

foundations still. The Library was constructed and supported by the Ptolemys, the Greek kings who inherited the Egyptian portion of the empire of Alexander the Great. From the time of its creation in the third century B.C. until its destruction seven centuries later, it was the brain and heart of the ancient world.

Alexandria was the publishing capital of the planet. Of course, there were no printing presses then. Books were expensive; every one of them was copied by hand. The Library was the repository of the most accurate copies in the world. The art of critical editing was invented there. The Old Testament comes down to us mainly from the Greek translations made in the Alexandrian Library. The Ptolemys devoted much of their enormous wealth to the acquisition of every Greek book, as well as works from Africa, Persia, India, Israel and other parts of the world. Ptolemy III Euergetes wished to borrow from Athens the original manuscripts or official state copies of the great ancient tragedies of Sophocles, Aeschylus and Euripides. To the Athenians, these were a kind of cultural patrimony—something like the original handwritten copies and first folios of Shakespeare might be in England. They were reluctant to let the manuscripts out of their hands even for a moment. Only after Ptolemy guaranteed their return with an enormous cash deposit did they agree to lend the plays. But Ptolemy valued those scrolls more than gold or silver. He forfeited the deposit gladly and enshrined, as well he might, the originals in the Library. The outraged Athenians had to content themselves with the copies that Ptolemy, only a little shamefacedly, presented to them. Rarely has a state so avidly supported the pursuit of knowledge.

The Ptolemys did not merely collect established knowledge; they encouraged and financed scientific research and so generated new knowledge. The results were amazing: Eratosthenes accurately calculated the size of the Earth, mapped it, and argued that India could be reached by sailing westward from Spain. Hipparchus anticipated that stars come into being, slowly move during the course of centuries, and eventually perish; it was he who first catalogued the positions and magnitudes of the stars to detect such changes. Euclid produced a textbook on geometry from which humans learned for twenty-three centuries, a work that was to help awaken the scientific interest of Kepler, Newton and Einstein. Galen wrote basic works on healing and anatomy which dominated medicine until the Renaissance. There were, as we have noted, many others.

Alexandria was the greatest city the Western world had ever seen. People of all nations came there to live, to trade, to learn. On any given day, its harbors were thronged with merchants, scholars and tourists. This was a city where Greeks, Egyptians, Arabs, Syrians, Hebrews, Persians, Nubians, Phoenicians, Italians, Gauls and Iberians exchanged merchandise and ideas. It is probably here that the word *cosmopolitan* realized its true mean-