, some forty thousand books were lost in the ensuing conflagration, though other authorities hold that only a few books, stored in the warehouses awaiting shelving, were burned. These books, in fact, were probably waiting for shipment to Rome on Caesar's orders. Even if Seneca's estimate is correct, it is dwarfed by the seven hundred thousand scrolls thought to have been in the main library of the Mouseion alone. There are rumors of subsequent fires, too; but visitors to Alexandria in the period following Caesar's death leave evidence of great libraries' continued existence. Strabo, who wrote in the time of Augustus and the birth of Jesus, seems to have been acquainted with a working Alexandrian library. Legend holds that Marc Antony offered Cleopatra the books of Pergamum (Alexandria's great rival, located in what is now the Turkish province of Izmir) as compensation for the loss of her library, though Plutarch doubts the truth of this tale. Suetonius writes that Domitian, Roman emperor of the second century A.D., employed Alexandrian scholars to replace the texts of Augustus's Palatine Library after it was destroyed in a fire; this would seem to indicate the ongoing presence of an intellectual community at Alexandria, holding precious texts from which copies could be produced. It is likely that what remained of the libraries was destroyed utterly in the third century A.D., when the Brucheion was razed during the emperor Aurelian's war against the notorious Zenobia, queen of Palmyra. By this time, however, the libraries surely were in decline under Christians who, following their cultural triumph over pagans, Jews, and Neoplatonists, found the Hellenic riches of the libraries discomfiting. Their ire reached a fever pitch in the fourth century A.D.: Theophilus, patriarch of Alexandria, desired the site of the temple of Serapis for a church; he set loose a mob of Christians, who destroyed the pagan temple and, perhaps, the books of its library as well. Whatever the truth of the tale of the caliph's decree

three hundred years later, it seems clear that the flimsy papyrus of Alexandria burned more than once.

UNLIKE ALEXANDRIA'S COLLECTION of papyrus scrolls, the first libraries could not burn at all, for they were filled with books written in clay. The literature of Mesopotamia goes back to the third millennium B.C., and ranges from poetry to prayer, from epistle to account book. The script in which it was written, called cuneiform, is named for the shape of its syllabic characters, which consist of clusters of small, wedge-shaped marks incised into clay tablets with a stylus. The clay would be left to dry or fired in a kiln; the resulting "books" are extremely durable, especially in the dry climate of the Fertile Crescent. These durable books of clay lent themselves to the library-building impulse; as early as the third millennium B.C., a temple at the town of Nippur, in what is now southeastern Iraq, included archive rooms filled with tablets.

Mesopotamian libraries reached their zenith nearly two thousand years later, in the reign of Ashurbanipal II, who ruled the Assyrian Empire in the seventh century B.C. He organized a great library at his capital, the already ancient city of Nineveh, which grew to include as many as 25,000 tablets. While his library served as an archive, Ashurbanipal's aspirations were universal, and he ordered the collection not only of omens, incantations, and hymns but of the ancient literatures of the several Mesopotamian languages—Assyrian, Sumerian, Akkadian, Ugaritic, and Aramaic, among others. The library seems to have been highly organized; works were tied together in their various tablets and marked with a label to identify their contents; a catalog also existed, recording the titles of works and the number of tablets that comprised them. Other archives and libraries throughout Mesopotamia show similarly high levels of organization; in some repositories, tablets were kept in labeled bas-

kets, their titles written along the edges of the clay for quick identification. Given the great antiquity of these writings, the number that have survived is astonishing: some twenty thousand fragments exist from Ashurbanipal's library alone, now kept in the British Museum. Ashurbanipal's successors could not administer the far-flung lands he had conquered; the power of his empire quickly waned after his death, and Nineveh was gradually abandoned and forgotten. Still more Mesopotamian libraries must lie buried in the great tells, or mounds of ruined cities, that dot the landscape of the Assyrian homeland, now Iraq; precision bombs may now be destroying libraries we don't even know exist.

Four hundred years after the library at Nineveh crumbled, Alexander the Great shattered the Near East. In 331 B.C., when he decided to celebrate his conquests by building a great city on Egypt's Mediterranean shore, he is said to have traced the perimeter of the future Alexandria with a trail of flour. According to one account, a great flock of wading birds arose from the shores of nearby Lake Mareotis to follow him on his circumambulation, gobbling up the flour as he went. At first, the conqueror took this as an ill omen, until an adviser pointed out the true meaning: that Alexandria would prosper and offer endless sustenance and wealth to its inhabitants. However Alexander chose and planned his city, its location was auspicious; it offered the best port on the Egyptian Mediterranean and the only point of access to the breadbasket of the Delta and the inland Nile. Alexander died before seeing his aspirations for the city fulfilled; his former general Soter made the city the capital of the Ptolemy dynasty after the young conqueror's death. It was Soter who envisioned the library that would concentrate—and give his heirs dominion over—the learning of the Hellenic world.

Like all Greek lyceums of the time, the libraries of Alexandria took Aristotle's Peripatetic school as their immediate inspiration.

Aristotle had been Alexander's tutor, and the name of his school came to denominate the followers of his rationalist philosophy. Originally, however, the term *peripatos*, which means, literally, "walking around," referred to his teaching method. He took his pedagogy from Plato, whose own teacher, Socrates, had walked and taught everywhere—on the roads, in the homes of his wealthy young followers, or in the agora, or marketplace, of Athens. Even in the fully literate Greek world, their wholly oral method had become the norm.

Some ancient sources claim that Aristotle's own library was transported to Alexandria, where it became the seed collection from which the great library grew. The great Greek geographer Strabo, however, who seems to have known the library well, tells that Aristotle's books had been buried in a hole in Athens, to keep them from being claimed by the Attalid kings, the rulers of Athens, who wanted them for their library at Pergamum. Later the books—water-damaged, worm-eaten—were dug up and sold to the book collector Apellicon, who in trying to collate and amend the damaged scrolls introduced many inaccuracies. His library would be claimed by the Roman general Sulla, who took Athens from the forces of King Mithridates VI in 88 B.C. He had the library packed up and sent back to Rome, where the books were split up, copied incorrectly, and all but lost.

Despite its Aristotelian inspiration, however, the library departed from the Peripatetic model in striking fashion. Although it was meant to attract scholars and thinkers, no formal teaching program was adopted. This was one of its chief benefits to scholars; for then as now, intellectuals found teaching as much a burden as a calling. The royal pension freed scholars from having to advertise for pupils to walk around with, while the heaps of scrolls offered them inexhaustible opportunities for their work.

