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The library of Alexandria

Ancient Egypt is well known as the country which housed the most famous library of antiquity, the library of Alexandria. The details surrounding the foundation of this institution remain unclear. The idea may have originated with Ptolemy I, but the available sources indicate that actual construction did not take place until the reign of Ptolemy II and the credit is perhaps entirely his.¹

Much is known about the wide range of scholarly activities and ground-breaking achievements of the library of Alexandria. But the possibility that any aspect of contemporary *Egyptian* culture may have played a part in the decision to create this institution has been given little if any serious consideration. The inspiration for its creation is usually sought in the Greek world and there alone.² There is, however, very limited evidence of institutional libraries in the Greek world before the Hellenistic era. By contrast, Egypt had a millennia-long tradition of temple libraries, and one that is well documented. At least a part of the activities for which the library in Alexandria would become famous, had long been the stock in trade of these libraries. This tradition is largely unknown outside a relatively small group of Egyptological specialists because it has received limited attention and general studies are not readily accessible. Yet substantial source material is available. In marked contrast to the situation with Greek and Roman libraries, for which we rely almost exclusively on secondary literary sources and the architecture of monumental buildings, the Egyptian material largely consists of contemporary and primary evidence in the form of actual writings from the libraries along with the titles and biographical statements of the people associated with them. The possibility that the large-scale, systematic collections of religious, scientific and historical writings kept at the temple libraries may have played a part in inspiring the creation of the library of Alexandria should, in my opinion, be given serious consideration.

¹ Cf. Bagnall 2002: 348–51. ² An exception is Shubert 1993.

It is, in this relation, important to keep in mind that Egypt in general had become a source of much inspiration to the Greek world after Psammetichus I, in the mid-seventh century, allowed large numbers of Greeks to settle in Egypt and Naucratis was founded. In the wake of the Greeks becoming familiar with Egypt and its culture, numerous scholars are said to have travelled there to study. This was centuries before the foundation of the library of Alexandria. And, according to our sources, the object of their journeys was precisely those cities that housed the greatest temples and temple libraries. These journeys would prove anything but futile. Above all, the Greeks soon learned the art of writing on papyrus. This made it possible to commit to writing works like those of Homer and Hesiod, some time between the eighth and the sixth centuries BC. Without the development of written culture which followed in the fifth century there could have been no library of Alexandria. The Greeks also learned the mathematical decimal system from the Egyptians and the calendrical system based on the solar year, to mention just two other fundamental borrowings.

In addition to the rich testimony to intellectual interaction between Greek and Egyptian cultures in the centuries preceding the creation of the library of Alexandria, I would like to draw attention to a further source which seems to me of crucial importance. This so-called Satrap Stela is an inscription set up by Ptolemy I when he was still just the viceroy of Egypt on behalf of the king of Macedon and had not yet assumed the titles of kingship.³ The text relates how Ptolemy returned to Egypt from the conquered Persians a number of divine images and, what is especially interesting in connection with the present paper, the writings from the Egyptian temple libraries. This achievement is mentioned foremost in the text, even before the announcement of the decision to relocate the royal residence from Memphis to Alexandria.

The Satrap Stela provides direct testimony that the ambitious Ptolemy realised the importance of maintaining and preserving that wisdom which Greeks, throughout the centuries, had travelled to Egypt in order to familiarise themselves with. Had these texts not been considered of utmost importance, they would hardly have been mentioned so prominently by Ptolemy. Evidently the Persians had also taken an interest in these texts. If they had merely wished to deprive the Egyptians of these writings, in which their ancient culture and science was codified, they would surely just

³ A recent translation is Ritner in Simpson 2003: 392–7.

have set them ablaze, rather than to try and carry them off wholesale to Persia.

