

# "The Rise and Fall of Alexandria", Howard Reid and Justin Pollard

**Post by "Joshua" of November 19, 2020 at 7:26 PM**

I've been listening to this audiobook in the car, and on the whole I've been very pleased with it. It is one of the better popular histories of Classical Antiquity that I've read, and it has really helped to fill in some gaps in my historical knowledge. The authors' method is to let ancient texts do a good deal of the talking, and to fill in the blanks with narrative and commentary. I've found it incredibly engaging.

Unfortunately, I'm posting this thread in "celebration" of coming across the first mention of the Epicurean school—in Chapter 14. It really makes me appreciate what Stephen Greenblatt has given us in *The Swerve*. The story simply isn't told elsewhere.

I had thought that Democritus would get a mention in the chapter on physics and cosmology, but he did not. I had thought that Lucian would get a mention in the chapter on Oracles and their various frauds and mechanical deceptions in the ancient world, but he did not. The book is constantly tracing ideas back to their roots in Athens and the Aegean, but the story of atomic materialism and the pursuit of pleasure doesn't seem to the authors to warrant the treatment.

The lament of Palladas over the fate of Hellenism is too good not to use; but at this point I'm not counting on any mention of the Epicurean connection to his epigrams.

Quote

Is it not true that we are dead, and living only in appearance,

We Hellenes, fallen on disaster,

Likening life to a dream, since we remain alive while

Our way of life is dead and gone?

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**Post by "Cassius" of November 19, 2020 at 9:06 PM**

Joshua what / who do they focus on instead? People like Pythagorus and Plato? Or do they just generally give little attention to philosophy?

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## Post by “Joshua” of November 19, 2020 at 10:30 PM

### Quote

Joshua what / who do they focus on instead? People like Pythagorus and Plato? Or do they just generally give little attention to philosophy?

I would say that the book focuses on the city itself in its several social and cultural dimensions;

-geopolitical—Alexander the Great, the Ptolemaic kings, Cleopatra and Caesar, etc

-philosophical—Empedocles and Pythagoras, Plato and Aristotle, Archimedes and Euclid, Eratosthenes, Aristarchus, Ptolemy, etc (the book is very heavy on philosophy)

-cosmopolitan—nexus of all trade between India, Africa and Europe; civil strife between Greeks/Egyptians, and between Pagans/Christians/Jews

The 'conceit' of the book as outlined in the beginning is to let the ancients speak for themselves, as if one were walking through the great Library itself and pulling scrolls off of the shelf.

I did learn one fascinating thing! It was the law in Alexandria that every ship in the port would be inspected upon arrival and before departure. If the inbound ship was found to contain any books, they were seized by the port authority for copying. After the book was copied, the *original* would be sent to the Library, and the copy returned to the ship. Outgoing ships containing books not copied, or not catalogued for export, could be punished accordingly. This really was an entire city devoted to the project of compiling a collection of every book ever written by man. Epicurus was prolific and widely popular. His books *must* have been there. The thought of such a place makes me unreasonably giddy—and sad, for what we've lost.

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## Post by “Cassius” of November 20, 2020 at 3:45 AM

### [Quote from JJElbert](#)

If the inbound ship was found to contain any books, they were seized by the port authority for copying.

Wow I have never heard that either! I wonder what the source of that information is - any possibility that that also is a "conceit" rather than historical fact?

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### **Post by “Don” of November 20, 2020 at 7:08 AM**

Oh, it actually happened. Here's the section getting the Wikipedia article and the article has multiple references. I've always enjoyed the idea of library agents stomping onboard a ship:

According to the Greek medical writer [Galen](#), under the decree of Ptolemy II, any books found on ships that came into port were taken to the library, where they were copied by official scribes. The original texts were kept in the library, and the copies delivered to the owners. The Library particularly focused on acquiring manuscripts of the Homeric poems, which were the foundation of Greek education and revered above all other poems. The Library therefore acquired many different manuscripts of these poems, tagging each copy with a label to indicate where it had come from.

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library\\_of\\_Alexandria?wprov=sfla1](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Library_of_Alexandria?wprov=sfla1)

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 20, 2020 at 7:17 AM**

Galen wrote this in the 2nd century AD; I don't know whether he is the only ancient source.

Quote

Ptolemy the king of Egypt was so eager to collect books, that he ordered the books of everyone who sailed there to be brought to him. The books were then copied into new manuscripts. He gave the new copy to the owners, whose books had been brought to him after they sailed there, but he put the original copy in the library with the inscription "a [book] from the ships"

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 20, 2020 at 7:18 AM**

Crosspost; thank you Don!

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### **Post by “Don” of November 20, 2020 at 8:22 AM**

[Quote from JJElbert](#)

Crosspost; thank you Don!



You used a primary source though, so this point goes to you!

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### **Post by “Cassius” of November 20, 2020 at 9:01 AM**

At first I was thinking that taking the original seemed a little overboard, but I suppose in that day they were actually doing the owner a favor by giving them a newer version that might last longer?

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### **Post by “Joshua” of November 20, 2020 at 11:40 AM**

Quote

At first I was thinking that taking the original seemed a little overboard, but I suppose in that day they were actually doing the owner a favor by giving them a newer version that might last longer?

Ha! No.

The Ptolemy's were very unscrupulous and underhanded about how they "acquired" books. In one instance they gave the city of Athens a large sum of silver as collateral to 'borrow' the original copies of several great Athenian playwrights. Upon receipt of the scrolls, they sent a message back—you keep the silver. We're keeping the books. Copying in the ancient world was often done by educated slaves, and was always prone to minor errors. Alexandria wanted to

make sure it had the best and most accurate version of every text. I saw an article yesterday that referred to the practice as "reverse-copyright". The state 'owned' all writings from the moment of composition.

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### **Post by “Don” of November 20, 2020 at 12:41 PM**

#### [Quote from Cassius](#)

At first I was thinking that taking the original seemed a little overboard, but I suppose in that day they were actually doing the owner a favor by giving them a newer version that might last longer?

Oh no, just the opposite. The copy would be more prone to scribal errors. especially since they were probably hastily copied.

The owners would not have been happy, but what were they going to do about it.

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### **Post by “Joshua” of December 1, 2020 at 6:30 PM**

I've finally just finished listening to this book. Only two or three mentions of Epicurean Philosophy, which I still think is remarkable. So there's nothing good there, but on the whole I very highly recommend it. A truly fascinating story of a grand old city.