Strabo describes the scene confronting readers at Alexandria, where indoor book stacks were surrounded by a series of open, breezy colonnades or covered walkways, to the shade of which the scholars could repair for study and discussion. Such colonnades, perhaps evoking Plato's shady grove, became a standard element in ancient libraries, and even Roman libraries—which like modern ones had reading rooms with tables and chairs—featured them.

Of course, the scholars weren't reading books, not as we know them; the codex, or bound book, would not come into use until the Christian era in Rome. Alexandria's libraries, like all ancient repositories, were filled instead with scrolls of papyrus, a water reed native to the banks of the Nile. Compared with clay, papyrus is fragile and hard to preserve. It was plentiful, however, and could be transformed into a convenient medium for writing quickly and easily. When hammered flat, juices in the plant act as a sort of cement to bind and fix the fibers: the first papermakers learned to split open individual plant stems, lay them overlapping each other, and pound them into sheets of any given length. Once dry, the resulting sheets were then wrapped around a peg, called an *umbilicus*. No physical evidence remains of Alexandria's libraries, and archaeological evidence from other, later libraries is of doubtful value in reconstructing the shelving and access of scrolls in their stacks. Contemporary descriptions, however, allow a few conclusions: Scrolls in libraries had tags marked with the authors and titles of the work hanging from these *umbilici*. This was especially necessary because scrolls, unlike codices, don't stand up on shelves; instead, scrolls had to be heaped together into precarious piles. To remove one scroll, a reader or library assistant would have had to shift all the others on the shelf; as a result, only a kind of generalized order would have been possible to maintain.

The scholars of the Mouseion ate together in a dining hall and

held their property in common, much as medieval scholars did in the early universities of Europe. By all accounts, the scholars enjoyed an extraordinary degree of academic freedom; the Ptolemies seem to have understood that they would produce the most useful work only if given free rein. This privilege apparently extended even to dealings with the royal house; when Ptolemy I Soter, impatient with his own slow progress in mathematics, asked Euclid for a shortcut, the geometer had the temerity to reply, "There is no royal road to Geometry." The perks of a posting at Alexandria didn't fail to raise the ire of excluded scholars; one Timon of Phlius wrote derisively of the "cloistered bookworms" fed and cared for in Alexandria's "chicken coop of the muses" (I like to think it was Timon's mixed metaphors that took him out of the running for an Alexandrian tenure). By bringing scholars to Alexandria and inviting them to live and work, at royal expense, among an enormous store of books, the Ptolemies made the library into a think tank under the control of the royal house. The strategic implications of a monopoly on knowledge—especially in medicine, engineering, and theology, all among Alexandria's strengths—were not lost on the Ptolemies. They ordered the confiscation of the books of visitors to the city, which were copied for the libraries (though sometimes the originals were kept, too), adorned with a tag that read "from the ships." In an effort to stop the growth of the libraries at Rhodes and Pergamum, both of which threatened Alexandria's preeminence, the city's rulers banned the export of papyrus. The move backfired, however, spurring the Pergamenes to invent parchment (*charta pergamenum*), which for its strength and reusability would prove to be the preferred writing medium in Europe for more than a thousand years.

Despite competition from Rhodes, Athens, Pergamum, and other centers of Hellenic culture, Alexandria's libraries thrived under

the Ptolemies. The names of scholars who followed the seven hundred thousand scrolls to Alexandria echo down to the present day; Euclid, who was probably born in the dusty Egyptian village that existed at the site before Alexander founded his city, wrote his *Elements* there, and Archimedes passed through as a student before settling in his beloved Syracuse. Eratosthenes, Strabo, and Galen all relied on the riches of Alexandria. Legend has it that, at Ptolemy II's urging, seventy Jewish scholars convened in the library to translate the Torah into Greek; the Septuagint was the miraculous result. Alexandria was home as well to the most cosmopolitan and eclectic school of Greek lyric poetry, whose most famous exponent, Callimachus, also served as librarian at the Mouseion. His 120-volume critical bibliography, the *Pinakes*, or tables, cataloged the vast collection of Greek literature held in the library. His catalog shared the fate of its library: none of this work has survived.

In the first centuries A.D., the city would be the scene of great cultural struggles among pagans, Jews, Christians, and Neoplatonists; what we know today as the Judeo-Christian tradition has its origins in the eclecticism of Alexandria. But the libraries always had a grander mission than any of these: they sought to compile and contain the entire corpus of Greek literature, as well as the most significant works of many foreign languages. Thus was Alexandria's the first library with universal aspirations; with its community of scholars, it became a prototype of the university of the modern era.

The great pile of books at Alexandria defined a newly acquisitive approach to the value of knowledge. The goal was to hold everything, from the authoritative manuscripts of the *Iliad* and Hesiod's *Works and Days* to the most obscure lists of secondary and fallacious commentaries on Homer, to works incorrectly attributed to Homer, the works pointing out their misattribution, and the works refuting those works. In furthering this goal, the Ptolemies made

good on the essentially Alexandrian intuition that knowledge is a resource, a commodity, a form of capital to be acquired and hoarded at the pleasure of the regime. The centralization and consolidation of libraries serves the convenience of scholars and princes alike. But great libraries are problematic in times of war, disaster, or decay, for their fate becomes the fate of the literatures they contain. Much of what comes down to us from antiquity survived because it was held in small private libraries tucked away in obscure backwaters of the ancient world, where it was more likely to escape the notice of zealots as well as princes.

Above all, it is this last point—the needs and tastes of private readers and collectors—that determines what survives. Before the flames, before theft and censorship, the fate of books is bound up in the constant shuffling and transformation of the word in all its uses. Though Alexandria's libraries were universal in scope, their librarians faced hard choices. Manuscript scrolls were costly and time-consuming to produce, and the scribes' precious labor could not often be lavished on minor texts. The chief role of an ancient library was the provision of exemplars from which readers would transcribe copies for their own use; naturally, only the major works were copied in any great quantity. The rest—the secondary, the extracanonial, and the apocryphal—dropped out of view.

