

Did Aristotle Invent Library Classification?

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ABSTRACT: This article tests the suggestion made by the first-century CE Greek geographer Strabo that the philosopher Aristotle was the first person to systematically organize a library, and that this classification influenced the arrangement of books in the libraries of early Greek Alexandria. It broadly examines Aristotle's classifications and systematizing activities, and sets Aristotelian methods of knowledge organization against his Greek predecessors. It outlines what we know about Aristotle's library, and how it might have differed from other collections of books owned by his contemporaries. It then surveys several ways Aristotelian arrangements may have posthumously exerted influence over cultural institutions in Alexandria in the late fourth and early third centuries BCE. The libraries studied are state-sponsored, private, and institutional collections. Definitive conclusions cannot be drawn due to a paucity of evidence, but the article argues that Aristotelian structures of knowledge could have had a profound effect on a nascent library culture that continues to have resonances in the ways libraries are organized today.

KEYWORDS: Aristotle, library classification, Library of Alexandria, ancient libraries

Aristotle was the great collector, collator, and synthesizer of antiquity. Along with Plato, Thomas Aquinas, and Immanuel Kant, he is one of the towering figures in the Western philosophical tradition. Throughout his philosophical works, a drive to organize, categorize, and classify is conspicuously apparent. His classification of plants and animals was dominant for 2,000 years, and he may justifiably be called the originator of taxonomy.¹ But might Aristotle also occupy a foundational place in the history of library classification? This article draws upon a little remarked passage from the work of the Roman-era Greek geographer Strabo, which appears to suggest that Aristotle was the first to arrange a library systematically, so that it might fit an intellectually coherent structure. To examine the viability of this claim, Strabo's text will be set against Aristotle's wider classification activities, his library, and his influence on the Hellenistic state of Ptolemaic Egypt.

<https://doi.org/10.5325/libraries.6.2.0333>

Libraries: Culture, History, and Society, Vol. 6, No. 2, 2022

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Aristotle, son of Nicomachus and Phaestis, was born in 384 BC in the city of Stagira on the Chalkidiki peninsula, in what is now the northern Greek province of Macedonia. As a young man, he traveled to Athens to join the Academy, Plato's philosophical school. In the late 340s BC, Aristotle returned to Macedonia during a period of anti-Macedonian sentiment in Athens, as the expansionary ambitions of the northern Greeks began to challenge the Athenian hegemony over the Greek city-states bordering the Aegean Sea. For several years, he may have traveled through the Greek cities, islands, and states of Asia Minor. By 343 BC Aristotle had returned to Macedonia, to the court of King Philip II, where he tutored the king's son Alexander, later Alexander the Great. Following Philip's assassination, Aristotle returned to Athens and set up his own school, the Lyceum or Peripatos. He left in 323 BC during another wave of anti-Macedonian feeling and died a year later. The cause of his death remains unclear, and has been the subject of much speculation.²

Much of what we know, or think we know, of Aristotle's life comes from later biographies and pseudo-historical anecdotes, many fanciful.³ Unlike Plato and Socrates, Aristotle was not an Athenian citizen, and so of little interest to the comic poets or orators of Athens, whose surviving works offer vignettes of other philosophers. Bold claims are made about his intellectual ontogenesis, his relationship with Plato, his influence over Alexander, and his method of teaching, but these claims rarely draw upon extant contemporary texts. Much of Aristotle's philosophical output is also available to us only second-hand. His influential works are, it is believed, written-up lecture notes from his teaching at the Lyceum. Aristotle, like Plato, wrote philosophical dialogues, and there is some evidence that later classical authors had access to them. But from his surviving writings, we may judge that Aristotle's teaching, learning, and research did not take place with a view to publication. None of his dialogues survived antiquity, nor did several of his treatises.⁴ What remains as a corpus are thirty-one books, which often read as a set of works-in-progress, drafts, notes and working papers, intended for an audience of philosophically attentive listeners. Roman philosopher and statesman Cicero referred to now-lost Aristotelian writings as "flowing rivers of gold," which might baffle his readers today, as most of his surviving texts flow more like treacle.⁵ Many of Aristotle's works are difficult to read, and the neatness of his Greek does not translate well into Western European languages. Nor do Greek ethical, metaphysical, and ontological concepts map neatly onto contemporary ways of thinking.

Despite the difficulty of reading and understanding such undelineated texts, Aristotle's influence over the classical world, Christianity and Islam, and

early modern Western philosophy and science would be difficult to overstate.⁶ His profound and original thinking in logic, the philosophy of mind, moral philosophy, metaphysics, and literary theory set the boundaries, and first principles, of these subjects for almost 2,000 years. In science, his writings on classical mechanics, cosmology, geology, and empirical biology held sway for almost as long. Attention to his philosophical concerns has varied throughout the history of the subject, but many of the important issues in contemporary Western philosophy overlap with Aristotle's areas of study, even if in the sciences and logic his writings are now of mere historical interest.⁷ He remains a touchpoint in philosophy, and in intellectual history more broadly.

Classification in Aristotle

Aristotle's surviving works fall into four categories. First are a set of six broadly logical works known since ancient times as the *Organon*, a Greek word meaning "tool," or "instrument." These works examine logic in a broad sense—propositions, judgments, fallacies, demonstration, definition, and argument, for example. The first work of the *Organon*, the *Categories*, sets categorical limits to the analyses which follow, though its primacy may be a later editorial imposition.⁸ Central to the *Categories* are two systems of classification. First, Aristotle divides beings into four kinds (1a20–1b9)—accidental universals, essential universals, accidental particulars, and nonaccidental particulars.⁹ There follows a longer and more detailed division of "things that are said" (1b25, τὰ λεγόμενα) into ten kinds, namely substance (2a12–4b19), quantity (4b20–6a36), relation (6a37–8b24), quality (8b25–11a39), and, examined in less detail, time, place, situation, condition, action, and passion (11b1–14). The *Categories*, and the second of the *Organon*'s works, *On Interpretation*, were the only works of Aristotle known in Western Europe until the twelfth century, due largely to their translation into Latin by the late Roman philosopher Boethius in the fifth century CE. Though difficult reading, they were also perhaps his most influential works in antiquity and were subjects of extensive published commentary in the Greek and Roman worlds, a tradition that began in Alexandria in the third century BC.¹⁰ These commentaries, and Aristotle's other surviving books, continued to circulate in Greek and Arabic versions in areas of Byzantine and Arab influence throughout Western Europe's dark ages.¹¹