Libraries in ancient Egypt

What in fact constitutes a temple library? Although an actual temple library was discovered more than 75 years ago and there are likely remains from other temple libraries or priestly communities in various collections, these have received only a minimal amount of attention.⁴ Until the 1990s hardly any of the material had been published and to date most of the relevant material still remains to be studied and made available. Earlier studies of Egyptian temple libraries have therefore focused on more indirect source material.⁵

The earliest textual references to libraries date back to the Fourth Dynasty (c. 2550 BC). They consist of titles of officials associated with buildings containing what is described as ‘sacred writings’, which indicate that we are dealing with religious or other cultic texts, rather than administrative documents. One vast category of material which must surely have been kept in some form of libraries are the liturgical texts known collectively as the Pyramid Texts. The corpus so far attested amounts to about 300 pages in a modern English edition.⁶ These early indirect attestations of libraries are contemporary with two other important developments in relation to the history of writing in Egypt; the emergence of biographical texts inscribed on the walls of the tombs of officials, and the first statues depicting officials in the scribal pose. While no literary papyri survive from this period, the extensive use of papyri in the administration is documented by the remains of four archives from the late third millennium which have been found at royal mortuary temples. In one case the archival architecture was still partially preserved and this single archive was large enough to have accommodated several thousand papyri.⁷

A substantial number of literary papyri are preserved from the Middle Kingdom and Second Intermediate Period (sc. the first half of the second millennium), but only a single library with a known archaeological context

⁴ See in more detail Ryholt forthcoming a. A general survey of Egyptian literature from the Late Period and Greco-Roman Egypt may be found in Ryholt 2010.

⁵ The most comprehensive study of Egyptian libraries to date is Burkard 1980, cf. also Assmann 2001. A series of new studies on Egyptian libraries will be published by Parkinson forthcoming, Hagen forthcoming, and Ryholt forthcoming a.

⁶ Faulkner 1969, Allen 2005. ⁷ Ryholt forthcoming b.

survives. This is a small collection of twenty-three papyri found *in situ* within a box in a tomb at Thebes. The archaeological context and the fact that most of the texts were magical or medico-magical indicates that we are dealing with a private professional library pertaining to some form of magical practitioner.⁸ It further contained some poetical literature, including the *Tale of Sinuhe* and the *Tale of the Eloquent Peasant*.

More importantly, it is also from the time of the Middle Kingdom that we have the first references to scribes and texts associated with the so-called 'House of Life'.⁹ This institution has often been thought to represent a kind of academy, but it is never directly associated with teaching. It is, however, not until the Late Period (c. 664 BC onwards) that we have more substantial information on the activities of this institution. At this point in time, the House of Life can be shown to be intimately linked to the cult of Osiris who played a central and dominating role in Egyptian religion.¹⁰ Accordingly, the institution was associated with wisdom and even arcane knowledge and one of its primary activities was the study and composition of the religious and magical texts that allowed the maintenance of the cult all over Egypt.

The Tebtunis temple library

The only large-scale temple library preserved to us from ancient Egypt is the Tebtunis temple library which will be the focus of the remaining part of this chapter.¹¹ The library was found *in situ* and seems to have been abandoned in the early third century AD. It thus represents one of the latest collections of ancient Egyptian literature. It may nonetheless be considered largely representative of earlier libraries since a significant number of the texts it contained are already attested in much older versions.

Tebtunis is the southernmost settlement in the Fayum Oasis which is located south of Cairo, immediately to the west of the Nile. During the Hellenistic Period and well into the second century AD, the Fayum was a very prosperous part of Egypt. The archaeological remains at Tebtunis are particularly well preserved since the settlement is located in the dry desert climate outside the edge of present-day cultivation. The site itself is considerable, covering about 120 acres. It includes a large town-area with private

⁸ Quack 2006a: 72–7. ⁹ Gardiner 1938. ¹⁰ Ryholt forthcoming (a).

¹¹ A general survey of the Tebtunis temple library and its contents may be found in Ryholt 2005 (cf. now Ryholt 2012 for literary papyri) and more detailed surveys of the religious texts in von Lieven 2005 and Quack 2006b.

houses, a main temple, several smaller chapels, a large processional street or dromos, baths and several cemeteries. The main temple was dedicated to Soknebtunis, a form of the crocodile god Sobek whose name simply means 'Sobek, Lord of Tebtunis'. It is to this temple that the library here discussed belonged.

The modern excavation history of the temple library is a very complex affair, many details of which are still not entirely clear.¹² The earliest known batches of material were discovered during an English expedition in 1899 and a German one in 1902, but the bulk of the material was only excavated by local Egyptian villagers in 1930 and by an Italian expedition in 1931. The papyri discovered by the English are now in Oxford and Berkeley, those by the Germans in Berlin, and those by the Italians in Florence. The most substantial part, which was found by the local villagers, ended up on the antiquities market. As a result groups of papyri were dispersed between many institutions and individuals: the lion's share was acquired by Copenhagen.

