

THREE VANISHED LIBRARIES THAT HISTORY WITNESSED

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ABSTRACT

“Libraries store the energy that fuels imagination. They open up windows to the world and inspire us to explore and achieve, and contribute to the improving our quality of life.”

-Sidney Sheldon

A library is a collection of sources of information. The first libraries dating back to 2600BC, that archived clay tablets that recorded transactions or inventions. During the Classic Period, “The Library of Alexandria” was the most significant library of ancient world which consisted papyrus scrolls.

“The Imperial Library of Constantinople” in the capital city of Byzantine Empire was another significant depository of ancient knowledge; the last of the great libraries of the ancient world.

Oriental world also witnessed the vast storehouse of the Vedic texts that was “Dharmaganja of Nalanda”. Nalanda flourished under the patronage of the Gupta Empire in the 5th and 6th centuries and later under Harsa, the emperor of Kannauj.

Although the three libraries represent three different times and archives, one thing is very similar to them that those three precious storehouse of knowledge were devastated at the hands of different civilizations.

KEYWORDS: Library, Papyrus, Parchment and Invasion

INTRODUCTION

Libraries are some of the most spectacular buildings in the world regardless of whether or not they attach themselves to a university, a public system or someone’s home, exist as an essential factor in the formation of society’s backbone. It makes knowledge and education accessible to human being. The first libraries consisted of archives of the earliest forms of writing, cuneiform script in the clay tablets. They were discovered in Sumer, some dating back to 2600 BC. In the sixth century, the great libraries of the Mediterranean world remained those of Constantinople and Alexandria. India too witnessed one of the most lucrative libraries in the 5th and 6th century, that belongs to the Nalanda University (Mahavihara).

In the pages of history we find various civilizations which created incredible centers of learning that had been ruined by foreign invaders or some “civilized” conquering army. The granary of knowledge consisted of records on fragile paper, clay or tree bark was lost forever. But they are now gone because of drastic political invasions. An account of three libraries which had been destroyed by invaders due to various reasons, is given below:

The Dharmaganja of Nalanda

The highly formalized methods of Vedic learning inspired the establishment of large teaching institutions such as Nalanda, which is considered as India's one of the earliest universities. The site is located about 95 kilometres South-east of Patna. It is now a UNESCO declared World Heritage Site. Nalanda flourished under the patronage of the Gupta Empire in the 5th and 6th centuries and later under Harsa, the Emperor of Kannauj.

The pivotal centre of study attracted scholars and students from all over India, Tibet, China, Korea and Central Asia.

Our knowledge of Nalanda mostly comes from the writings of pilgrim monks from East Asia such as Hiuen Tsang, I-tsing who travelled to Nalanda in the 7th century. I-tsing stayed ten years at Nalanda and when he returned to China in 695 CE, carried away 400 Sanskrit texts which were subsequently translated. It is evident from large number of texts that I-tsing carried back with him that the centre of study must have featured a well-equipped library. Traditional Tibetan sources mention the existence of a great library named Dharmaganja at Nalanda. It comprised three large multi-storeyed buildings, the Ratnasagara (ocean of jewels), the Ratnadadhi (sea of jewels) and the Ratnaranjaka (jewel adorned). Among them Ratnadadhi was nine storeyed high and archive most sacred and valuable manuscripts including the Pragnaparamita Sutra and the Guhya Samaja.

The exact number of volumes in the Dharmaganja is not known. But it is estimated to have been in the hundreds of thousands. During its heyday the centre was praised as the world's largest collection Buddhist literature. The library also had texts on subjects as astrology, astronomy, medicine, logic, literature and grammar. It must have had a classification, based on a text classification scheme developed by Panini, the Sanskrit Linguist. Buddhist texts were most likely divided into three divisions based on the Tripitaka's three main divisions- the Vinaya, the Sutra and the Abhidhamma Pitika.

In around 1200 CE, Bakhtiyar Khilji, a Turkic chieftain out to make a name for himself, was in the service of a commander in Awadh. He began a series of plunder in Bihar and during the raid he burnt down the prestigious house of learning and legend says that the library took months before everything ended up in ashes.

The Great Library of Alexandria

The Great Library of Alexandria is the most famous library in classical antiquity. Over the years it has gained a mythical status as a "universal" library where scholars from different parts of ancient world come and share ideas. The library was located in the royal palace in Alexandria. It was a complex with shrines dedicated to the Nine Muses, lecture areas, observatories, a zoo and living quarters. The great library was thought to house the works of great scholars including Homer, Plato and Socrates.