The remaining works in the Aristotelian corpus fall into three groupings, all of which Aristotle considered "sciences" (ἐπιστάμια), a word that had a

wider meaning in Greek than its cognates today. The first of the sciences is the theoretical—works on physics, biology, meteorology, astronomy—but a category that also includes books about metaphysics and the soul. These studies pursued knowledge for its own sake. They too include several explicit classifications. In his *History of Animals*, *Generation of Animals*, *Movement of Animals*, and *Parts of Animals*, Aristotle collected, detailed, and systematized all Greek knowledge of animals at that time, which had hitherto been unrecorded. These researches inaugurated zoology as a new science.

Aristotle's four works on practical science comprise his three books on moral philosophy, and his *Politics*. They concern human action, and the nature of goodness and human flourishing.

There are two extant works in the productive sciences—the *Rhetoric* and the *Poetics*.

While standing within (or in the case of the *Organon*, above) these three categories, the subject of each text also stands in its own right—the topics treated have independent methodologies and objects of concern. But they are held together by unifying assumptions, an overlying structure or arrangement, and shared organizing principles, many informed by an assembling or aggregating mandate.

In allowing an organizing structure, even a loose one, to drive his research, Aristotle was proceeding in a manner contrary to the prevailing train of Greek thought. Euclid, the Greek mathematician who lived in Alexandria in the late fourth and early third centuries BC, stands as the clearest sample of the dominant methodology. In Euclid's *Elements*, a realm of knowledge—geometry—is axiomatized. A set of primary truths is defined. Through a series of logical deductions, further truths are revealed, and thus an elegant axiomatic system is written into being. This optimistic method of knowledge acquisition may also be found in the writings of Aristotle's teacher Plato. In particular examples, such as the mathematical truths derived from first principles in the *Meno*, and also in Plato's multiwork attempt to discover the nature of ultimate truth, axiomatic thinking is frequently present.

By contrast, a gathering and organization principle is at the heart of the Aristotelian endeavor. Knowledge is not axiomatic, but integrated. An oversimplified interpretation of early modern European philosophy sets continental rationalists, who believed that deduction provided a path to knowledge, with insular empiricists, who sought knowledge through sense perception. A similar, though similarly deceptive, contrast may be drawn between Plato and Aristotle. The latter was the original empiricist—he collected data, organized

them in new ways, and built them into a set of arguments, both philosophical and scientific, in which individuals, the world, and the relationship between the two could be placed. When Aristotle collected these data, he classified them so that sense could be made of them.

If Aristotle's originality is profound, his philosophical inheritance is equally marked. Though the Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians had earlier sought to gather, arrange, and generalize upon the objects of the material world, the Greeks were the first to reflect upon these generalizations and attempt to abstract and define them as concepts in their own right. Both (Western) philosophy and science begin with the speculations of the pre-Socratic Greeks of Asia Minor, who aimed to discover the fundamental realities of the material and immaterial worlds through observations of nature. However, these speculations were empirical in only a loose sense. The pre-Socratics did not correlate their observations or arrange them in such ways as to enable the emergence of new knowledge. They did not practice classification.¹²

Socrates appears to have dismissed classification as a method of attaining knowledge of the moral virtues, his principal concern. Though it is difficult to say anything for certain about this most mysterious and totemic philosopher—he wrote nothing and is known primarily as an argumentative and evasive character in the pseudo-historical dialogues of his pupil Plato—he considered examples and codifications of concepts as obstructive to their true understanding.

It is in Plato that the first stirrings of taxonomy as a key to understanding emerges. In several of his late dialogues, in particular the *Phaedrus*, *Sophist*, *Statesman*, and *Philebus*, Plato practices a form of classification called *diairesis*, or division. These dialogues share a concern with logic and pose several challenges to the confident metaphysical analyses of Plato's earlier works. Like Socrates, Plato believed that to understand something, we must be able to define it. Attempts to define the moral virtues (such as piety, courage, justice, and friendship) in Plato's early dialogues led, under Socratic cross-examination, to a state of *aporia*, or perplexity. In the *Phaedrus* Plato outlined a new approach. The participants of this dialogue speculate upon the ways different kinds of things that share vague similarities may be brought together. These collections are then divided dichotomously, several times, until an impasse is reached. But the end state is not aporetic, because each stage in the division has been philosophically productive. Each dichotomous division reveals a puzzle; together these puzzles assist in the construction of a definition of the thing under investigation.

In the *Phaedrus* the subjects of division have no philosophical weight, and most of the dialogue deals with the nature of erotic love, the structure of the human soul, and the nature and use of rhetoric. But the *Sophist*, much of which is concerned with the methodology of definition, hints at the possibility of applying the method of division to fundamental philosophical concepts such as being, sameness, difference, and change.¹³ The method of collection and division can be seen as a precursor to modern biological classification, in its exhibition of genus–species hierarchies. The successive division into species and subspecies not only provides a definition of the object of study, but also builds a systematic structure of knowledge, and illuminates connections between previously unconnected concepts and things.

Marcella and Newton, drawing on Richardson, see in Plato the first generalized classification of knowledge.¹⁴ But if there is a classification in the source they reference, Plato's *Republic*, this author cannot see it. It is true that Richardson's source, Sextus Empiricus, a Skeptic philosopher of the second or third century AD, claimed that Plato was the pioneer of those who divide philosophy into physics, ethics, and logic.¹⁵ However, Sextus, as he states, is writing about his understanding of philosophy, and seeking its archaeology. Indeed, the tripartite division, and its association with Plato, had already been noted by Cicero 250 years previously.¹⁶

Whatever Aristotle learned from Plato, it is clear that much of his writing is provoked by discontent, real or imagined, with earlier thinkers, Plato among them. Aristotle sets up these philosophers as foils to his nascent science or new philosophy. This is why Aristotle is the most important source for our intellectual reconstruction of the pre-Socratic philosophers, all knowledge of whom is fragmentary and second-hand, and also a reason why we are wary of any claims he makes about them or quotes he attributes to them.¹⁷ Curiously, by contrast, Aristotle only refers to Plato's dialogues infrequently in his works. But when we consider the context—again, lectures delivered to an audience of semi-professional philosophical researchers and trainee philosophers—we realize that Aristotle's audience would already be familiar with Plato, but less so with the pre-Socratics, almost none of whom were Athenians, and many long dead. As will be suggested later, Aristotle may have owned a collection of books by the pre-Socratic philosophers, and this was probably a rare thing. Plato's books would have had a wider readership.