No official report on the excavation of the papyri and their archaeological context were ever published by any of the three official expeditions. However, according to the scant information available, the papyri excavated by the Italian mission were found in two adjoining cellars, i.e. two subterranean rooms. These were located in relation to one of the houses built against the inside of the temenos wall which surrounded the temple and less than twenty metres from the sanctuary itself. The exact location of the house remains disputed¹³ and we have no detailed description of the cellars. For this reason important questions remain open: How large were the cellars? Did they contain niches or shelves or evidence of containers such as baskets, boxes or jars? Which papyri were found where? Were any other types of objects found with the papyri? Were papyri kept here during, or only after, the period of the temple's use?

Because of the uncertainty as to the precise location of the building under which the two cellars were located, it also remains uncertain what it looked like, but none of the preserved architecture in the row of buildings against the temenos wall is particularly imposing. There is nothing to indicate that Egyptian temple libraries were ever constructed as prestigious monuments as far as architecture is concerned. It is extremely unlikely that any of

¹² The excavation history is discussed in detail by Ryholt forthcoming c.

¹³ Cf. Rondot 2004: 31. Prof. Claudio Gallazzi (pers. com.) kindly informs me that records available to him suggest that the house was located at another location within the same general area.

them would have resembled the Roman period libraries preserved in Rome, Athens, Ephesus and Timgad which were built as large-scale monuments by emperors and wealthy Roman citizens.¹⁴

Let us proceed to the date, size and contents of the Tebtunis temple library. The material spans the first and second centuries AD. There are indications that the bulk of the material might have been written between 100–150 AD. The latest dated papyri are from the early third century AD. The size of the library is more difficult to estimate owing to its very poor state of preservation. The papyri have been reduced to tens of thousands of smaller fragments. For this reason work on individual texts is immensely time-consuming; most of them remain to be studied in detail and published. A tally based on my study of the fragments in the different collections indicates that they represent around 400 texts.

For the present purpose, the texts may conveniently be divided into three major groups: cultic, scientific and narrative. The cultic texts, by which I mean texts related to the cult at the temple and its priesthood, represent about 60 per cent of the total holdings. The remaining texts from the library are made up of roughly equal amounts of scientific texts and historical narratives. In addition to this material, there is a small number of wisdom texts which are not easily attributed to any of the three above-mentioned groups.

It is also necessary to add a comment on the use of scripts. The temple library includes material written in four different scripts. The majority of texts, about two thirds, are written in demotic. This had originally been the script used for administration and other everyday purposes, but over time its use expanded so as to include scientific and narrative literature. After the Roman conquest of Egypt its use gradually became restricted demographically to the priestly communities. Within the temple library, the majority of the scientific texts and all the historical narratives are written in demotic. The cultic texts are mostly written in hieratic which was used for most of the remaining third of the library. This script was exclusively used by priests in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. Finally, there are a limited number of texts written in the hieroglyphic script, several of which were intended for the very purpose of learning this script, and a few further texts written in Greek. The latter are nearly all scientific (medical and astrological) in nature. There is almost no evidence of Greek poetic literature within the temple library, but numerous copies of various Greek authors – not least

¹⁴ See conveniently Casson 2001.

the works of Homer – have been found in the private houses of the priests, and it is clear that they were familiar with such material.

The cultic literature¹⁵

I will begin the presentation of selected texts from the temple library with the cultic material. Two of the most fundamental texts within this category are the Daily Temple Ritual and the Offering Ritual. The Daily Temple Ritual provides step-by-step instructions concerning the basic ritual which was performed every day in every temple in Egypt. There may have been minor variations from temple to temple, but on the whole the ritual was the same. The earliest manuals on the daily ritual are preserved in three papyri from the tenth century BC and relate specifically to the cults of Amun and Mut at Thebes, while a series of reliefs at the temple of Seti I (c. 1300 BC) at Abydos furnish us with the most complete set of pictorial representations of the acts that were performed during the ritual. Regular offerings also formed a central part of the cult and are similarly described in the Offering Ritual which has not survived from earlier periods.

