

'like the river flowing back on itself, all the way from the city to Chaireum, a day's walk away and more . . . shouting and dancing in front of him. He was acclaimed not only by the throng of children but by a polyglot mob shouting now in unison now in antiphony, vying to outdo each other. I forbear to mention the applause of the whole populace, the outpourings of myrrh, the all-night revels, the illumination of the whole city, the public and private feasts and all the other ways in which cities make public display of their joy.'<sup>33</sup>

## Economic Life

Throughout the whole of our period Alexandria remained the most important commercial city of the Mediterranean world. The encomium of Dio of Prusa, even though addressed to an Alexandrian audience, is not exaggerated or tendentious:

'Not only have you a monopoly of the shipping of the entire Mediterranean because of the beauty of your harbours, the magnitude of your fleet, and the abundance and marketing of the products of every land, but also the outer waters that lie beyond are in your grasp, both the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean . . . The result is that the trade, not merely of islands, ports, a few straits and isthmuses, but of practically the whole world is yours. For Alexandria is situated, as it were, at the crossroads of the whole world, of even its most remote nations, as if it were a market serving a single city, bringing together all men into one place, displaying them to one another and, as far as possible, making them of the same race.'<sup>34</sup>

This position Alexandria owed to its natural advantages. There were two magnificent harbours, the Great Harbour to the east and the Eunostus (Harbour of Fortunate Return), with a smaller, artificially excavated harbour at its rear, to the west. The harbours were separated by an artificial dyke, the Heptastadium, linking



### 136 The Sophilos mosaic.

The mosaic, of the second century BC, bears an idealised portrait personification of Berenike, wife of Ptolemy III Euergetes, with a headdress in the form of a ship's prow which may be intended as a symbolic reference to Ptolemaic domination of the seas.

the mainland to the island of Pharos on which the famous lighthouse stood. These accommodated an immense volume of maritime trade with the Mediterranean world and also made Alexandria an important centre of the shipbuilding industry. To the south of the city, Lake Mareotis, which itself had a harbour on its northern shore, was linked by canals to the Canopic branch of the Nile delta, giving access to the river valley. Not only did this make available to Alexandria as much of Egypt's domestic produce as she required – the large-scale transport of grain from the valley was, of course, absolutely essential to feed the city's populace – but it also linked her, through the important entrepôt of Coptos to the ports of the Red Sea coast and a network of trading relations with India and Arabia, which reached its apogee in the Roman period. Great though the volume of imports through this route was, it was outweighed, as Strabo noted, by the volume of exports which Alexandria despatched to the south.<sup>35</sup>

The Nile thus became one of the great trading arteries of the classical world. To the Meroitic kingdom in the south went silver- and bronze-ware, lamps, glass, pottery, wines, olive oil, reaching as far as Sennar, south of Khartoum, where bronze lamps of the first or second century have been found. Ivory, myrrh, spices, silver and gold were to be seen in profusion at Hieria Sykaminos on the southern border, on their way down-river. Under Roman rule the roads which connected the ports of the Red Sea coast to the Nile, directing goods to Coptos and thence down-river to Alexandria, were developed. In the later period the contacts through these regions to the kingdom of the Axumites tended to take over from the Nile route to Meroe as these regions were increasingly disrupted by the local tribes. The Romans did not, of course, invent these contacts; their chronological span is neatly indicated by the activities of a pious and curious Christian merchant of the sixth century named Cosmas Indicopleustes (Sailor of the Indian Sea). He recorded an inscrip-



137 **Alexandrian coin.** The Pharos represented as a square tower seen at an angle, surmounted by an open latticed circular lantern. On the summit is a statue of Isis Pharia holding a sceptre, on either side of the lantern a Triton. Reign of Antoninus Pius.

tion giving an account of the Third Syrian War of Ptolemy III Euergetes which he discovered during a trip to a Adulis, the main port in the Axumite kingdom and, in the Roman period, an entrepôt of major importance for the profitable trade in ivory.<sup>36</sup> More adventurously, Ptolemy VIII had been responsible for despatching an expedition to discover the route to India. This included a character called Eudoxus of Cyzicus who was visiting the Ptolemaic court; he returned from the trip with a cargo of precious stones and perfumes, which the king immediately

confiscated; somewhat later, after the death of Ptolemy VIII, Eudoxus went again, stayed away for some eight years, and was again deprived of his profits by the reigning king when he returned.<sup>37</sup>

