The Alexandria Library and the work of the International Friends

1. Introduction

I was reluctant to come to this seminar because I was due to spend a week in Alexandria at the opening of the new library there. This served as no satisfactory excuse for Stela Filipi-Matutinovic who instead of accepting my excuse said that I should still come and talk about the Library as well.

I actually became involved in the project to build a new library in Alexandria in two ways: I was a member of the UK Friends of UNESCO, set up when the British government ceased to be its friend and left membership of the organisation. A UK Friends of the Alexandria Library was formed as an offshoot since UNESCO was one of the promoters as we shall see later and so I joined that. At the IFLA Conference in Beijing in 1996, I was asked by the Unesco representative at that conference if I would go to Alexandria and evaluate the new library's proposals for a library system which I did for a week in November of that year. On my return I reported back to the UK Friends and was asked to join their committee. So I have two different connections with the Library and I hope to talk about the role of Friends as well as about the Library itself.

2. International Support for the Alexandria Library

Even before I ever visited the Alexandria Library, two of the members of the Friends on the staff of the British Library had already been to help the library develop an acquisitions policy, so the Friends were already doing some work for the Library. Unesco encouraged the setting up of Friends groups in different countries to channel support for the new library. Unesco have a website for them, so people can contact the appropriate group (1). However, we in the UK Friends have concentrated on raising funds for the purchase of a microfiche of 15,000 Arabic manuscripts in the collection of the British Library. We did this by producing a book called Arabic Treasures of the British Library which we sold to 'donors' and which contains a selection of material from the best or more interesting of the manuscripts which have been microfiched. The microfiching was incidentally done in collaboration with the King Faisal centre for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh. The British Library agreed to make a reduction of the cost of the microfiche, and a generous loan from a publisher has made it possible for us to be able to give the microfiche collection to the Library in time for its official opening in October.

Talking of Friends, other countries have groups. In some countries they consist of librarians who like the idea of resurrecting the Ancient Library of Alexandria and can see it as a repository for many kinds of materials. This is the case in Norway where there is a strong interest because the architect is the Norwegian company Snohetta. They have done a great deal to raise money for Norwegian furniture. Other groups (not predominantly librarians I suspect) have suggested rooms of material donated by countries and kept as separate collections, surely a librarian's nightmare.

In other countries the membership is related to the Alexandrian expatriate community. Alexandria itself since its founding has been a melting pot, a place where civilisations converge. It is the meeting point of Asia, Africa and Europe, since Europe is only across the Mediterranean and since for much of its most important years it was a Greek colony. The Greeks have a special interest in it, so the Greek Friends persuaded the Greek Foreign Ministry to make a large donation to the project half for the library and half for a statue of Alexandria the Great to be placed outside it. Unfortunately the local authority planners could find no place for it nearby so it now stands in the middle of a ceremonial boulevard about a kilometre distant. The French were also a colonial power and the street names were French before they were arabicised after Suez. Old people still use the old names but the French and Arabic usually have different meanings so are no clue to each other! The French have supported the library as much as any other country. Like the UK Friends the interested membership consists of a large number of the great and the good such as retired senior librarians, civil servants, authors and such like. But the late President Mitterand pledged support for the library and the French government

gave a large sum towards the purchase of a software system for library management encompassing the control of multi-media material.

Many of the countries which have links with Alexandria as a city run social events to raise money. Baltimore in the USA is twinned with Alexandria and they have supported the Library by collecting books from all over the USA and shipping them to the Library, the cost of the shipping having been raised by social events abd donations. There is an International Friends meeting from time to time when the different national Friends Groups meets to exchange ideas. Now the library has opened there is the possibility of a different kind of Friend. A user who did not qualify to use the library as a local resident could join the Friends and get access s to extra facilities. The Friends of the British Library has such a scheme and a room is made available for the Friends to sit and read the daily newspapers (which other wise are not available in the British Library on their day of issue!). The Alexandria Friends are such a group. Founded over a year ago, they are supporting many aspects of the library such as the conferences that take place in the new conference centre which to them is an integral part of the Library's mission. Of course it must be remembered that to the business community in Alexandria the influx of conference attendees is more important than the trickle of scholars who might come to consult the library materials.

The nearest Friends groups in this region are the Bulgarian and the Greek Friends.