In addition to the rituals that were performed on a daily basis, the temple library includes manuals relating to rituals carried out during festivals that were celebrated only on specific dates during the year. An example is provided by a manual relating to the Bastet festival which was a kind of New Year celebration. One of the fundamental Egyptian myths, known as *the Myth of the Sun's Eye*, relates how the sun-god had once grown weary of man and decided to let his daughter eradicate all of mankind.¹⁶ His daughter changed herself into Sakhmet, a ferocious lioness, and started a wholesale slaughter. The sun-god soon changed his mind, but his daughter had grown fond of human blood and refused to stop. Fortunately a priest from Heliopolis came up with the idea of brewing a large amount of beer and mixing this with red ochre so that it would resemble blood. Sakhmet drank the beer and, according to plan, grew drunk, suffered a hangover and gave up her enterprise, and so mankind was saved. In celebration of this event, the Egyptians held a nationwide annual celebration, the 'Feast of Drunkenness', in honour of Bastet at New Year's day. The festival is also described by Herodotus (2.59–60).

¹⁵ For a more detailed description of the contents of the Tebtunis temple library and fuller references, see Ryholt 2005, 2010. The latter contribution also provides a general survey of the surviving literature of Late Period and Greco-Roman Egypt.

¹⁶ One version is translated by Wente in Simpson 2003: 289–98.

The amount of magical literature in the temple library is much smaller than one would expect to find during earlier periods. However, by the time of the Roman occupation of Egypt there were severe restrictions on the use of magic, and in 199 AD, during the reign of Septimius Severus, an official decree declared that the practice of magic was punishable by death.¹⁷ These sanctions seem mainly to have been put in place to avoid the potential dangers of malicious magic, and it is therefore significant that the temple library does not seem to include any magical spells to gain influence over the feelings and health of others. Such spells had been very common in earlier times and are still attested in a single Theban archive of demotic texts of slightly later date than our temple library. The few magical texts from the temple library mainly concern the protection for pharaoh. They were, in other words, used for the priests who assumed the role of pharaoh in carrying out the cult.

The cultic material also includes a large number of manuals or reference works containing what may be termed 'priestly knowledge'. Such reference works already existed in earlier times, but the number and the scope of their contents seems to have expanded during the Late Period. Through these manuals, the priests sought to classify and explain their entire surrounding world. The themes include the ideal temple and its priesthood, the gods and their mythology, the characteristics of each geographical division of Egypt, the universe, time and space, and so forth. Several of the manuals survive in multiple copies within the Tebtunis temple library and are also attested elsewhere in Egypt. It seems reasonable to assume that these would have been present in more or less every temple.

Four of the most important manuals – to judge from the number of surviving copies – are the so-called Book of the Temple, the Mythological Manual, the Priestly Manual and the Book of Nut. These were all written in the hieratic script, except in the case of the Book of Nut where there is also a hieroglyphic version. With somewhere in the order of twenty copies within the Tebtunis temple library alone, the Book of the Temple is by far the best attested manual of priestly knowledge. It consists of two parts. The first is a treatise on the ideal temple, which provides a detailed description of all important elements of the temple and their significance. The other is a treatise on the temple personnel, which provides a description of all relevant temple occupations, including the role and training

¹⁷ Cf. Ritner 1995: 3,355–6, on official Roman hostility towards Egyptian magic.

of specific priests. The Priestly Manual contains a concise description of each geographical division of the country according to a fixed structure which provides information about the name of the main deity, the main temple, the title of the high priest, the sacred lake, the sacred tree, the sacred mound, etc. In contrast to these lists, the Mythological Manual provides narrative accounts of numerous myths about local gods throughout Egypt.