However, unusually, Aristotle's *Parts of Animals* and *Prior Analytics* do contain criticisms of Plato's method of division. But the idea of classification as a means to knowledge appealed. Examples may be found in the logical and

zoological works noted above, but also in the “four causes,” which are both necessary and sufficient for explanation, Aristotle’s classifications of justice (universal, distributive, corrective, and reciprocal, in the *Nicomachean Ethics*), forms of government (kingship, aristocracy, constitutional democracy, simple democracy, oligarchy, and tyranny, in the *Politics*), and literature (epic, tragedy, and comedy, in the *Poetics*).¹⁸

Aristotle’s philosophy is best understood as a set of methodologies rather than a set of doctrines.¹⁹ His philosophy is systematic but also open-ended, and his thinking evolved through time. It is this desire for systematization that makes Aristotle the first classifier as we might understand the term today. In antiquity, and through his medieval interpreters, Aristotelianism became associated with a doctrinal way of thinking. This tendency emerged with Aristotle’s first editors, who brought together disparate texts into an evolutionary structure—starting with his logical treatises, followed by his analyses of the natural world, which build to his metaphysics, and finally his works in various disciplines within philosophy—aesthetics, politics, ethics, rhetoric. This assemblage was inspired by Aristotle’s own desire to build structures and work from first principles through lines of argumentative thought to an unrealized comprehensive philosophy. But this is just one way, and a highly interventionist one, to understand his thinking. As Hatzimichali notes, Platonism and Aristotelianism—unlike the philosophical writings of the Stoics—did not develop as “organized philosophical systems” until after the end of the Hellenistic period.²⁰ Aristotle’s works themselves are inconsistent with one another and display a more flexible approach to knowledge acquisition. He was puzzled by the natural world and man’s relationship to it; by gathering and organizing data he aimed to resolve this perplexity, and he did so in multiple ways that were both analytical and imaginative.

Throughout Aristotle’s writings, a drive to systematize, to organize, and to arrange, is ever present. With this activity in mind, it is worth giving attention to Strabo’s *Geography* and consider what Aristotle thought about gathering and arranging books.

Aristotle and Books

Strabo was a geographer and historian, born in Greek Asia Minor, who lived between 64 or 63 BC and AD 24. He is an important source for our knowledge of the Greco-Roman world, and indeed its libraries—he is the first person to write about Alexandria’s Mouseion, which many have believed to be

coterminous with that city's illustrious library. He traveled widely through Asia Minor during his long life, and also journeyed across the Roman Mediterranean world and in Africa as far south as Ethiopia. He visited Egypt in about 25 BC with his friend, the new Roman prefect Aelius Gallus, and spent several months there. Though he is a reliable source and a careful encyclopedist and chronicler of the known world, it should be kept in mind that Aristotle had been dead for over 300 years when Strabo wrote about him in his *Geography*. Caveat noted, in the translation of H. L. Jones, Strabo made the following claim:

Aristotle bequeathed his own library to Theophrastus, to whom he also left his school; and he is the first man, so far as I know, to have collected books and to have taught the kings in Egypt how to arrange a library.

ὁ γοῦν Ἀριστοτέλης τὴν ἑαυτοῦ Θεοφράστῳ παρέδωκεν, ὥπερ καὶ τὴν σχολὴν ἀπέλιπε, πρῶτος ὧν ἴσμεν συναγαγὼν βιβλία καὶ διδάξας τοὺς ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ βασιλέας βιβλιοθήκης σύνταξιν.²¹

This article makes no assumptions about nor any investigation of “the Library of Alexandria.” Its size, function, foundation and destruction, and even the nature of its existence, are hidden beneath a fog of allegory and legend.²² We know neither when it was founded nor when it ceased to be.²³ Two centuries after Strabo, 500 years after some of Aristotle's pupils moved to Alexandria, a character created by Greek rhetorician Athenaeus joked that there was no point in describing Alexandria's books and libraries since they were in all men's memories already.²⁴ It is hard to know what Athenaeus meant. Was there genuinely nothing for the dinner guests of this scene to say about the city's libraries, since their shared knowledge and opinions would make such discussions otiose? Was it not worth discussing because the Alexandrian libraries were already a thing of the past? Were Alexandria's libraries—in a city recently ravaged by war and plunder—perhaps already a semi-mythical reference point, as we might rhetorically mention Noah's ark, Atlantis, or unicorns? What might be most revealing in Athenaeus's passing remark is the way his character speaks of libraries in the plural. Instead of speculating upon the unknowable “Library of Alexandria,” this article seeks to determine Aristotle's influence over the state-sponsored bibliographic culture of early Ptolemaic Egypt, for which there is some, if limited, evidence.

Strabo's sentence contains several interlocking claims. Leaving aside Theophrastus and the school, three distinct propositions, one leading to the

next, can be discerned. Each is credible, but each is also more uncertain than the last. First, Strabo claims that Aristotle owned a library; second, that he collected books, and was the first man to do so; finally, that Aristotle taught the Ptolemaic kings how to arrange a library. The credibility of the third claim rests on the second, and the credibility of the second rests upon the first. Aristotle's ability to teach library classification is assumed by his ability to organize his own library, a knowledge necessitated by his active acquisition of books and his (previously demonstrated) taxonomic tendencies.