If the Ptolemies had not pursued their aggressive acquisitions policy in Alexandria, confiscating books from private readers and failing to return scrolls borrowed from other repositories for copying, many of the lost works might well have survived. But the Ptolemies didn't see their library as a universal repository devoted to the preservation of liberal learning, however much our cherished origin myths may have us believe it was so. Libraries are as much about losing the truth—satisfying the inner barbarians of princes, presidents, and pretenders—as about discovering it. The loss of

libraries is often enough the product of the fear, ignorance, and greed of their supposed benefactors and protectors. The willful ineptitude of bureaucracies throughout history plays its role as well. Threatening images of invading barbarians may be a salve in such instances; only catastrophe can provide the drama that acts as a drug against the existential horror of decadence and decline.

The libraries of Alexandria probably shared a modest fate, moldering slowly through the centuries as people grew indifferent and even hostile to their contents. Ancient Greek, never a linguistic monolith in any case, became incomprehensible to Alexandrians of the Christian era with their mixture of Coptic, Aramaic, Hebrew, Latin, and Koine, or demotic Greek. Ignored by the generations to whom they were indecipherable, the scrolls would have been damaged by alternating periods of moisture and aridity, eaten by the troublesome fauna and flora that have evolved especially to live in the library, stolen, lost, and, yes, burned. They were replaced by writings of the Fathers and Doctors of the church and by the thinning literature of the declining Roman world. The lens of retrospect compresses the millennia, places Theodosius (sixth century A.D.) on the same ground occupied by Cleopatra and Archimedes (who lived in the first and second century B.C., respectively). What happened to the books of Alexandria? Their true fate is discernible to librarians: many, many centuries happened to them—too many for their inevitable dispersal and disappearance to be staved off, no matter who held the monopoly on papyrus, no matter whose mobs rioted in the streets, no matter which emperors set fires.

**A CENTURY AFTER** Alexander encircled his city with a wall of flour, the Qin emperor Shi Huangdi began to connect his far-flung forts with the stone embattlements that would become the Great Wall of China. According to the chronicles, Shi Huangdi next

undertook perhaps the most extensive book burning the world has ever known. His aim, the same chronicles tell, was to destroy all Chinese literature, all history, all philosophy written before the founding of his dynasty. When he died, six thousand terra cotta warriors accompanied him, buried together in a vast funerary complex near the modern-day city of Xian, in central China. As the chronicles have it, though, he didn't extend the luxury of effigy to the traditional Confucian scholars: they were buried in person when their books were burned.

The First August Emperor (*Shi Huangdi*, the title he chose for himself) emerged in the third century B.C., at the end of what is now called the Warring States period, before a unified China existed. His father was the king of Qin, a mountainous state in China's northwestern borderlands, scarcely different in terrain or culture from the lands of the "barbarians" from whom Shi Huangdi would one day wall off his domain. The emperor-to-be was born Chao Cheng, when his father was a hostage in the state of Chou. Perhaps this fact explains the son's tenacity in wiping out not only the Chou but China's five other independent states. The elite of those states were Confucian traditionalists, to whom personal virtue and appeal to tradition were the bases of civil society and royal authority. The leaders and scholars of Qin, by contrast, saw men as selfish and inherently opposed to the power of the ruler, which they enforced through the harshest and most assertive methods. Chao Cheng assumed his father's throne at the age of thirteen; he kept "the black-haired people," as he called China's masses, in a constant state of war for the next twenty-six years, until at last the six kings fell and their states came under his own firm rule.

However mythologized the chronicler's accounts of Shi Huangdi's exploits may be, there can be little doubt that he was colorful in his megalomania. The reach of his power, he believed,

extended to all of nature and even to heaven. When he was climbing with his retinue down Mount Tai, a storm blew up. The royal company found shelter beneath a tree; in gratitude, the emperor rewarded the tree by making it a feudal lord, "a gentleman of the fifth rank." Another time he was traveling downriver when a wind nearly upset the royal barge. Learning that they had just passed a shrine to the memory of a princess, he blamed her spirit for nature's infraction. In retribution, he ordered the mountain on which the temple stood stripped of trees and painted red.

Attracted to this eccentric new power, traditional scholars swarmed the imperial court, warning the emperor of the risks he faced in failing to follow the examples set by the kings of antiquity. But they grossly miscalculated; for in doing so, they offended him whose dynasty represented a new dawn, unprecedented in power and pretension. His chancellor, Li Si—whose Legalist scholarship was snubbed by the Confucians—took the opportunity to strike at his own rivals. "Now your majesty has initiated this great undertaking, establishing merit that will last 10,000 generations. This is not the sort of thing that a stupid Confucianist would understand!" The chancellor had his emperor's ear. As the chronicler from the first century B.C., Sima Qian, tells it (in Burton Watson's translation), Li Si pressed his case:

In the past the empire was fragmented and in confusion and no one was able to unite it. Therefore the feudal rulers rose up side by side, all of them declaiming on antiquity in order to disparage the present, parading empty words in order to confuse the facts. Men prided themselves on their private theories and criticized the measures adopted by their superiors. . . . I therefore request that all records of the historians other than those of the state of Qin be burned.

Sima Qian assures his readers that the emperor agreed wholeheartedly: "an imperial decree," he relates dispassionately, "granted approval of the proposal."

They would have burned well. Paper was not invented in China until the second century A.D. While silk was often used as a writing medium, books in ancient China were typically compiled on strips of wood or bamboo, sewn together like venetian blinds with silken thread. Each strip contained a single row of characters, read vertically; the thin vertical form of these early books helped to determine the flow of Chinese writing on paper centuries later (though Chinese historically has followed a variety of patterns on the page). The books themselves were rolled up tightly for storage. An imperial report from the first century B.C. (almost two hundred years after the burning of the books) mentions the ample space afforded for book storage in the palace precincts, which contained 484 duplicate bundles of the works of Kuan Tzu alone.

Not long after the alleged burning of the books, a pair of diviners grew dissatisfied with the emperor's prohibitions against magic and scholarship carried on outside the court. They fled, searching for themselves the herbs of immortality. Enraged, the emperor ordered a roundup of such independent "masters," a term that, as the Sinologist Martin Kern relates, referred both to classical scholars and to physicians, augurs, and interpreters of dreams. According to Sima Qian, more than 460 were executed. The word he uses, *keng*, is usually translated as "executed," though it literally means "buried alive." Sima Qian's term for the event, terse and to the point, would be invoked by generations of Confucian scholars as the *fengshu kengru*, the burning of books and burial of scholars.