I would like to go into slightly more detail about the fourth manual whose original title reads ‘The Plan of the Movement of the Stars’. This manual is more commonly referred to as the Book of Nut because the older hieroglyphic versions are dominated by a large image of the Goddess Nut who personifies the sky. As the original title implies, this was a treatise on the sky and the heavenly bodies. Knowledge of these matters was essential for the priests, partly because of rituals associated with certain celestial events, and partly because an understanding of astronomy was fundamental to the art of astrological divination (on which see below). But the aspect of this composition to which I would particularly like to draw attention is not its contents, but the light it sheds on textual transmission. The Book of Nut is first attested in the underground temple built by Seti I at Abydos (c. 1300 BC), some 1500 years before the copies of the text found in the temple library. Curiously, at a time of such wealth and might as the early Nineteenth Dynasty, it was apparently not possible for the people put in charge of the construction of the underground temple of Seti I at Abydos to gain access to an intact copy of the Book of Nut. The copy at their disposal was damaged and in the text, as copied onto the walls of his temple, blank spaces were left to indicate where words or passages were damaged or illegible. This is noteworthy since it might be taken as an indication that the text was an even older composition which had suffered during its transmission. Another interesting circumstance is the fact that the Tebtunis temple library contained different versions of the text. One contains the same blank spaces as the text used by King Seti I, while the same passages appear to be intact in another. The question which presents itself is: why was the damaged version kept if an undamaged version was available? The answer is presumably that the scribes were in doubt whether the undamaged version was original or whether the intact passages in question were later restorations; it might therefore have been considered better to be on the safe side and retain both versions. The text also shines light on another aspect of textual criticism. Ancient Egyptian priests, like the later scholars at the library of Alexandria, sometimes encountered passages in older texts which

they felt required comment for one reason or another.¹⁸ In the case of the Book of Nut, the scribes evidently sought to distinguish clearly between the original text and the later commentaries. In doing so, they took advantage of the fact that they had two scripts at their disposal and retained the original text in hieratic while the commentaries were added in demotic.

The temple library also included a number of texts relating to the classical Egyptian language. The Egyptians continued to compose and copy certain types of texts in this stage of the language until the large-scale closing of temples which began during the third century AD. To this end they not only compiled lists of archaic words, but even copied out entire ancient texts which they considered to represent fine examples of the classical stage of their language. A good example is provided by a series of hieroglyphic inscriptions copied from tombs at Assiut and preserved in two papyri. The actual tombs, some of which are still preserved, date to the Middle Kingdom (c. 2000–1800 BC) and were about two millennia old by the time these two papyrus copies were made.

Another noteworthy text is an exceptionally large onomasticon known as *The Great Tebtunis Onomasticon*. This text is interesting not just for its contents, but also for the lemmata that were later added. It was originally written in the hieratic script and one or more later scribes transcribed specific words into the demotic and Coptic scripts above the line. This is one of the oldest Coptic texts that we have and it is an invaluable source for the pronunciation of Egyptian, which was normally written without indication of the vowels, in the Roman era. I will not go into the rich contents of the onomasticon, but I would like to draw attention to one section which contains a list of old verbs of action. What makes this list noteworthy is the fact that it was excerpted from none other than the historical inscriptions of Ramesses III (c. 1175 BC) which are still preserved in the temple of Medinet Habu at Thebes. It is therefore clear that this lengthy inscription had been carefully studied and that a list of archaic words was then entered into a compilation which was circulated throughout the country. Texts such as these shed light on another aspect of literary scholarship that also formed an important subject of study at the library of Alexandria, that is, lexicography. Many old texts, not least the works of Homer, contained rare and archaic words. In Egypt lexical lists belong to a tradition that extended beyond the second millennium BC.¹⁹

¹⁸ The phenomenon of commentaries in relation to Egyptian literature is discussed by von Lieven 2007: 263–7.

¹⁹ Osing 2001.

The scientific literature

The second group of material I should like to present is the scientific literature. The temple library includes at least a dozen medical papyri, most written in demotic but three in Greek. The presence of this material is not surprising; healing and medicine were intimately associated with temples and the House of Life more or less as far back as our sources take us. An example of the very prominent role of medicine and medical studies at the temple libraries is provided by two biographical inscriptions set up by court physicians in the sixth century BC, both of whom relate how they were placed in charge of restoring the House of Life at the great temples of Abydos and Sais.²⁰ One of the texts dates to the time when Egypt had become part of the Persian empire. The court physician tells that the Persian king Darius I ordered that he should rebuild the House of Life because he, the king, understood the importance of the Egyptian medical art. About a century later Herodotus (2.84) speaks very enthusiastically about the Egyptian art of healing, above all because of the high level of specialisation which to him apparently was out of the ordinary. A more direct indication of Greek interest in Egyptian medical expertise is provided by the fact that certain aspects of it can be traced in the later Greek medical traditions, including the Hippocratic corpus.²¹

Divination, the art of predicting the future on the basis of various types of omens, seems to have played a much more important role at the temples than has hitherto been assumed.²² There are far more manuals relating to divination than medicine, around sixty in total, but it should be noted that the average divination text is likely to have been considerably shorter than medical treatises. The divination texts from the temple library may be divided into two main groups: divination based on the position of the heavenly bodies, i.e. astrology, and divination based on the interpretation of dreams.