It is worth noting that the Alexandrian stimulus to trade and commerce did have some important and beneficial side effects which were non-pecuniary. From the reign of Ptolemy VIII, for instance, we have a work written by Agatharchides of Cnidus, *On the Red Sea*, in which he made use of information available in the royal archives in Alexandria as well as eye-witness reports from merchants. An anonymous Alexandrian merchant is responsible for a work written in the latter half of the first century AD, the *Periplus Maris Erythraei* (*Voyage round the Red Sea*), which remains our most detailed literary source for the study of Roman trade with the east.<sup>38</sup> There are thus important links between the vibrant commerce centred in Alexandria and the intellectual and literary activities which will be considered in the final part of this chapter.

The resulting influx of wealth, both public and private, into the city was enormous. It was not only a proportion of Egypt's massive surplus of grain which found its way through Alexandria to the Aegean, then to Rome and Constantinople, despatched under government supervision by contract with the shippers of the Alexandrian grain fleet. Indigenous products, most notably glass, textiles, luxury goods and papyrus, found ready markets in the east and the west and the latter, at least, continued to do so for centuries after the Arab conquest.

Individual merchants were able to make themselves extremely rich and powerful. Perhaps not always on the scale of the great landowner, though there must have been many, like Ptolemy II Philadelphus' minister Apollonius, who made money both from land and from trading ventures far afield. The wealthy merchant and usurper of the third century, Firmus, who has already been described,<sup>39</sup> is perhaps fictional and almost certainly not typical but he is nevertheless a credible figure. Hagiographical sources of the Byzantine period show, for instance, an Alexandrian



138 **Head of Augustus.** This beautiful bronze head displays the finest characteristics of Alexandrian craftsmanship in a style which is entirely Greek. It perhaps found its way to Meroe, where it was discovered, as a result of one of the Ethiopian raids or Roman counter-measures of the 20s BC.



139 Fragment of a wine-jar. Characteristic of the Ptolemaic period are wine-jugs of blue faience decorated with reliefs portraying members of the royal family, in this example Cleopatra I, wife of Ptolemy V Epiphanes, dressed as the goddess Isis. The reliefs are sculpted in the Greek idiom, but the notion of portraying contemporary persons as objects of religious cult is not a traditional Greek one.

merchant in the Spanish trade who was able to bequeath 5,000 gold *solidi* to each of two sons and another who, after returning down-river with three ships loaded with imported goods, distributed all his wealth, amounting to 20,000 *solidi* (about 275 pounds of gold) to the poor of Alexandria.<sup>40</sup> In the latter case, as in many others, the influence of the church is evident and its enormous wealth, though primarily land-based, was certainly much increased by revenues from commerce and trade. Its leaders were frequently able to exert political pressure through economic control, of the transport of grain for example, and a fourth-century Patriarch, George, one of the rivals of Athanasius, is said to have maintained a local monopoly in nitre, papyrus, reeds and salt.<sup>41</sup>

All this represents the apex of an economic pyramid whose base consisted in the organisation and labour of a very large number of poorer and humbler people. Apart from the structure of the transportation services, best known in the late Roman and Byzantine periods when they were operated through guilds of ship-owners, their captains and agents, there is little evidence for the details of the organisation of industry and commerce. A general picture is given by an undoubtedly spurious 'Letter of Hadrian' which is more likely to be a reflection of conditions in its author's day (the late fourth century) and firmly indicates that Alexandria did not have an unemployment problem:

'The people are most factious, vain and violent; the city is rich, wealthy and prosperous, in which no-one lives in idleness. Some are glass-blowers, some are making paper and others are engaged in weaving linen; everybody at any rate seems to be engaged in some craft or profession. The gouty, the circumcised, the blind all have some trade. Not even the maimed live in idleness. They have only one god – Mammon. Christians, Jews, everyone worships this divinity. Would that this city were endowed with better morals – it would be worthy of a city which has the primacy of all Egypt in view of its size and prosperity.'<sup>42</sup>

This passage mentions three of the most famous Alexandrian products, glass, paper and linen, all of which were exported far and wide. The best Alexandrian glassware, in particular, was of very fine quality indeed and Strabo notes that the properties of the vitreous earth which was used enabled the glass-blowers to achieve polychromatic effects which could only be done elsewhere by a blending process.<sup>43</sup> Although a guild of glassworkers is known at Oxyrhynchus,<sup>44</sup> it seems likely that much of the household ware found in the valley (notably at Karanis in the Fayum) was of Alexandrian manufacture.