This is the story that attracted Jorge Luis Borges, who was charmed in his curious way by the juxtaposition of burning books



and building walls. In his essay "The Wall and the Books," he discusses how

these two vast undertakings—the five or six hundred leagues of stone against the barbarians, and the rigorous abolition of history, that is, of the past—[which] were the work of the same person and were, in a sense, his attributes, inexplicably satisfied and, at the same time, disturbed me. . . . Perhaps the wall was a metaphor; perhaps Shih Huang Ti condemned those who loved the past to a work as vast as the past, as stupid and as useless.

The story has been employed, too, as a kind of allegory of the Cultural Revolution; scholars who supported the government of the People's Republic have touted it as a salutary example of a regime dealing properly with a reactionary elite. It's no wonder that the story of Shi Huangdi's burning of books is, like that of the library of Alexandria, largely mythical.

Although some destruction of books and persecution of scholars took place, it seems likely Sima Qian exaggerated its extent. In any case, the Qin approach to books was altogether more complex than the chronicler's tale of the *fengshu kengru* might suggest. In a 1975 excavation of a Qin burial, one coffin was found to contain, jumbled among the bones, some eleven hundred written bamboo strips. They were from legal texts; the deceased was probably a Legalist scholar. Another scholar was laid to rest with his diary rolled up and placed like a pillow beneath his head. Books were important to the Qin elite, and they continued to read and write them throughout the first emperor's reign. Had it been entirely otherwise, it seems unlikely that scholars' burials would have so celebrated their relation to books.

Not only did scholars continue to be active in the reign of Shi Huangdi, but he did not scruple to use their learning in celebration

of his rule. Between 219 and 210 B.C., the new emperor toured the newly conquered eastern states. On these tours, he made pilgrimages with his closest advisers to mountaintops, where they erected stelae, or stone pillars, bearing inscriptions extolling the virtues of his rule. The seven surviving stela texts are formally composed and densely allusive to the traditions of Confucian scholarship. Martin Kern, whose translations of the stela texts are as authoritative as they are graceful, can trace nearly every one of the terse, four-syllable lines of the inscriptions to traditional sources. The inscription on Mount Lang-yeh states, "Diligently he labors on the principal tasks. / He exalts agriculture, eliminates peripheral [occupations]." Kern argues that this perhaps refers to Shi Huangdi's suppression of the scholars. In his stela at least, Shi Huangdi made no attempt to erase the authority of history and the texts it handed down; on the contrary, he constitutes the story of his rule out of the very literature he is reputed to have burned.

According to Kern, the presence of Confucian allusions in these stone inscriptions, as well as in Qin court poetry and hymns found inscribed on bells, jars, and other bronze vessels, points to the survival of the old scholarship through the reign of Shi Huangdi. The burned books were likely those held by private scholars unwilling to submit to Qin authority over intellectual matters; these, too, are the scholars, diviners, and other freelance intellectuals who found themselves buried like so many clay soldiers. The emperor appears to have sought control not only over classical learning but over all intellectual work; the work of doctors and diviners operating outside imperial restrictions would have presented a clear threat to the new emperor's secular authority. Shi Huangdi seems to have realized what the Ptolemies in Egypt had discovered: that a monopoly on intellectual resources was as important to rule as imperial control over the production of rice and silk. The Confucian canon emerged

from the Qin dynasty tighter and more coherent than it was at the start—though we may reasonably fault the emperor's choice of editorial method.

The fate of the Qin dynasty was not glorious. Shi Huangdi died while returning from a campaign against peasant uprisings. Just three years later, his son and heir was murdered. The empire dissolved for a time into struggles among peasant chiefs and feudal dukes. The leaders of the peasants who ultimately founded the next dynasty, the Han, followed the Qin in their ferocity. When the future emperor Liu Ji's father was kidnapped by a rival who threatened to boil him alive, the leader showed his coarse mettle by requesting a bowl of soup made from the resulting stock.

Once the Han dynasty was founded and its rivals extinguished, however, its dukes and ministers went looking for legitimacy in scholarship and contemplation. Confucian scholars provided it, arguing that the Han's authority must rest in their defense of that classical scholarship which Shi and his chancellor, Li Si, had both suppressed and exploited. These scholars would provide more than ritual incantations and court counsel; they would provide a legitimation for the usurpers as well. The many strengths of the first Qin emperor—his consolidation of authority, his bringing of peace to the warring states, his much trumpeted standardization of weights, measures, coin, and even axle sizes—were obscured, while his viciousness, which hardly distinguished him from other kings, was reinterpreted as without precedent or pretext. Lu Jia, the new emperor's chief minister, argued in his report to the new emperor that it was through such viciousness that the Qin had lost their empire, and that only by adopting the ways of the Confucian sage—which presumably did not include occasional meals of paternal stew—could the Han hope to inaugurate an infinite reign. Yet Lu Jia himself made no reference to the story that in later times character-

ized the rule of the first Qin emperor—the *fengshu kengru*, or burning of books and burying of scholars.