The library was built around 295 BC by Ptolemy I. it flourished under the patronage of the Ptolemaic dynasty and functioned as a major centre of scholarship until the Roman conquest of Egypt in 30 BC. Sources said that Mark Antony gave Cleopatra over 200,000 papyrus scrolls for the library as a wedding gift. The great library was part of a larger research institution called the 'Museum of Alexandria', where many of the most famous thinkers of the ancient world studied.

Papyrus scrolls constituted the collection of the library. But the library's index was lost with the rest of the library when it was destroyed, and it is not possible to know with certainty how large and how diverse the collection may have been. The highest estimates claim 400,000 scrolls while the most conservative estimates are as low as 40,000, which is still an enormous collection. This library, with the largest collection of the age, acquired its collection by laborious copying of originals. It was in charge of collecting all of world's knowledge and most of the staff was involving with the task of translating works into papyrus paper. The originals were kept in the library and the copies delivered to the owners. Sometimes they paid the fee of script but kept the original script for the library.

As a research institution, the great library filled with works of mathematics, astronomy, physics, natural sciences and other subjects. Its empirical standards applied in one of the first homes for textual criticism.

In the early 2nd century BC, scholars began to abandon Alexandria for safer areas with more generous patronage.

During Caesar's civil war, Julius Caesar was besieged at Alexandria in 48 BC. Many ancient sources describe Caesar setting fire to his own ships and state that this fire spread to the library, destroying it. Although the Myth of 'the burning of library at Alexandria is popular, it may have suffered several fire acts of destruction over many years. Scholars have argued that although the various component parts of the library destroyed in fire the centers of academic excellence had already moved to various capital cities. It is also possible that the great library of Alexandria actually survived, by way of the imperial library of Constantinople, the Academy of Gondishapur and the House of Wisdom.

The Imperial Library of Constantinople

The Imperial Library of Constantinople was the last of the great libraries of the ancient world, in the capital city of the Byzantine Empire. Long after the destruction of the great library of Alexandria, it preserved the knowledge of the ancient Greeks and Romans for almost thousand years.

In ancient Greece most of the literature was transcribed on to papyrus as the papyrus began to deteriorate, there was a movement to transfer the material from papyrus to parchment. Around 4th century, Constantine the Great started the movement but it was especially concerned with Holy Scriptures. His heir to the throne Constantius II continued this movement. It was his work that culminated in the first imperial library of Constantinople. The library is estimated to have contained some 100,000 volumes of ancient texts. The person in charge of the scribes was thought to have been Themestios, working directly under Constantius II in the supervision of the library. After Constantius II, Valens continued the efforts of his predecessors by employing four Greek and three Latin calligraphers. The majority of Greek classics exist today are known through Byzantine copies originating from the Imperial Library of Constantinople.

Working on the transfer of the ancient papyrus texts to parchment dedicated a great deal of time and attention. Older works like 'Homer' and 'Hellenistic' history were given priority over Latin works. Works on grammar and texts were chosen over least used or contemporary works. Due to this form of selective preservation many works are lost. Some fragments of these lost works have been found at archaeological excavation.

Over the centuries, several fires in the library of Constantinople destroyed much of the collection. The library was burnt in the year 473. However sources report that with the effort of Constantius II and Themestios, scribes saved and recopied the works that would have been lost in the fires. Historians are of opinion that part of the collection housed in the library was later obtained by Charle Magne in the 8th century. But it is unclear whether these were the volumes that had

been housed at the imperial library of Constantinople or if they were merely copies made at Charle Magne's library of Aachen during the period of Renaissance. Besides the fire damage, the building too damaged from raids and wars. After the fall of Constantinople on 12 April, 1204, the library was allegedly destroyed by the Franks and Venetians of the Fourth Crusade during the sacking of the city. Donald Queller notes that while some manuscripts were probably lost in the three fires that ravaged the city during the attacked by the crusaders, there is no indication of the continued existence of a formal imperial library at the time and no source mentions lost manuscripts.

The destruction of these libraries has become a symbol for the loss of cultural knowledge. For millennia, libraries of all shapes, have kept humanity active forever, allowing great innovations to take place. Although most of them fell to fire and time these wonders deserve to be praised.

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