Alexandria was the headquarters of the papyrus industry for the whole of the Mediterranean world. An anonymous geographer of the fourth century AD states that it was manufactured nowhere else at all, but there was certainly a good deal of production for local use in the towns of the delta and the valley.<sup>45</sup> The marshes and swamps of the delta were the habitat for the raw material which was processed at Alexandria and exported both in the form of writing material and manufactured books.<sup>46</sup> Details of the organisation of the industry are completely unknown, though it is most likely that at all periods it was a mixture of small and large private enterprises operating under varying degrees of government control. Certainly, in the Roman period, land on which papyrus grew could be privately owned. Weaving, too, was common all over Egypt but there were Alexandrian specialities in methods of weaving and dyeing and imported silk from the east is said to have been rewoven at Alexandria.<sup>47</sup>

Also of particular importance was the manufacture of drugs, perfumes, jewellery and works of art. For these many of the raw materials came along the trade routes from the east and were manufactured at Alexandria for export. No doubt the former was stimulated by the vitality of medical science in the capital. The value of the precious unguents in the manufacture of perfumes is stressed by the conditions in which the factory workers operated – wearing only masks, veils and loincloths and being stripped and searched on leaving work.<sup>48</sup> Jewellery was wrought from gold, silver and a great variety of precious gems. A document of 18 BC records the transfer of a goldsmith's workshop and a technique for covering triumphal statues at Rome is said to have been borrowed from Egyptian silversmiths.<sup>49</sup> Alexandrian cameo work, too, was particularly fine. Such products need to be considered not

**140 Alexandrian coin.** The Serapeum is shown as a portico with 2 Corinthian columns supporting a pediment; there is a statue of Sarapis inside, his right hand touching the Caesareum, represented as a small shrine with 2 columns supporting a pediment bearing an inscription represented by dots. Reign of Trajan. See Plate 105.



merely as objects of commerce but as works of art and Alexandria was certainly a very important centre for a wide range of artefacts, although nothing is known about the way in which artists organised their operations. The output, in particular, of Alexandrian mosaicists and sculptors in bronze has left a prominent mark, sometimes very far afield. In the Ptolemaic and Roman periods the orientation of style and motif is, as we might expect, Greek rather than Egyptian; not until the emergence of Coptic art in the Byzantine period is there any significant sign of fusion of the two traditions.

### Intellectual Life

Any discussion of the history of literature, ideas, scholarship and science between the Hellenistic and Byzantine periods would find it necessary to refer to Alexandria far more often than any other city in the Mediterranean. There is virtually no area of intellectual activity to which she did not make a major contribution and in several



141 Alexandria (Kom-el-Dik), a school. This unique building which lies close to the theatre and the baths consists of three elements. In the centre is a main lecture hall, with the lecturer's seat at the centre of the short range at the top; the rooms on either side are smaller and may be subsidiary classrooms or preparation rooms – the one on the left is square-ended, the one on the right horseshoe-shaped.

spheres her role was paramount. Modern fashion and taste has most frequently turned its attention to the early part of the Ptolemaic period when the patronage at the royal court was in its heyday and attracted the presence of leading poets, men of letters, scholars and scientists from all over the Greek world. The household names of this era – Callimachus, Apollonius of Rhodes, Theocritus, Euclid, Eratosthenes – are not matched in the later centuries, but it would be seriously misleading to imagine that the continuators of the tradition were of little or no importance. Scholars of the later ages turned their attention to more esoteric and less attractive subjects of study, notably Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, but their achievements were remarkable, nevertheless, and they played a major role in keeping their tradition alive until the very end of the Byzantine period, and beyond. The fourth-century historian Ammianus Marcellinus was in no doubt about the importance and vitality of intellectual life at Alexandria in his day:

‘Even now in that city the various branches of learning make their voice heard; for the teachers of the arts are somehow still alive, the geometer’s rod reveals hidden knowledge, the study of music has not yet completely dried up there, harmony has not been silenced and some few still keep the fires burning in the study of the movement of the earth and stars; in addition to them there are a few men learned in the science which reveals the ways of fate. But the study of medicine – whose support is much needed in this life of ours which is neither frugal nor sober – grows greater from day to day, so that a doctor who wishes to establish his standing in the profession can dispense with the need for any proof of it by saying (granted that his work itself obviously smacks of it) that he was trained at Alexandria.’<sup>50</sup>