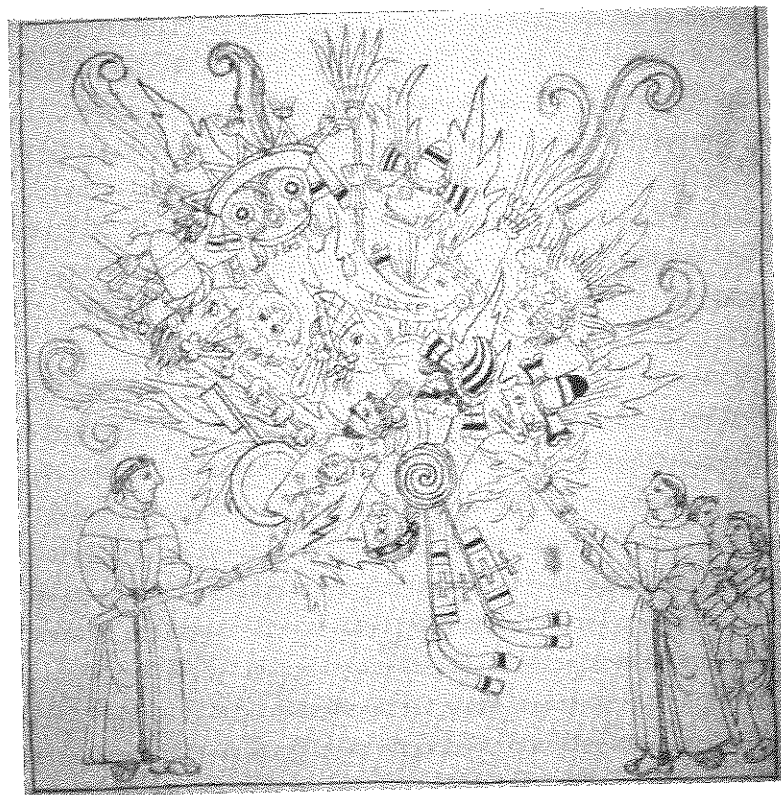
Later Confucian scholars, jostling for prominence in the empire's service, sought to establish a textual tradition reaching back to Confucius himself, through the cataclysms of the Warring States period and the Qin rise to power. It was given to Sima Qian, a Han-dynasty Confucian with an intense desire to discredit all that Shi Huangdi had done, to tell the final version. The Chinese Herodotus, Sima Qian wrote the great *Shiji*, a history of imperial China that was universal in scope. Although it would not be the biggest book in China—the encyclopedia *Yung Lo Ta Tien* of the fifteenth century A.D. comprised more than eleven thousand volumes—it was very nearly universal in size as well. On the narrow strips of bamboo, it was enormous; as the Sinologist Grant Hardy describes it, "it would have been impossible to hold the original *Shiji* in one's hands; in fact, it would have taken a cart to contain it." In it, Sima Qian related the story of the chancellor's decree; he told the tale of the 460 scholars buried alive. Thus was the colorful story born, a mixture of reshuffled facts and practical fantasies. Through his story of the *fengshu kengru*, the biblioclasm of Qin, Sima Qian helped restore scholarship to imperial authority, and allowed it to enjoy an authority and a freedom it would otherwise have lacked. Without a story of burned books, many more books might never have been written.

Sima Qian's flimsy bamboo and ink did what Shi Huangdi's stone stelae and bronze bells could not: it told the story of the dawn of an empire, and it made that story stick. In a sense, the intellectual history of medieval China is the story of a struggle between the ephemeral and the durable—between stone and bronze inscriptions of the state and the calligraphy on silk and bamboo of the scholars and the priests. The latter would be persuasive because the scribes

kept writing, because they ran the archives, and because they knew the stories best and wouldn't stop telling them.

As for Sima Qian, his most subtle defamation of the First August Emperor comes when he praises him. For where he does so it is in terms of comparison to past rulers of Qin and the emperors of antiquity. Of course, such praises followed the conservative form of classical scholarship, but given Shi Huangdi's ambivalent relation to the classics, such traditional praise carried an ironic undertone. No confirmation of the heavenly authority of the Han, however, could help their author in the end. Having unsuccessfully defended a vilified minister from defamatory charges, he was given a choice: he could suffer castration or execution. So Sima Qian became a eunuch and had to bury his own book (which was a library unto itself) in the ground in order to protect it from imperial authorities.

Even in the Han dynasty, despite the value it placed on classical learning, threats to books and scholars persisted. In response to such threats, scholars sought a medium more permanent than the bamboo strips and silk sheets on which writing was typically preserved. In the centuries between the rise of the Qin and the invention of paper, scholars and priests founded new kinds of libraries across China, libraries impervious to fire and burial. The Fang shan collection of Buddhist sutras founded in A.D. 550 in Hunan, China, for instance, is an enormous library. In its 4.2 million words it comprises one of the most complete and authoritative collections of Buddhist scripture in Chinese. But there is not one book in the Fang shan library—not one silk scroll, not one shred of paper. Instead, the words of the sutras are carved, in the finest book hand with characters one inch high, on stone stelae and the walls of caves. Of course, stone carvings of writing were nothing new, as Shi Huangdi's own mountaintop stelae attest. But the systematic collection and preservation of classical texts on stone was a unique devel-



*Priests burning Aztec books (in the clutches of the cleric at the far right).  
Tlaxcala Codex 13. Glasgow University Library, Hunterian Collection 242.  
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opment. The Buddhists, whose body of teachings emerged in the first century A.D., late in the Han dynasty, realized that carved texts allowed rubbings to be made, providing ready copies for the faithful. Their stone libraries and "stele forests" are found today throughout China; the stones black with the ink from rubbings taken throughout the centuries, representing surely millions and perhaps

billions of cheaply made copies of books. Though Taoists and Confucians shared the practice, the carving of stelae was particularly important to Buddhists, whose proselytization later motivated the invention of printing (the techniques of which were pioneered in China before the eleventh century), which prefigures, and mirrors, the significance of its rediscovery in fifteenth-century Germany and its importance to the progress of the Reformation and European culture.

**MYTHICAL OR REAL**, biblioclasms have their reasons. Often they are accidental, as when Caesar torched his ships in the harbor at Alexandria. Purposeful book burnings are of two kinds: they may be attempts at revision, such as with Shi Huangdi; another example comes from the emergence of Islam, when the Koran's adherents burned other religious texts deemed unauthoritative. In this case, the burning was a kind of sacrament; believers consigned the books to the flames almost reverentially, lest they contain words of truth hidden among the pages of error. Or books may be burned in order to erase their authors and readers from history, as the conquest of Mexico shows.

After Tenochtitlán fell to Hernán Cortés, the conquest of Mexico became a battle of the books: namely, that of the written histories of the Mexica versus the Christian Bible. The technology of the book had arisen in Mesoamerica at least a thousand years before the arrival of Columbus, and it had achieved in that time extraordinary subtlety and sophistication. In Mayan writing—probably the most complex of the Mesoamerican systems—a glyph could be a calendrical designation, a name, or even a phonetic symbol for a syllable. The materials varied, from stones to leather and other materials. The Aztecs wrote their books on specially prepared deerskin or native paper made from the fibers of the agave plant; the script was painted

in vibrant colors by means of fine brushes, and covers were often made of jaguar skin.