Did Aristotle have a library? Almost certainly, yes. Athenaeus mentions Aristotle and the tragedian Euripides along with several other pseudo-historical individuals famed for their libraries in the classical period.²⁵ In Aristotle's time, "books" were widely used in Greek philosophical culture. In Socrates's account of his intellectual history in a dialogue of Plato, he speaks of acquiring books of the philosopher Anaxagoras, after hearing someone reading aloud from one.²⁶ Plato's dialogue *Parmenides* begins with the philosopher Zeno—of the paradoxes—and Socrates arguing over claims found in the former's new book, from which its author has just been reciting. Objecting to the dangers of poetry in the *Republic*, Plato has Socrates claim that poets try to overwhelm people with "a noisy throng of books by Musaeus and Orpheus" (βιβλῶν δὲ ὄμαδον παρέχονται Μουσαίου καὶ Ὀρφέου).²⁷ And so on. Books were part of Greek philosophical life, were available for purchase, and a recognized means of expressing new ideas. This "book culture" developed gradually throughout the late fifth century BC, but was firmly established by the early years of the fourth.²⁸

But what was a book? In the Greek and Roman worlds, until the Christian era a "book" meant a papyrus—or less commonly, a parchment—scroll. Although only one papyrus roll that predates the conquest of Alexander the Great has been identified, there are several depicted on surviving Classical Greek pottery.²⁹ Books were expensive, and they were fragile, but not too costly for most philosophers (who were often affluent) or their (usually wealthy) acolytes.³⁰ At his trial Socrates noted that a book of Anaxagoras could be purchased in the Athenian market for one drachma, the typical daily wage of a skilled worker.³¹

Aristotle's exercises in the collation of knowledge suggest not only that he read widely, but also that he had books in front of him as he wrote. He references, and sometimes quotes from, other authors.³² "We ought to make extracts from written works," he wrote, as though this were an original idea, and indeed our examples of this practice are all later ones, many among authors

influenced by Aristotle.³³ His *Rhetoric* contains a great many quotes from earlier and contemporary authors. Even acknowledging Aristotle's genius, it is likely that he was quoting from books he owned rather than drawing from memory.³⁴ It seems uncontroversial to suggest that Aristotle owned books, quite likely many of them, and enough to number as a library.

However, Aristotle is not only an acquirer of books, in Strabo's telling. He is also a collector of them, and the first of his kind. His acquisition is purposeful, part of an intellectual project. This is clearly a Greco-centric claim. This article does not wish to deny that libraries existed in the Near East before Alexander's invasion of these lands and that, as Ryholt and Barjamovic convincingly argue, these libraries were (like the Greek and Roman institutions that were founded during the Hellenistic period) central repositories of knowledge.³⁵ There were libraries in Mesopotamia and Egypt long before Aristotle, several of them extensive.³⁶ The Library of Ashurbanipal, the fragmentary collection of 30,000 cuneiform clay tablets that contains administrative records, history, medical texts, and, most famously, the Epic of Gilgamesh, pre-existed the Greek intellectual world by centuries. It is difficult not to see in its comprehensiveness, its religious scholarship, and its destruction by the fire that consumed the city of Nineveh in 612 BC, echoes of later stories told about Alexandria, though it is also all too easy for the Library of Ashurbanipal to suggest false assumptions about other cuneiform libraries, as Robson notes.³⁷ But we know little about its scale, arrangement, or production. Most importantly, we do not know enough about the tradition from which it emerged nor its intellectual heritage. In Alexandria we can trace the lineage of such a tradition and trace its long shadow in Western intellectual history. Strabo is interested in this earlier Mesopotamian tradition, as is this author, but Aristotle is the subject of this article.

To reframe, can Aristotle really have been the first *Greek* person to purposefully collect books in order to construct a library?

There is no evidence that anything like a library existed in Classical Greece, the Greece of Athens and Sparta, Sophocles and Socrates, the Peloponnesian and Persian Wars, red-figure vase painting, and the Acropolis. There were no public libraries in the Athens of the fourth century, "in the sense that no collection of books had been put together on the initiative of the state."³⁸ Polybius, the Greek historian who lived in the second century BC, wrote that "it is possible to assemble without risk and without difficulty information in books, simply by taking the steps to reside in a town with writings in abundance and a library at hand,"³⁹ but he was writing of the intellectual

temperament and civic infrastructure of a later period. In the mid-second century AD, Roman grammarian Aulus Gellius suggested that the sixth-century BC tyrant Peisistratus had created a library in Athens, which was subsequently stolen by the Persian king Xerxes and later returned.⁴⁰ Whether this story can be trusted is an open question. As French historian Christian Jacob points out, the creation, destruction, pillage, and reparation of libraries is a familiar motif in the literature of the ancient world, often imposed by later authors.⁴¹ No archaeological remains of an Athenian library earlier than the Roman age has been found; nor is there any literary evidence of one.

There were libraries of a kind in Athenian homes and schools in Aristotle's time, in that there were places where there were books brought together. In Greek, a *bibliothékē* (from *biblōn*, "book," and *thékē*, "box or chest") was a library, a collection of records, and later a compilation, but always a depository, physically or intellectually, of books. In its earliest surviving use, in a fragment of the comic poet Cratinus Junior, a contemporary of Aristotle, the word refers to a bookcase.⁴² The manuscripts of Solon, the early sixth-century Greek statesman, were located in the house of the politician Critias at the end of the fifth century, according to the dialogue of the same name by Plato.⁴³ Established families appear to have considered it their civic duty to protect, and thus transmit, texts and their contents—Critias was Plato's uncle, and the manuscripts may be the source of some of Plato's historical claims. There is also fragmentary evidence of the existence of small private libraries used to assist with professional activity.⁴⁴ In Xenophon's *Memorabilia*, a set of hypothesized, episodic conversations, Socrates—who appears as a character in several of Xenophon's works too—suggests that doctors, architects, mathematicians, astronomers, and professional performers of epic poetry could acquire books to help carry out their professions.⁴⁵ But these were outliers, not typical citizens. There are Roman lists of Greek book collectors dating back to the sixth century BC, and an expressed desire among these list-makers to see in these collections a nascent set of public libraries, but "there is not yet any pre-Alexandrine evidence," of any such libraries, "and we may . . . suspect that those early book collectors were modelled on the Hellenistic kings."⁴⁶

Aristotle's collecting activities are different from those described above in that they are deliberate, systematic, and persistent. A disputed account of Aristotle's time as a student in Plato's Academy suggests that he regularly walked out of formal lectures in order to (more fruitfully) read alone.⁴⁷ In what must be an exaggeration, Aulus Gellius claimed that Aristotle paid three Attic talents—18,000 drachmae—to acquire some books belonging to Speusippus,

head of Plato's Academy following the master's death.⁴⁸ In the examples of reading above, Athenian intellectuals of the fourth and fifth centuries BC used books orally, publicly, and socially. Private libraries, like public libraries, are a feature of Hellenistic, not Classical, Greece.