The environment was of prime importance. Early in the Ptolemaic period, probably under Ptolemy I Soter, the Museum (literally ‘Shrine of the Muses’) was established within the palace area. Strabo, who saw it early in the Roman period, described it thus:

‘It has a covered walk, an arcade with recesses and seats and a large house, in which is the dining-hall of the learned members of the Museum. This association of men shares common property and has a priest of the Muses who used to be appointed by the kings but is now appointed by Caesar.’<sup>51</sup>

Little is known of its later history. The emperor Claudius enlarged it (and also arranged for annual public readings of his histories of Carthage and Etruria!); Hadrian visited it in 130 and disputed with its leading lights; in 215 Caracalla, in the aftermath of his massacre of the Alexandrian populace, abolished the common meals and attacked the Aristotelian philosophers amongst its members.

There was certainly an admixture of non-scholar members in the Roman period when membership carried the privilege of maintenance at the public expense and tax concessions – it was granted not only to intellectuals and literary men but also as a reward to distinguished public administrators and even renowned athletes. The last scholar-member of whom we have any record is Theon, father of Hypatia, a distinguished mathematician who was active in the second half of the fourth century AD.<sup>52</sup> By that time, other institutions of learning, which, unlike the Museum, offered

instruction to students, filled its role, notably the university and the Christian Catechetical School; and from the first century BC onwards there had existed important philosophical schools which were essentially private enterprises, run by distinguished teachers and unsupported by public money.

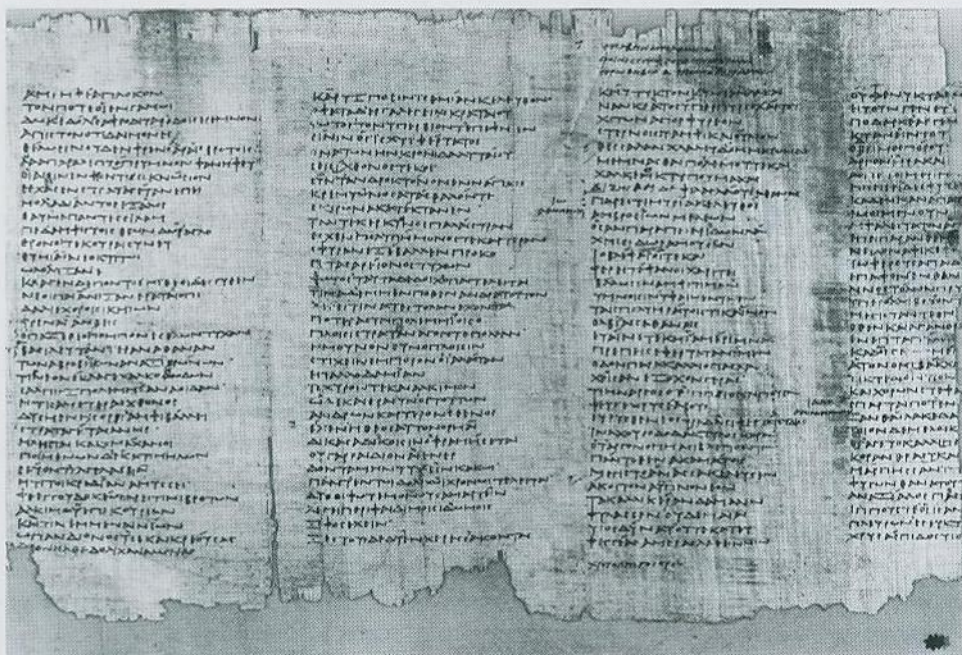
The Great Library of Alexandria was indispensable to the functioning of the community in the Museum. It also was within the palace quarter and was probably founded by Ptolemy I, although his son significantly enlarged it. At some point, perhaps during the Ptolemaic period, it spawned a daughter library which was located in the Serapeum. Collection of books for the Great Library during the Ptolemaic period was voracious and assiduous – at its height it probably numbered close to half-a-million papyrus rolls, most of them containing more than one work. But during Caesar's Alexandrian war against Pompey a significant proportion of the collection is said to have been destroyed in a fire, perhaps in the store houses rather than the main building.<sup>53</sup> The loss must have been partly compensated by Antonius' gift to Cleopatra of the contents of the library of the kings of Pergamum, said to number 200,000 volumes.<sup>54</sup> The Great Library itself might have perished in the destruction of the palace quarter in the early 270s and the daughter library during, or soon after, the destruction of the Serapeum in 391. Neither seems to have been in existence at the time of the Arab conquest.