In the centuries since the conquest, scholars often have disparaged the hieroglyphic writing of Mesoamerica, calling it “less advanced” than Egyptian hieroglyphs. But as codices and inscriptions continue to be deciphered, it's increasingly clear that earlier European critics didn't have their terms straight. The iconic script known in Nahuatl as *tlacuilolli*, for instance, is said by Gordon Brotherston to “fuse into one visual statement what for us are the separate concepts of letter, art, and mathematics.” Conceptually, too, in Mesoamerican writing, outward simplicity conceals hidden depths. Most Aztec histories, for instance, were composed on the plan of the most fundamental of all Mesoamerican ordering systems: the calendar. But these calendrical annals incorporated history, divination, biography, and myth, reflecting the world of Mesoamerican religion and the minutiae of its history. Other genres existed as well: a remarkable herbal (a book containing names and descriptions of useful plants) and Aztec imperial tax statutes are among the handful of pre-conquest works to have survived. But the Aztec libraries consisted chiefly of the calendrical annals, which were revered for the religious lore and divinatory power they imparted.

Recognizing the importance of these books to the Mexican priests and nobility, the conquerors tracked down and burned all the Aztec painted books they could find. The Mexican scribes knew that their history was imperiled. They continued producing codices in secret; the Spanish did not root out the last scribal colleges in mountainous Oaxaca for another century. But the Spanish fathers charged with converting Mesoamericans were implacable. Unable to separate the historical value of the Aztec books from the religious threat they posed, they burned books wherever they were found.

It took only a few years for them to recognize their folly. The

lost Aztec books contained information on the history, ethnography, and languages of Mesoamerica that would prove crucial to christianizing the cultures of Mexico. Within a few years of the conquest, according to the groundbreaking Mexican historian Miguel León-Portilla, missionaries began teaching Aztec nobles to use the Roman alphabet to write the Nahuatl language; a few of the scribes they trained went on to collaborate with Europeans in the production of books that synthesized the pre-Columbian hieroglyphic script with European phonetic writing. The greatest of these works was written by the Franciscan Bernardino de Sahagún, whose *Historia general de las cosas de Nueva España* is a vast encyclopedia of Mesoamerican civilization, treating Aztec history, ethnobotany, religion, and medicine. A unique synthesis of the Mesoamerican and European traditions of the manuscript book, its fairest copy is known as the Florentine Codex—for it resides in the Laurentian Library in Florence, Italy, founded by Cosimo de' Medici and designed by Michelangelo.

But the Spanish were not the first to burn the books of the Valley of Mexico; the Aztecs had discovered on their own how to bind books and how to destroy them. The ancestors of the Aztec rulers of Tenochtitlán had been the Mexica—nomadic tribes who had swarmed out of the north barely one hundred years before the Spanish conquest. As the Mexica cemented their control and began to extend their influence throughout the region, their priests realized that the old chronicles of wandering and savagery would not do. The Mexica quickly transformed themselves into the Aztecs, creating a new order of nobility, new taxes, and a new system of theocracy for the Valley of Mexico. Such sweeping transformations called for the support of a new history as well. And so the old books were gathered and burned. The decision came from Itzcóatl himself, the first Aztec emperor, who took a hand in the composition of the new story, writing hymns to the revised Aztec past. The new books left

no doubt as to the ancient origins of the Aztec claim to power. Nor was it the last chance the Aztec scribes would have to revise their history. When they began to collaborate with priests like Father Bernardino to re-create the chronicles of the lost empire, they would insert into their histories retroactive omens and oracles that “foretold” the coming of the conquistadores in mythologized terms. Thus did they gratify their new rulers’ vanity, even as they validated the power of the complex, brutal religion they had been forced to abandon.

**BIBLIOTECAS** accidental, revisionary, and comprehensive: Rome knew them all. Its mythology even offers the possibility of a civilization finding its birth in the burning of books. Among the tales of Rome’s origins is that of the Cumaean Sibyl, a prophetess who authored books of oracles that predicted the glory of Rome, only to burn them by her own hand. As a maiden, she had spurned the smitten god Apollo, who exacted his revenge by giving her the immortality she craved—without eternal youth. So she aged through the ages, ostracized for her bountiful warts and her bowed back. Apollo apparently took pity on her, though, and granted her the gift of prophecy. She sat in a cave in the Hill of Cumae, passing the years by writing down her oracular visions on palm leaves. In Virgil’s telling, Aeneas came ashore at Cumae, where he visits the Sibyl, who delivers to him her awesome and terrible prophecy of a future Rome. Michelangelo included her image among the prophets in the Sistine Chapel; he shows her with turbaned head, her face deeply creased, but cradling her prophetic book in arms thick and supple as a stonemason’s.

My favorite image of the Cumaean Sibyl is down the hall from Michelangelo’s masterpiece, in the Vatican’s Salone Sistino. This glittering room was once the heart of the Vatican Library; in fact, the

halls through which visitors now exit the Sistine Chapel *were* the library, and the painted wooden cabinets that line the walls ("Do you think they keep the priestly vestments in these?" I heard a fellow tourist ask his wife) once contained the books. The fresco in the Salone Sistino is one of a series depicting great libraries and book burnings of antiquity; it shows the Sibyl as she offers to sell nine books of prophecy—her visions, gathered and inscribed in books of palm leaf—to the early Roman king Tarquin the Bold. When Tarquin dismisses her terms, she throws the first three books on the fire, and offers the remaining six at the original price. Again the king refuses. When the Sibyl of Cumae throws three more volumes on the fire, the slow-witted Tarquin is finally impressed, and pays her price for the remaining three books. This is the scene the Vatican fresco presents, with Tarquin anguishing over the books piled into the brazier while a strangely youthful Sibyl stands insouciant before him. The myth ends with the remaining books installed in the Roman Forum, where they would be consulted by Rome's emperors in desperate times until the fourth century A.D. At some point, however, they disappeared; perhaps they were simply lost, or perhaps some smiling barbarian or Roman general amused himself by consigning the last three volumes to their sisters' fate. Today, the precise contents of the Sibylline Books remain a mystery; from a few snippets quoted in other sources, they seem to have consisted of vague aphorisms written down in Greek—cold comfort to an emperor faced with plague, assassination, or invasions of barbarians.