The astrological texts, which are by far the most numerous, can be subdivided into two groups. One group concerns predictions about the country as a whole. These predictions are based on the observation of the annual rise of Sirius (Egyptian Sothis) and the constellation in which this star appears. The rise of the star coincided with the beginning of the inundation – the rise of the Nile – and marked the beginning of the year. Since it was the level of the inundation which largely determined the extent of the yearly

²⁰ Posener 1936: 1–26, Gardiner 1938: 165. ²¹ Ritner 2000, cf. also Harris 1971.

²² A general survey of divination in ancient Egypt may be found in von Lieven 1999.

agricultural produce and the wealth of the state, it is not surprising that the *Sothis omina* should come to be associated with the well-being of the country as a whole. In fact one of the common statements in the *Sothis* texts is ‘the Nile will be in balance this year’ or sometimes the opposite. Other predictions include statements such as ‘a small rebellion will take place in Egypt’ or ‘a ruler will die’. It still remains uncertain exactly what was done with these predictions once they had been established.

The second group of astrological texts are personal, i.e. predictions about the future of individuals. These texts provide an interesting social study since they, indirectly, inform us about the everyday worries of their intended users, just as modern horoscopes do. And the concerns are very much the same. The topics in question include career, wealth, health, friends, relationships, marriage and children.

The books on dream interpretation are closely related to those on personal astrology since they concern individuals and provide the same type of predictions. These texts are divided into sections which systematically explore specific themes, e.g. dreams about certain types of objects or actions.

The narrative literature

The third major category of texts comprises narrative literature. When I first began to make the inventory of the texts from the temple library, I was surprised at the scope of this material. Over the years it has become evident that it has a clear common denominator: all the narrative literature concerns historical characters or characters that were perceived as historical. At the same time it is clear from the actual contents of the narratives that we are largely dealing with historical fiction. It would, however, be a grave misunderstanding to see the narratives as mere entertainment. It was precisely this type of narrative material that was widely exploited by classical authors in their accounts of Egyptian history. This is well illustrated by the works of authors like Herodotus and Diodorus, to mention just a few, as well as the *Aigyptiaka* composed by the Egyptian priest Manetho in the early third century BC. In a few fortuitous instances, the Egyptian versions of specific stories told by these authors have even been identified among the holdings of temple libraries. An example is the Pheros Story mentioned below.

These circumstances indicate that the narrative material found at the temple libraries was deliberately selected and kept as some form of record about Egypt’s past. It is surely no coincidence that the majority of texts concern the

greatest kings and sages from the past. Many texts celebrate a glorious past where Egypt defeats and humiliates those same foreign people – Assyrians, Kushites, Persians – who, in the historical reality, had invaded and occupied the country. Such texts exemplify how major national traumas were manipulated in fiction, and the material offers a valuable insight into a kind of native Egyptian history that was based on a vague historical memory, but largely invented.

The largest group of related narratives, more than twenty papyri in all, concern Prince Inaros of Athribis (Inaros I) who became famous for his rebellion against the Assyrians during their brief occupation of Egypt in the seventh century BC. It is noteworthy that the relatively short encounter with the Assyrians caused the greatest trauma in later historical memory, at least to judge from the surviving literary material from the Tebtunis temple library and elsewhere.²³ The accounts of the exploits of Inaros and his allies expanded over the centuries and by the Roman period they had developed into a whole story cycle – the Inaros stories – which in several respects resembles the Arthurian stories. Just as independent stories would develop around several of the characters associated with King Arthur, such as Sir Lancelot, so we find independent stories about several of Inaros' allies. Several of these stories take place after the death of Inaros. We also find fantastic elements such as a battle with a sorceress who leads the Assyrian army on behalf of King Esarhaddon. In one of the dramatic episodes she turns herself into a gigantic griffin through magic and nearly slays the entire Egyptian army before Inaros kills her and saves the day.