It is difficult to know how purposeful Aristotle's collecting was, or how many books his library contained, because though it was much speculated on, no ancient writer has provided us with a catalog of his books, or even the briefest of contents list. In echoes of the literary descriptions of the Alexandrian institution, Aristotle's biographers and hagiographers were more concerned with his library's fate than its substance.⁴⁹ Several post-mortem histories can be traced, including the suggestion that Aristotle's library ended up in the hands of Cicero, though this relies on an inventive reading of one of Cicero's letters.⁵⁰ Had the library come to him, Cicero, whose desire to acquire Greek books is elsewhere documented, would surely have made more of the fact in his writings.⁵¹ A tenth-century Islamic account of Octavian's defeat of Cleopatra, last of the Ptolemaic rulers, describes his inspections of the Alexandrian libraries, where he is alleged to have discovered Aristotle's manuscript copies of his own writings.⁵²

And yet because many of Aristotle's writings are working papers of sorts, akin to the scholarship that appears today as preprints on open-access archives like arXiv.org, speculation on the contents of Aristotle's library is consequential and a potentially rewarding philosophical and bibliographical exercise. What we have, then, is the evidence of Aristotle's writing, and his output, interests, and activities do indicate the deliberate acquisition, through books, of pre-existing knowledge. And as Aristotle organized everything, so he must—it seems safe to assume—have organized his books.

Aristotle's Influence over Library Culture in Ptolemaic Egypt

Given the likelihood that Aristotle owned a substantial library and arranged it to enable his academic pursuits, could he have shared his collecting and systematizing principles with the library builders of the new Greek kingdom in Egypt, which may have been founded by some of his pupils? Could he have taught the first Greek rulers of Egypt the principles of librarianship and, in particular, library classification?

No. Aristotle certainly did not devise a notional system of shelf ordering, containing logically ordered classes. For one thing, the Ancient Greeks probably did not store their books on shelves, since their books were a different

shape to ours—scrolls, not codices, and shelves are not the most practical way of storing scrolls. (We know little about how scrolls were stored, but Roman archaeological and literary evidence suggests they often stood upright in tubular clay or beech boxes.)⁵³ Notational classification is a modern invention. Even in medieval and early-modern libraries, books were divided by broad alphanumeric classes, and any subsequent notation was indicative of press and shelf position, and only rarely intellectual subordination.

Nor did Aristotle oversee, supervise, or consult in any way on the construction of a Greco-Egyptian library. Alexander conquered Egypt in 332 BC, founding the city that bore his name. He left the next year, never to return while living. A Greek presence remained over the next decade, but it was not until Alexander's death in 323 BC, and the succession crisis that followed, that Egypt came under firm Ptolemaic control. Alexander's general Ptolemy—hereafter Ptolemy I, to distinguish him from his son—ruled Egypt, defended it against his former Macedonian friends, and founded the Ptolemaic dynasty toward the end of that century. His son and successor, Ptolemy II Philadelphus, ruled from 283 to 246 BC, and expanded his father's empire and its material wealth; it was probably Ptolemy II who founded a library, or libraries, in Alexandria. Aristotle died a year before Alexander, in 322 BC. He could not, therefore, "have taught the kings in Egypt how to arrange a library," since these kings reigned after the philosopher's death.

Or could he have? There are several ways in which Aristotle may have exerted a formative influence over early library history. Oliver Stone's film *Alexander* (2004) portrays Alexander and Ptolemy I as boyhood friends; a scene shows them being tutored at Aristotle's feet. In reality Ptolemy I was eleven years older than Alexander, already a mature fixture at the Macedonian court when Aristotle first returned from Athens. Ptolemy I may even have been the illegitimate son of Alexander's father Philip.⁵⁴ He served with Alexander from his earliest campaign. He accompanied him to the Siwa Oasis in the west of modern-day Egypt, where an oracle pronounced Alexander to be the son of Zeus. On his deathbed, Alexander asked to be buried in the Temple of Zeus Ammon in the Oasis, a wish that remained unfulfilled after Ptolemy I hijacked Alexander's body to assert control over the fissuring empire. So it seems likely that Ptolemy I's interactions with Aristotle were more than occasional, and the influence of Aristotelian teaching significant, especially in Ptolemy I's thinking about how to educate his son, and their intergenerational project to Hellenize their new kingdom. *Alexander* is told in flashback by an

aged Ptolemy I, dictating to a scribe within a grand Alexandrian library full of mosaics of Alexander's victories, a curious collection of North African ephemera, and scribes scribbling in a hall filled with scrolls. The film is an odd mix of the historically meticulous and the absurd. So too might be Strabo's claim.

Another way Aristotle may have influenced the arrangement of the Alexandrian library is through Demetrius of Phalerum, Ptolemy I's counselor from 297 BC. Demetrius had been a student of Theophrastus, Aristotle's successor at the Lyceum, and possibly of Aristotle himself.⁵⁵ He would have had access to Aristotle's library, which Strabo notes was given to Theophrastus on the philosopher's death.⁵⁶ Demetrius may have been inspired by the library's organizing principles and used them to conceive the Alexandrian arrangement.