Although the Sibyl is mythical, her books were real enough. Installed first in the Roman Forum, they later resided in a hollow space beneath the statue of Apollo in Augustus's great Palatine Library. In truth, they marked the beginning of Rome's libraries. But until the time of Julius Caesar, books in Rome were largely in pri-

vate hands; and the owners of great libraries, like Cicero, shared them only with friends and fellow elites. The notion of a public library very much like our own is the invention of Caesar, who had planned one for the city just before his assassination. After Caesar's death, his supporter Asinius Pollio and the writer Varro (whose treatise on library administration, the *De bibliothecis*, does not survive) took up the cause, building Rome's first public library in the Forum around 39 B.C. Following Caesar's wishes, they built a library with two reading rooms—one for Latin books, another for Greek—decorated with statues of appropriate poets and orators. This is the pattern all subsequent Roman libraries take, from the great imperial repositories of Augustus and Trajan to the more modest public libraries and to the little collections of the provincial cities. It marks a strict departure from the Greek model, with its prototype at Alexandria, which had no reading rooms as such. The bilingual nature of the Roman library expressed the Mediterranean heritage to which Rome laid claim, while the emphasis on the reader's experience gives proof of its republican origins.

In libraries as with everything else, Augustus, Rome's first true emperor, both followed Caesar and strove to best him. Once his rivals were safely dead, Augustus set to transforming Rome into an imperial city; later he boasted that he had found Rome brick and left it marble. Among his marble edifices was the great Palatine Library, adjoining his temple of Apollo, as well as a second, later library in the nearby colonnade he built in memory of his sister, Octavia. Of this second one nothing remains. But the remnants of the Palatine Library provide a picture of imperial libraries, with its two side-by-side reading rooms, with niches in the walls for the placement of *armaria*, or doored wooden bookcases, which housed the scrolls. Deeper alcoves provided space for statues. The Roman

biographer of emperors Suetonius agrees with Virgil that the Sibylline Books were brought to this temple, where they were installed beneath the statue of their fickle patron, Apollo.

Like Augustus, subsequent emperors each included a library or two in his imperial building projects. Of these perhaps the greatest was Trajan's, whose library departed from the side-by-side floor plan of the others. His two reading rooms faced each other, communicating through screened colonnades. In the court between them stood the Column of Trajan, the monument for which that emperor is most famous. Though it seems incredible now, this man of war and intrigue placed the supreme memorial to his life of action in the middle of a library.

The emperors didn't only put libraries in their private palaces and temples; they also gave them to the people of Rome. In Augustus's reign, public baths—part of the “bread and circus” largesse with which the imperial city contented the masses—included libraries among their amenities. Although these libraries followed the imperial layout with opposed reading rooms for the two languages, it's likely that they contained more familiar and classical literary works and fewer arcane legal, scientific, and medical treatises than the royal collections did. Whereas the books of Alexandria are reputed to have met their end in the furnaces of public baths, the public library itself seems to have originated in the bathhouse.

The development and spread of libraries throughout the Roman world was especially remarkable given the decentralized and extra-official character of Roman intellectual life. In the public sphere, the pursuit of knowledge, like the pursuit of wealth or power, was a matter of private associations and casual relations among people. Unlike the Ptolemies, the Qin dynasty, or the Aztec nobility, Roman emperors rarely sought direct control over the life of the mind. As the classicist Elizabeth Rawson has pointed out,

Rome lacked schools and universities (many Roman elite went to Greece for schooling); no formal competitions existed for writers and artists, as they had in Greece; nor did the state pay the salaries of engineers, physicians, teachers, or other professionals, who depended on the patronage of individual senators or the imperial house. In this light, the flourishing libraries of Rome are unique: they are the nearest thing Rome had to incorporated, official cultural institutions as we know them today.

For the individual, likewise, literature was never a vocation, but merely a hobby; the writing of history, drama, or lyric poetry was suitable only to a public man's *otium*, or leisure time. But as the career of Marcus Tullius Cicero shows, this does not lessen the importance of literature and libraries in Roman public life. Cicero was the foremost example of the Roman man of letters; his career as a senator, lawyer, and republican official spanned Rome's most turbulent era, in which civil wars destroyed the republic and ushered in the empire, and his letters are a record of Rome's turmoil as important as that of any historian. But it was his talents as an orator that raised him to the heights of the senatorial elite. To Cicero, public life and letters were one. The history of republican Rome and its founding families provided him not only with edifying stories to occupy his leisure hours but with crucial political ammunition as well. Son of a wealthy citizen of common origins, he was frequently shocked at the willful ignorance the scions of Rome's great families showed of their own history. His letters to friends and clients, by contrast, often contain carefully considered requests for information from the senatorial archives.

Like all Roman writers, Cicero expended a great deal of energy buying and copying books and building his library. In this he benefited from the help of Tyrannio, Rome's greatest teacher and scholar, whose own library was reputed to hold some thirty thou-



sand scrolls; from his friends, especially Titus Pomponius Atticus, whose 416 letters from Cicero survive in modern editions; and especially from his many educated Greek slaves. In Rome, many of the tasks of scholarship, from teaching to copying and editing and librarianship, were handled by educated slaves, most of them Greek, who were among the most prized members of any elite household. In this manuscript culture, a slave-owning man of letters was not only a writer, a critic, and a reader—he became of necessity a publisher as well, of his own works and those of others. Though Rome supported a thriving book trade, discriminating readers knew that the texts offered in the bookstalls were often hopelessly corrupt. Cicero and his friends provided each other with carefully copied editions of their own works and those from their collections. Cicero did so when he compiled the *Academia*, his great anthology of Academic philosophy, for the writer Varro's use. He recounts its production to his friend Atticus in a letter of June 24, 45 B.C.:

I have taken the whole Academy from highly aristocratic personages . . . ; and from two books I have put it into four. They are bigger than the old ones, yet I have removed a good deal. . . . As for the work, unless my share of *amour propre* deceives me, it has turned out better than anything in its genre now existing, even in Greek. I am sure you will take a philosophical view of the waste of your copyists' labour on the treatise on Academic doctrine which you already have. This one will be far finer, more concise, better.

His speeches before the Senate, like his books, are "far finer, more concise, better" than those of his peers, and knit together with a complex and eclectic rhetorical style that was Cicero's alone. He used his unmatched talents as an orator to mount a persistent

defense of republican Rome in the face of the advance of Julius Caesar and his rivals. Though he did not take part in Caesar's assassination, his republican sympathies were well known, and when he ran afoul of Caesar's successor Octavian—who later would be called Augustus—he was tracked down and killed. His hands and head were lopped off and put on display at the site of his greatest triumphs, atop the speaker's rostrum in the hall of the Senate.