The Inaros stories were apparently not sufficient to fulfill the need for Egyptian redemption in relation to the Assyrians; the hated Assyrians were represented as a people who had been humiliated by the Egyptians since the earliest history. Thus in another lengthy narrative we find King Djoser and his chancellor Imhotep also managing to defeat and humiliate the Assyrians – once again fighting a woman who leads the Assyrian army on behalf of a frightened king.²⁴ Since Djoser and Imhotep lived in the middle of the third millennium BC, this is a gross anachronism. The story about Djoser and Imhotep is also interesting for other reasons. Imhotep was the first known historical individual to become deified and he was venerated as the greatest sage in later times. Very little is known about the historical person except what may be inferred from a single contemporary inscription which records his name and titles and which indicates he served as one of

²³ The Assyrian invasion of Egypt in Egyptian literary tradition is discussed in Ryholt 2004.

²⁴ A detailed description of the story may now be found in Ryholt 2009.

the most senior officials of King Netjerkheth. This king would later be known as Djoser and became renowned for the construction of the first pyramid tomb, the famous Step Pyramid. The narrative is divided into a series of episodes which also mention the birth of Djoser, the royal tomb and the family of Imhotep.

A final narrative I would like to single out is the Petese Stories.²⁵ This is a compilation of seventy short stories about the virtues and vices of women. In several respects we are here dealing with a text of outstanding literary importance. According to Greek literary tradition, its alleged author, Petese, a prophet from the ancient city of Heliopolis, was Plato's Egyptian instructor in the art of astrology. Moreover, the introduction to the text states that the numerous stories were compiled on the prophet's behalf as a literary testament by which he would be remembered for posterity. The inspiration apparently came from a personal experience by Petese. According to another text, the prophet had once deciphered a more than two-millennia-old text which had been discovered in the temple of Heliopolis and which no-one else could read. This text was written by none other than Imhotep himself, the greatest sage of all in Egyptian tradition. And, just as the memory of Imhotep lived on through his writings, Petese also sought to gain immortality in this manner. The Petese Stories are cited by title in two other contemporary Egyptian literary texts, and they would therefore seem to have been well known and widely circulated. Even more remarkable is the fact that one of the stories included in this compilation was heard by Herodotus when he visited Egypt some six hundred years earlier and incorporated into his *Histories* in a Greek adaptation, i.e. the Pheros Story (Hdt. 2.111).

Conclusions

My purpose in this chapter has been two-fold: first to present some examples of the library tradition in ancient Egypt; and second to demonstrate how this tradition is relevant to our understanding of the cultural environment of the country in which the library of Alexandria was founded.

It is not my contention that the library of Alexandria was merely a Greek version of an Egyptian temple library or to belittle its achievements. It is indisputable that there are very significant differences. Above all, the library of Alexandria was vastly larger and much better funded than any Egyptian

²⁵ See Ryholt 2006: 1–19 for an outline of its contents and literary importance.

library is likely to have been and the Egyptian temple libraries were anything but public.

On the contrary, there are indications that these libraries zealously protected their writings which were frequently described as 'secret' throughout the three millennia which our sources cover. The primary reason for restricting access to the literature may well have been to protect it from abuse and to retain its potency. Knowledge was power, and it is obvious how magic or knowledge about the future gained through divination might be misused. There may also have been an element of protection of special expertise when literature, such as the medical type, was not made readily available to outsiders. Some temples enjoyed a high regard in relation to medical expertise and became important centres for pilgrimage, and they may well have wished to protect that status. The secretive attitude of the temple libraries was still in effect when Greek scholars began to seek out Egypt as a source of wisdom. It is, for instance, recounted how frustratingly difficult it was for visitors such as Pythagoras, Plato and Eudoxus to get the priests to share their wisdom (Strabo, *Geography* 17.1.29; Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras* 7–8). Whether this is a historical fact in relation to the three named individuals is less important than the fact that such a statement exemplifies a general opinion that Egyptians did not readily impart their knowledge.

So, although scholarly activities such as textual criticism, commentary and lexicography, as well as studies in sciences such as medicine, were undertaken at the Egyptian temple libraries long before the creation of the library of Alexandria became famous in these areas, it is hardly likely that they could ever have achieved the same impact. However this may be, the present paper will hopefully provide some idea of the wealth of information to be gained from the Egyptian temple libraries.