Demetrius had been a legislator at Athens who fell out with the new regime. Forced into exile, he retained a fondness and nostalgia for Attic literature.⁵⁷ In the *Letter of Aristeas*, a late second-century BC Greek text purporting to be an account of the first Greek translation of the Pentateuch, it is claimed that the project for an Alexandrian library was initiated by Demetrius, in his role as Ptolemy II's librarian.⁵⁸ However, although referenced as an authentic text by several ancient authors, most notably the Jewish historian Josephus (who seems to draw upon it for his own claims about the library), the *Letter* has long since been discredited.⁵⁹ Nor is Demetrius favorably connected to Ptolemy II in the historical record. He is usually described as an advisor to Ptolemy I, whom he advised not to bequeath his kingdom to his youngest son. When Ptolemy II ascended to the throne, he had Demetrius imprisoned. Nor is Demetrius named in the sequence of Alexandrian librarians listed in the *Suda*, the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia. Demetrius may be the link between Aristotle's library and Alexandrian librarianship, but the connection is uncertain. The *Letter of Aristeas*, incidentally, is the only surviving text written in the Ptolemaic period to note the existence of a library in Alexandria. It appears to be the source for the belief of later authors such as Philo, Epiphanius, Athenaeus, and John Tzetzes, that Ptolemy II was the library's founder. A dissenting view lies in the late second century AD bishop of Lyon Irenaeus, who claimed that the library was founded by Ptolemy I.⁶⁰

Demetrius was not the only student of Aristotelianism to exert an influence over the intellectual life of Alexandria. Pfeiffer writes how

the pupils of Aristotle were able to bring priceless help to the ποιηταὶ καὶ κριτικοὶ [poets and critics] who already existed in Alexandria; they

transferred collections of learned material from their Athenian home to them, they instigated further antiquarian research, they stimulated new literary criticism . . . and they taught them to organize institutions for the promotion of scholarship.⁶¹

These pupils, it is worth noting, did not necessarily insert the works of Aristotle himself into Alexandrian intellectual and literary culture—a strong case has been made that many of Aristotle’s writings were either lost or accessible to only a privileged few during the Hellenistic era.⁶² The culture they influenced was a broader one; the library as a Greek institution is concomitant with the strengthening of Aristotle’s school, and of Aristotelian thinking more broadly, under his successor Theophrastus, and the naturalistic turn taken by the school under its third head, Strato of Lampsacus. Although Aristotle’s extensive use of pre-existing texts has already been noted, the intellectual tradition he founded, a tradition anticipated in the activities of his fellow pupils in Plato’s school, necessitated the existence of libraries to carry out its work. As Pfeiffer notes,

they *used* books, so often maligned, especially by Plato, in order to save the fundamental work of their own masters. Aristotle and his followers could not have achieved their immensely learned compilations if they had not accumulated as many writings of the past as they could get hold of [emphasis added].⁶³

Jacob believes that what sets apart the Library of Alexandria from earlier gatherings of books was a catholic principle of knowledge accumulation, transplanted from the Lyceum, materialized through explicit political support.⁶⁴ He credits Demetrius as the driving force behind the library’s establishment.

Conclusion

Like much else in Ptolemaic Egypt, library culture in early Alexandria is likely to have been syncretic, drawing upon Macedonian-infused Hellenistic Greek political and social structures, a Classical Athenian inheritance, and pre-existing Egyptian traditions. There are many Egyptian examples of inscriptions referring to “Houses of Books” within temples—though only one

remaining archaeological survival, at Edfu—along with several burials at the necropolis of Saqqara and Thebes where small collections of papyri survive.⁶⁵ These traditions are likely to have informed library culture during Alexandria's first century, perhaps as much as Aristotelian scholarship did. Yun Lee Too notes that “the [modern] scholarly emphasis on the Alexandrian library that constructs this institution as *the* ancient library suggests that ‘ancient library’ might indeed be a static entity.”⁶⁶ By contrast, this article has argued that the library culture under the early Ptolemies was organic, iterative, evolving, and like Aristotle himself, peripatetic.

We do not know how ancient libraries were arranged. We have several booklists on papyrus and an inscription on marble of thirty works from a Gymnasium at Rhodes, but it is unclear if any of these should be considered partial catalogs of ancient libraries and, even if they are, they tell us nothing of their library's physical or intellectual structure.⁶⁷ Our ignorance about the libraries of Alexandria is of a kind with our ignorance of other ancient collections of books. Claims made about the library depend on our willingness to trust later accounts, and in many cases much later ones. The most detailed account of the operation of the Library of Alexandria is from twelfth-century Byzantine grammarian John Tzetzes, a problematic source.⁶⁸ Even the limited evidence of Alexandrian library culture which may be found among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri—the extraordinary collection of half a million papyrus fragments discovered in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, which document Egyptian history from the start of the Ptolemaic dynasty to the Muslim conquest of 640 AD—has been called into question by some scholars.⁶⁹

However, we can say with some certainty that libraries played an important part in the civic and intellectual life of Alexandria in the third and second centuries BC. We must take seriously Strabo's claim that their arrangement was influenced, to some degree, by Aristotle. It may be a coincidence that only in the early Hellenistic period, when the influence of Aristotle was at its height, did the first Greek libraries appear. Or it may be that the development, and earliest arrangements of book collections in early Ptolemaic libraries may have drawn upon Aristotelian structures of knowledge, and that those structures may have come indirectly from Aristotle himself. Library classification may, then, have started with Aristotle, before moving to Alexandria, then Rome and Byzantium, into the monasteries of Europe and then to its universities, and from there into academies, royal collections, leading to the great classification schemes of the late nineteenth century. Did Aristotle invent library classification? Perhaps.

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NOTES

1. David Bainbridge, *How Zoologists Organize Things: The Art of Classification* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2020), 15–17.

2. For the conflicts within the historiography of Aristotle, see Pierre Pellegrin, “Aristotle,” in *A Guide to Greek Thought: Major Figures and Trends*, ed. Jacques Brunschwig and Geoffrey E. R. Lloyd (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996), 32–53.

3. Carlo Natali, *Aristotle: His Life and School* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2013), 5–71.

4. Including the second book of his *Poetics*, which outlined Aristotle's analysis of comic drama—the first book deals with tragedy. A copy of this lost text forms an important plot element in Umberto Eco's medieval monastic thriller, *The Name of the Rose*.