3. **The original library**

No one really knows very much about the original library, certainly how it met its end. An interesting account is available on the web anonymously, entitled 'The Mysterious Fate of the Great Library of Alexandria' (2). It is quite likely that it just petered out during the decline of Alexandria in the 7th century AD. It was definitely founded by Ptolemy II in Alexandria which had been founded by Alexander the Great on a flying visit and this became the capital of the last dynasty of Pharaohs descended from Ptolemy, Alexander's general. The Library formed part of a museum but it is not clear whether it was a separate building or not. One story goes that Julius Caesar attacked Alexandria in pursuit of Pompey and finding himself about to be cut off by the Egyptian fleet he set fire to the enemy ships. The fire spread and engulfed 400,000 scrolls in the library. Subsequently Alexandria remained a place of learning and there were almost certainly libraries there but whether they ever achieved the same stature as the original library, no one can say. If libraries were burnt at the time when the city converted from paganism to Christianity, no one can say but it is likely. Alternatively the same accusation could be made against Muslims when the city converted to that religion. The main conclusion is that the stories about the end of the Alexandria library encapsulate a moral tale that books are likely to be burnt in war.

4. **Re-building the library, the original concept**

The idea of the library, of rebuilding the Bibliotheca Alexandrina (its Latin name) was conceived in the 1980's and on 12 February 1990 in Aswan members of the International Honorary Commission including Heads of State signed the Aswan Declaration for the Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria.

They declared in their statement that the Library would be a witness to a decisive moment in the history of the human spirit and should provide a base for acquiring information for researchers all over the world. At that point a sum of 65 million US dollars was pledged to the library from various countries. According to the architectural brief, the purpose was to return to bring to Alexandria the glory it held in ancient times.

In January 1987, Unesco financed a feasibility study that confirmed the feasibility of the project. The aim of the library should be to meet the cultural educational and research needs of the Egypt and the Mediterranean region.

On 26 June 1988, President Hosni Mubarak of Egypt laid the foundation stone on a site of about 35,200 square meters.

The same year an international competition was held, launched in September (3). By November 1988, 1324 applications had been registered from 74 countries. 524 were actually submitted from 58 countries. The jury worked from 17-25 September 1989. In the end Snohetta from Oslo, Norway were selected. The design was strongly symbolic. It included a circle inclined toward the sea, partly submerged in the ground. Seen from an aerial view it suggests the image of the sun. (Egyptian Hieroglyphs show the sun generally as a simple disc). The image of the ancient sun in contemporary terms will illuminate the world of human, library, and cultural activities, which complement the existing conference centre. The inclined roof brings in light and offers views of the sea from the interior, while giving the external impression of a continuing sea. A large portion of the Library itself is below ground. From the ground level it appears as a strong, cylindrical masonry form emerging from the earth, or a new moon that will grow to a full moon. It rises from this particular site like the rebirth of an earlier form: the ancient Library of Alexandria. The circle, about 16 meters in diameter, is not closed. Inverted triangle shapes (small pyramids) on the roof prevent direct light from entering the budding. Staff areas have balconies overlooking the Bay.

It consists of a nine-level design Inside, the building offers staff and users alike a new concept of physical library layout. Cascading levels of platforms contained within this single volume, illuminated from the roof, provide a uniform ambience throughout the various sections of the Library. A technical spine serves the different platforms. Each level allows access to its own closed stacks; new platforms can be added, allowing internal expansion. Designed as an arrow, an elevated pass way links the campus of the University of Alexandria to the peninsula, traversing the cylinder; a plain solid wall, 35 meters above ground and 16 meters beneath ground level, wraps around the cylinder providing protection from the wind and sand. The wall is covered with calligraphy of the known alphabets and musical and other symbols including pre-historic 'writing' from around the world.

Work started immediately on a conference centre which has been open a number of years.

In October 1990, the Egyptian Ministry of Education signed an agreement with the Director General of Unesco asserting the international community's commitment for the implementation of the 'Revival of the Ancient Library of Alexandria Project'.

In 1991, they started negotiating for the building with consultants, 40,000 volumes were acquired mainly by donation that same year and the Executive Secretariat was established.

In 1993 Snohetta began preliminary design and prepared the executive design and tender documents.

In 1994 the international tender was put out and library staff were recruited and training started often assisted by placements in foreign libraries. Unesco provided a project manager to see the library off the ground, for a period of two years.

1995-6 saw an extra 60,000 volumes added to the collection, construction began. As with all large buildings, such as the Bibliothèque de France and even more notably the British Library, it took longer to build than expected. The building was ready for occupation in October 2001 and for a month the public were let in just to look at the building. It could not be staffed as a library as there were not enough staff recruited. In April 2001, a new director was appointed replacing the earlier Project Manager who was an architect though with a very great knowledge of libraries. The new director is Prof. Ismail Serageldin, formerly Associate Director of the World Bank responsible for culture.

He has negotiated a new constitution for the library. At the same time he organised the formal opening ceremony which was set to be on World Book Day and Shakespeare's Birthday on 23 April 2002. In the event this had to be postponed until 16 October as a result of student unrest in the area: the library is in the heart of the Alexandria University campus as well as being on the Corniche which

is a famous road, rather like Copacabana in Rio de Janeiro, with a beautiful view over the harbour to the medieval castle.

