

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE ALEXANDRIAN LIBRARY

by

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ABSTRACT: The Alexandrian library of the Ptolemies was destroyed by fire during the war with Caesar in 48 BC. No other destruction is mentioned in ancient sources and theories about later destructions must be rejected. The story about the transferral of the Pergamene library to Alexandria must also be rejected. The evidence for a second, smaller library is late and unreliable; it also should be rejected. The notion that there was a library in the Serapeum appears to be a Christian elaboration of a Jewish legend. The ephrasis of Aphthonius, which is frequently cited to support it, can more plausibly be read as a description of another sanctuary.

Ancient sources mention only one destruction of the Alexandrian library, when the palace area was damaged by fire in 48 BC, and there is no firm evidence for the continued existence of the library after this time. It has been generally assumed that the Serapeum of Alexandria also contained a library, a so-called “daughter library”, and that this may have survived into late antiquity. The idea that it was destroyed by Christians in 391 originates from Edward GIBBON, but while the destruction of the temple at this time is well attested, our sources for the event do not mention a library. A re-examination of the sources for the daughter library leads to the conclusion that this library never existed, and that the notion of the Serapeum library probably originated as a Christian elaboration of a Jewish legend. This conclusion is supported by archeological evidence: the Serapeum did not contain rooms suitable for a library.

THE FIRE OF 48 BC

The library fire of 48 BC is mentioned by several authors: Seneca (*Tranq.* 9, 4–5), Plutarch (*Caes.* 49, 6), Aulus Gellius (VII 17), Cassius Dio (XLII 38, 2), Ammianus Marcellinus (XXII 16, 13) and Orosius (VI 15, 31). Except for Ammianus, who mistakenly places the library in the Serapeum, there is no disagreement between the sources about the basic facts. Before withdrawing with his men to Pharos, Caesar set fire to the Egyptian fleet. The fire spread from the harbour and destroyed the library, which was close by. No ancient source claims