5. Cicero, *Academica* 38.119.

6. See, for example, Börje Bydén and Christina Thomsen Thörnqvist, *The Aristotelian Tradition: Aristotle's Works on Logic and Metaphysics and Their Reception in the Middle Ages* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 2017).

7. John Lloyd Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 7.

8. An excellent introduction to the *Categories* may be found in Wolfgang-Rainer Mann, *The Discovery of Things: Aristotle's Categories and Their Context* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000). A minority view holds that Aristotle is not in fact the work's author, argued in Hermann Schmitz, *Aristoteles. Erster Band, Zweiter Teil, Ontologie, Noologie, Theologie* (Bonn: Bouvier, 1985). This view is demolished by Michael Frede, “Titel, Einheit und Echtheit der Aristotelischen Kategorienschrift,” in *Zweifelhaftes im Corpus Aristotelicum. Studien zu Einigen Dubia. Akten des 9. Symposium Aristotelicum*, ed. Paul Moraux and Jürgen Wiesner (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1983), 1–29.

9. This article uses Bekker numbering when citing the works of Aristotle, the standard form of citation in classical studies. This format is based on the complete edition of Aristotle published in the mid-nineteenth century by the Prussian Academy of Sciences, as edited by the eponymous August Immanuel Bekker (1785–1871). References to other classical texts are given in their standard forms.

10. See Michael J. Griffin, *Aristotle's Categories in the Early Roman Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

11. Newton estimates that “roughly two hundred extant Latin commentaries on the *Categories* were written during the Middle Ages”; Lloyd A. Newton, *Medieval Commentaries on Aristotle's Categories* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), 1.

12. William K. C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy*, vol. 1, *The Earlier Presocratics and the Pythagoreans* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962), 37.

13. Charles C. W. Taylor, "Plato's Epistemology," in *The Oxford Handbook of Plato*, 2nd ed., ed. Gail Fine (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 429–54, 451. An eccentric theory maintains that Aristotle wrote the *Sophist*. See Roger D. Masters, "The Case of Aristotle's Missing Dialogues: Who Wrote the *Sophist*, the *Statesman*, and the *Politics*?" *Political Theory* 5, no. 1 (February 1977): 31–60.

14. Rita Marcella and Robert Newton, *A New Manual of Classification* (Aldershot, Hampshire: Gower, 1994), 65; Ernest Cushing Richardson, *Classification: Theoretical and Practical*, 3rd ed. (Hamden, CT: The Shoe String Press, 1964), 49.

15. Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Logicians* 1.16.

16. Cicero, *Academica* 1.19.

17. See William K. C. Guthrie, "Aristotle as a Historian of Philosophy: Some Preliminaries," *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 77, no. 1 (1957): 35–41; and Harold Cherniss, *Aristotle's Criticism of Presocratic Philosophy* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1935).

18. The material, formal, efficient, and final causes, which may be applied to anything requiring an explanation, that is, any question beginning with "why" (Aristotle, *Physics* 994a–b; *Metaphysics* 1013a–b).

19. Ackrill, *Aristotle the Philosopher*, 1–4.

20. Myrto Hatzimichali, "The Texts of Plato and Aristotle in the First Century BC," in *Aristotle, Plato and Pythagoreanism in the First Century BC*, ed. Malcolm Schofield (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1–27, 2. This article understands the "Classical age" of ancient Greece to constitute the period between the Ionian Revolt of 500 BC and the death of Alexander the Great in 323 BC, and the "Hellenistic age" to mean from that time until the fall of the Roman Republic following the Battle of Actium in 31 BC.

21. Strabo, *Geography* 13.3.54.

22. For a sceptical reading, see Colin Higgins, "The Library of Alexandria as Myth and Metaphor," *What Do We Lose When We Lose a Library* (Leuven: Leuven University Press, 2016), 69–75.

23. Roger S. Bagnall, "Alexandria: Library of Dreams," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 146, no. 4 (December 2002) 348–62.

24. Athenaeus, *The Deipnosophists* 4.36.

25. *Ibid.*, 1.4.

26. Plato, *Phaedo* 97c, 98b.

27. Plato, *Republic* 364e.

28. For more on the development of this culture, see Pasquale Massimo Pinto, "Mena and Books in Fourth-Century BC Athens," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. Jason König, Katerina Oikonomopoulou, and Greg Woolf (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 85–95; William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 65–155; Rosalind Thomas, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992).

29. Bernard Legras, *Lire en Egypte, d'Alexandre à l'Islam* (Paris: Picard, 2002), 51–52.

30. Gustave Glotz, "Le Prix du Papyrus dans l'Antiquité Grecque," *Annales d'Histoire Économique et Sociale* 1, no. 1 (1929): 3–12.
31. Plato, *Apology* 26b.
32. Ingemar Düring, "Aristotle the Scholar," *Arctos*, n.s., 1:61–77.
33. Aristotle, *Topics* 105b; Tiziano Dorandi, *Le Stylet et la Tablette: Dans le Secret des Auteurs Antiques* (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 2000), 27–50.
34. Bernard M. W. Knox, "Books and Readers in the Greek World," in *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature*, vol. 1, *Greek Literature*, ed. Patricia Elizabeth Easterling and Bernard M. W. Knox (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), 13.
35. Kim Ryholt and Gojko Barjamovic, eds., *Libraries before Alexandria: Ancient Near Eastern Traditions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019).
36. Studies of ancient Egyptian libraries maybe found in Kim Ryholt, "Libraries in Ancient Egypt," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. König, Oikonomopoulou, and Woolf, 23–37; Günter Burkard, "Bibliotheken im Alten Ägypten," *Bibliothek: Forschung und Praxis* 4 (1980): 79–115; and Jan Assmann, "Libraries in the Ancient World—With Special Reference to Ancient Egypt," in *Bibliotheken Bauen: Tradition Und Vision—Building for Books: Traditions and Visions*, ed. Susanne Bieri and Walther Fuchs (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2001). Mesopotamian libraries are described in Eleanor Robson, "Reading the Libraries of Assyria and Babylonia," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. König, Oikonomopoulou, and Woolf, 38–57; Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2001), 1–16; and the many excellent essays in *Libraries before Alexandria*, ed. Ryholt and Barjamovic, which also covers the Egyptian world.
37. Robson, "Reading the Libraries," 55.
38. Pinto, "Mena and Books," 86.
39. Polybius, *The Histories* 12.27.
40. Aulus Gellius, *Attic Nights* 7.17.
41. Christian Jacob, "Fragments of a History of Ancient Libraries," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. König, Oikonomopoulou, and Woolf, 57–81.
42. Theodor Kock, *Comicorum Atticorum Fragmenta* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1880–88), 2:289.d.
43. Plato, *Critias* 113a–b.
44. Alexis, fragment 140; Isocrates, *Aegineticus* 5.
45. Xenophon, *Memorabilia* 4.2.8.
46. Pfeiffer, *History*, 6–8.
47. Natali, *Aristotle*, 157.
48. Gellius 3.17 Düring.
49. For a colorful reconstruction of the possible travels of Aristotle's library, see Luciano Canfora, *The Vanished Library*, trans. Martin Ryle (London: Hutchinson Radius, 1989); and the more academic bibliographical review in Paul Moraux, *Der Aristotelismus bei den Griechen. Bd. 1: Von Andronikos bis Alexander von Aphrodisias* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1973). For a skeptical view, see Jonathan Barnes, "Roman Aristotle," in *Philosophia Togata II: Plato and Aristotle at Rome*, ed. Jonathan Barnes and Miriam Griffin (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), 1–69.