4. **Library acquisitions, developing policies and developing roles.**

Librarians are of course as interested in what is in the library and in the library's role as they are in the building itself.

It has not always been easy to determine this over the years. There was originally a strand of thinking that said that the new library should replicate the old. It should aim to contain all of literature of the ancient world which would have been found in the original Alexandria Library (as we saw earlier would that be in 47 BC or in the elate 4th century AD). This could only be achieved by microfiching this kind of literature.

The problem with this was that the contents of the library would be too restrictive for the kind of project it was. But the idea of having not originals but microfilms started then and later evolved into electronic materials.

Another idea was to transfer the idea of being all-inclusive to the present time so the library would hold everything available now. That was too much of a problem as the quantities would be too great whether in terms of storage or of digitising.

National Friends had schemes for adding to the materials. I mentioned ours in the UK but we also produced a bibliography of the material that should be available in the library and was available from British publishers. After asking the Library to delete anything it had already acquired, we then asked publishers to donate the material required by the library.

One idea that came through all this was that the Library could provide a resource for scholars of Egypt in antiquity researching into any of the eras. This was felt to be valuable because Alexandria does not have a good library for them and the resources available to them in Cairo are overcrowded. The climate of Alexandria is usually better too, being farther north and on the Mediterranean Sea.

It had to wait for the appointment of Dr Serageldin for the Library's acquisitions policy to be firmed up. Additionally he has clarified that it can be used by any member of the public with a reason to use it. Unesco had already requested as early as 1997 that it should have a library for the blind and a children's library was proposed. The acquisitions policy of the library is now firmly laid down but its overall aim is to provide both the national and international communities of scholars and researchers with unique collections and facilities focussing on Alexandria, Egyptian, ancient and medieval civilisations as well as on contemporary disciplines. The Library will also have valuable collections of science and technology resource material to help the socioeconomic and cultural development studies on Egypt and the region. Because it is a large building with a controlled climate it is good that it has taken care of some unique documents from the Alexandria Public Library, manuscripts and archives from the Governorate of Alexandria from the 19th century.

It is always difficult to estimate the size of a library's collections and probably it is more difficult in a library where gifts have been a large proportion of acquisitions.

Estimates vary but it is reckoned to contain now 500,000 volumes. The cataloguing has not kept pace with this. Work began using CDS/ISIS because it was a Unesco project. An in-house format was used. They had to choose an exchange format and in the end decided to use MARC 21 because VTLS is set up for that format. So the move to the new system was not easy even though there was a large file of records on CDS/ISIS.

5. **The Inauguration**

The Inauguration took place on 16 October 2002. A party of some 20 or so UK Friends were present in Alexandria but because the Egyptian government was worried about security only a small number of people were at the Inauguration, led by the President of Egypt, Hosni Mubarak and his wife Suzanne Mubarak. The guest of honour was the President of France, Jacques Chirac. Only one UK Friend had a place at the ceremony, our secretary, and I along with many others was invited by the Greek community to watch it in their private park. However, I had been to the dress rehearsal and had heard the beautiful musical event which was a large part of the proceedings.

The inauguration was preceded by an international Friends Meeting at which the Director apologised to us that so few could attend and explained that the governemnt had seen fit to reduce the numbers for reasons of security. The UK Friends were particularly thanked for the microfiche and the head of the manuscripts department thanked us personally as it has swelled considerably the amount of material he has in his collection.

6. **The future**

It remains to be seen what the future holds for the library. The building will take many years to fill, and it is in my opinion likely to be an extra resource for students of the university whose facilities need improvement. It will also be a repository for materials in need of conservation because of its excellent air conditioned facilities.

One thing is certain: it has fired the imagination of librarians around the world. So much so that some librarians have been surprised that IFLA has not done more to promote it. Also the imagination of people who have new ideas has been fired. If you look on the web you will see many times that the word Alexandria has been hi-jacked by people who want to use it to indicate a grand library or even a grand digital collection. Others have thought that this is something the library could do so recently there has been a proposal for the library to store Powerpoint presentations in the medical field to enhance the transfer of medical information. This is being promote by academic medics in the USA in conjunction with the World Health Organisation. The proposal is that the Library could host these on its computers.

Already the library computers are host to a new archive which takes copies of web pages so that they can be retained for posterity. The Internet Archive has created the Wayback Machine. The Wayback Machine makes it possible to access more than 10 billion pages stored in the Internet Archive's web archive. The Wayback Machine was unveiled on October 24th, 2001 at U.C. Berkeley's Bancroft Library. The Internet Archive has donated its digital collections to the Bibliotheca Alexandrina to create a huge resource of information (4). They have also offered 2000 hours of Egyptian and Worldnet television broadcasts and a book scanning facility to the Library.

So in a way the library may one day be able to host all knowledge but only when knowledge itself can take up so little storage space.

References

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Note

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