As the republic became an empire, though, Cicero's beloved libraries flourished. Even amid the chronic fires that plagued Rome, they were maintained into the fourth century. The city's great conflagration of A.D. 64 (during which Nero supposedly fiddled as the city burned) claimed the Palatine Library. Domitian restored it; he did the same for Augustus's Octavian Library when it burned. This is remarkable, given Domitian's lack of interest in letters. Of Domitian, Suetonius writes, "All liberal studies in the beginning of his empire he neglected; albeit he took order to repair the libraries consumed with fire, to his exceeding great charges, making search from all parts for the copies of books lost, and sending as far as Alexandria to write and correct them."

The splendor of the empire persisted long into its decline, and even Christian Romans as late as the fifth century would visit each other's villas to relive the splendor of bygone days. The prolific epistoler Sidonius Apollinaris, in a letter to his friend Donidius written about A.D. 430, describes such a scene: the shouts of youth sporting on the fields, the chatter of dice, and laughter pealing out in secluded rooms. He finds his greatest joy, however, in the villa library, where he discovers

books in any number ready to hand; you might have imagined yourself looking at the shelves of a professional scholar or at the tiers in the Athenaeum or at the towering presses of the book-



sellers. The arrangement was such that the manuscripts near the ladies' seats were of a devotional type, while those among the gentlemen's benches were works distinguished by the grandeur of Latin eloquence; the latter, however, included certain writings of particular authors which preserve a similarity of style though their doctrines are different; for it was a frequent practice to read writers whose artistry was of a similar kind—here Augustine, there Varro, here Horace, there Prudentius.

Sidonius's description provides evidence of changes in the uses of books, even amid the continued appreciation of "the grandeur of Latin eloquence." First of all, there is now space for the once dissident books of those Gibbon calls the Galileans. Sidonius himself was a devout Christian, as were most of his fellow elite by this time. But that didn't stop them from appreciating the rhetorical perspicacity of such pagan authors as Varro and Horace. In the fourth century, Saint Jerome could still dream of being damned for idolatry for his devotion to the pagan classics, yet the proscription against the pagans even a few decades later was not so great as to give Sidonius and his friends pause.

The fact that "devotional books" are placed near the women's seating gives another view of the sociology of reading in the late empire. In pagan times, women had not often been offered much in the way of an education. Cicero's daughter, Tullia, was a rare exception: privately tutored, she was called *doctissima*, or "most learned," by her father in his moving essay *Consolatione*, written upon her death. When women did receive education, through either their own industry or the unorthodox methods of their parents, they tended to favor philosophy and mathematics over literature; for the latter was a masculine and practical subject, tuned to the needs of public discourse in the Senate. This metaphysical, mystical reading

perhaps prepared Roman women to be more receptive to Christian thought, and to prize meditative works over the florid rhetoric of the poets and historians.

Finally, we can imagine that, among the many scrolls in the library Sidonius visited, there were a fair number of books as we know them today. Christians introduced the codex, or bound book, to Rome from the homelands of the early church in Palestine, Egypt, and Greece. Based on portfolios of wax-covered ivory or wood that literate Romans had long carried as a kind of notebook, pages of papyrus and vellum were first bound together in similar fashion in the Christian era. A mosaic in Ravenna, which dates from Sidonius's time, shows a traditional Roman *armarium*, or bookcase, filled with codices lying flat with their covers upturned, their titles clearly showing. They were the Gospels: the codex was still a distinctly Christian medium.

Codices are not only much easier to read than scrolls; they are easier to store, too. Though their materials are every bit as subject to decay as the papyrus used in scrolls, their stable position on the library shelf helps ensure a longer life with fewer repairs. They are also easier to organize than scrolls, which would one day permit libraries to attain far greater complexity than in antiquity. But the codex could not save private libraries like the one Sidonius describes from ultimate disappearance; in the centuries of deprivation and disorder that attended the decline of Rome, books suffered along with everything else.

In addition to the ravages of emperors, and barbarians, and angry mobs, books endure natural disasters. The city of Herculaneum was buried in the rivers of ash that flowed from the eruption of Mount Vesuvius in A.D. 79 (the same eruption that destroyed, and preserved, Pompeii). Excavations in the eighteenth century revealed a room in the famous Villa of the Papyri that contained the jumbled

fragments of scrolls blackened by the fires of the eruption. Though many were too badly burned to be read, the layout of the room itself was a perfect example of a Roman library, with niches in the walls where the *armaria* were neatly installed.

The extent of the library is extraordinary: it contained some two thousand scrolls. Herculaneum was a suburb of Naples, which had grown from an early Greek colony into a deeply Hellenized, cosmopolitan city. The books of the Villa of the Papyri reflect this eclectic, literate climate—most of them were Greek works, dominated by treatises on Epicurean philosophy. Little remains of these books but carbonized chunks barely recognizable as scrolls; more than two hundred years ago excavators discarded many fragments, mistaking them for so many bits of charcoal.

An eighteenth-century Italian priest, Antonio Piaggio, invented an extraordinary machine for opening the burned scrolls: silk threads sewn to the leading edge of the papyrus are wound around an array of screws which, by their gradual tightening, peel back the burned layers; the brittle manuscript fragments are sliced away and attached to adhesive strips to strengthen and preserve them. By means of this process, a number of the scrolls have been carefully unrolled, read, and published. The majority of them, however, were thought unreadable until recently. Now a team from Brigham Young University and the Italian National Library at Naples are using digital imaging techniques to decipher the remaining fragments. Ink reflects light differently from the charred papyrus on which it is found. Spectral photography can illuminate differences between the two, rendering a lucid image of the writing. Ten thousand fragments remain; the team members believe they can decipher them all.

Long before the fall of Rome, Plato and Aristotle both came to the conclusion that there is no political system that doesn't suffer decline. As a not-so-minor corollary to this rule, it could be added

that there is no library that does not ultimately disappear, leaving a lacuna for future generations to puzzle over. The tragedy of the Villa of the Papyri is the tragedy of the library throughout history: by bringing books together in one place, cultures and kings inevitably make of them a sacrifice to time. So it is with the vast majority of the libraries of antiquity, from Asia Minor to Spain, from Alexandria to Pergamum. Researchers working on the fragments of Herculaneum offer the tantalizing possibility that they may find some of the many lost works of antiquity among the fragments. But even if the last few charred characters offer up nothing new, one thing is certain: the most complete ancient library accessible to us today survived because it burned.