50. See T. Keith Dix, "Assembling a Private Library at Rome," in *Ancient Libraries*, ed. König, Oikonomopoulou, and Woolf, 209–34, 215–16.

51. Hatzimichali, "The Texts of Plato," 4.

52. Al-Farabi, as quoted in *Theophrastus of Eresus: Sources for His Life, Writings, Thought and Influence*, ed. William Fortenbaugh, Pamela Huby, Robert Sharples and Dimitri Gutas (Leiden: Brill, 1992–93), 94.

53. Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* 16.83.

54. Nina L. Collins, "The Various Fathers of Ptolemy I," *Mnemosyne*, 4th ser., 50, no. 4 (August 1997): 436–76.

55. Doreen C. Innes, "Introduction to 'Demetrius on Style,'" in Aristotle, Longinus, Demetrius, *Poetics. Longinus: On the Sublime. Demetrius: On Style*, trans. Stephen Halliwell, W. Hamilton Fyfe, Doreen C. Innes, and W. Rhys Roberts, revised by Donald A. Russell (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1995), 309–40, 311. Whether or not he was taught by Aristotle himself, the influence of Aristotelianism on Demetrius was profound. See Lara O'Sullivan, "Philosophy and the Phalerean Regime," in *The Regime of Demetrius of Phalerum in Athens, 317–307 BCE: A Philosopher in Politics* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), 197–240.

56. If we can trust Strabo as a source for this claim. There is no reason not to trust Strabo but, as Barnes notes, he "does not cite an authority for his story." Barnes, "Roman Aristotle," 3. Strabo's is the only surviving text from the ancient world to record this inheritance.

57. Plutarch, *De Exilio*.

58. For a comprehensive overview of the Letter of Aristeas, along with the text and extensive commentary, see Benjamin G. Wright, *The Letter of Aristeas: Aristeas to Philocrates or On the Translation of the Law of the Jews* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2015). For its place in Hellenistic literary history, see Richard Hunter, "The Letter of Aristeas," in *Creating a Hellenistic World*, ed. Andrew Erskine and Lloyd Llewellyn Jones (Swansea: The Classical Press of Wales, 2010).

59. The letter may be inauthentic, but the Septuagint, or Greek Old Testament, could indeed have first come into being in Alexandria, which was also fertile ground for Jewish intellectual life. See Sylvie Honigman, *The Septuagint and Homeric Scholarship in Alexandria: A Study in the Narrative of the 'Letter of Aristeas'* (London: Routledge, 2003).

60. Irenaeus, *Adversus Haereses* 3.21.2.

61. Rudolf Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship: From the Beginnings to the End of the Hellenistic Age* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), 95.

62. Hatzimichali, "The Texts of Plato," 11–18, which responds to the skeptical challenge of Barnes, "Roman Aristotle."

63. Pfeiffer, *History of Classical Scholarship*, 67.

64. Christian Jacob, "Lire Pour Écrire: Navigations Alexandrines," in *Le Pouvoir des Bibliothèques. La Mémoire des Livres en Occident*, ed. Christian Jacob and Marc Baratin (Paris: Albin Michel, 1996), 47–83.

65. Günter Burkard, *Bibliotheken im alten Ägypten* (Munich: Saur, 1980), 79–115; Stephen Quirke, "Archive," in *Ancient Egyptian Literature: History and Forms*, ed. Antonio Loprieno (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 379–401.

66. Yun Lee Too, *The Idea of the Library in the Ancient World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 4.

67. For the inscription at Rhodes, see Jenő Platthy, *Sources on the Earliest Greek Libraries with the Testimonia* (Amsterdam: Hakkert, 1968); Steven Johnstone, "A New History of Libraries and Books in the Hellenistic Period," *Classical Antiquity* 33, no. 2 (October 2014): 347–93. For papyrus booklists see Rosa Otranto, *Antiche Liste di Libri su Papiro* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2000); George W. Houston, "Papyrological Evidence for Book Collections and Libraries in the Roman Empire," in *The Culture of Reading in Greece and Rome*, ed. William A. Johnson and Holt N. Parker (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 233–67.

68. Georg Kaibel, *Comitorum Graecorum Fragmenta, Auctore Udalrico de Williamowitz-Moellendorf Collecta et Edita*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Weidmann, 1899), 17–34. On the disagreements between scholars on Tzetzes's trustfulness, see Aglae Pizzone, "The Historiari of John Tzetzes: A Byzantine 'Book of Memory'?" *Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies* 41, no. 2 (October 2017): 182–207.

69. Jackie Murray, "Burned After Reading: The So-Called List of Alexandrian Librarians in P. Oxy. X 1241," *Aitia* 2 (2012), <https://doi.org/10.4000/aitia.544>.