Until the middle of the second century BC the extent of Ptolemaic patronage guaranteed a very lively milieu indeed, marked by intellectual creativity hardly matched in later periods. Men of talent were attracted from all over the hellenised Mediterranean, some to be tutors to members of the royal family, like Philitas of Cos and Strato of Lampsacus. Others enjoyed the benefits offered at court without such duties. One such was the Syracusan poet Theocritus, fulsome in his praise of the patronage offered by Ptolemy II Philadelphus: 'No man comes for the sacred contests of Dionysus who is skilled in raising his voice in sweet song without receiving the gift his art deserves and those mouthpieces of the Muses sing of Ptolemy for his benefactions. And what could be finer for a wealthy man than to win a fair reputation among mortals?'<sup>55</sup> Although writers of prose works made their mark in historical and geographical writing, it is the poets of third-century Ptolemaic Alexandria who have best earned the admiration of posterity. The *Idylls* of Theocritus, apart from their own considerable merits, are particularly important as models for Latin bucolic poetry. Apollonius of Rhodes wrote an epic in traditional form on the subject of the voyage of the Argo. He engaged with Callimachus of Cyrene in a celebrated and probably exaggerated personal and intellectual quarrel turning on the merits of traditional epic as against those of a more refined and learned genre, briefer and more varied in content. Callimachus reveals great innovative talent as an exponent of the latter. The theme of the four books of *Aetia* (Causes) is the origins of surviving local customs, especially religious; the debt to royal patronage is implicitly acknowledged in a poem on *The Deification of Arsinoe* and another, *The Lock of Berenike*, elaborates the conceit that a lock of hair, dedicated to Aphrodite by the wife of Ptolemy III in thanks for his return from the Third Syrian War, disappeared and was rediscovered among the constellations by the astronomer Conon.

The erudition and refinement of Alexandrian literature is in keeping with the



aura of scholarship in the Museum and the Library. A few in the distinguished series of directors of the Library were themselves creative writers – Apollonius of Rhodes resigned the directorship in about 245 BC, to be succeeded by the geographer Eratosthenes. It is disputed whether Callimachus ever held the post but, at all events, he was responsible for a monumental and painstaking biographical and bibliographical catalogue of authors and works in 120 books. This is merely one episode in a long tradition of sustained and accurate scholarship. Successive librarians, of whom the most eminent were Aristophanes of Byzantium and his pupil Aristarchus in the first half of the second century BC, maintained a programme of collating and interpreting the texts of the great classical Greek authors, introducing order, analysis and criticism to the Homeric epics, the lyric poets, historians, dramatists and many more. Both produced extremely important editions of the *Iliad*; Aristophanes developed systems of critical and lectional signs for use in texts and Aristarchus did pioneering work on Greek grammar as well as producing commentaries and critical editions. In short, these and other scholars laid the syste-



142 **Poems of Bacchylides.** Bacchylides was one of the most important of the Greek lyric poets of the fifth century BC, but his work was almost unknown until the discovery of this papyrus of the second century AD, which contains 20 of his poems. The roll, as reconstructed, contained 39 columns of writing and measured approximately  $4.5 \times 0.25$  m.

matic basis for the survival of this great corpus of literature into later antiquity and beyond.

The orientation of this literary and scholarly activity may seem to be obsessively Greek and it is true that the theme and content of the works of the Alexandrian poets, for instance, owe little or nothing to any Egyptian context outside Alexandria. But something needs to be said about literature of a less refined and sophisticated kind. There are the characteristically Egyptian folk-tales and romances which exist in both demotic and Greek versions and survived long into the Roman period, and thus must have had a Greek readership.<sup>56</sup> The evidence of the desire and need to transmit the native Egyptian historical tradition into Greek, brought the native Egyptian priest Manetho to write three volumes in Greek on the history and religion of Egypt, probably early in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus. Finally, there is the influence of the Jewish community in Alexandria, which increased considerably in size and importance in the reign of Ptolemy VI Philometor. To this milieu and probably to this period belongs the so-called *Letter of Aristeas*, which recounts the story that Ptolemy II Philadelphus requested the despatch of seventy Jewish scholars from Jerusalem to Alexandria in order to translate the Pentateuch into a Greek version for deposit in the collection of the Great Library.<sup>57</sup> The theme is elaborated with descriptions of the sumptuous gifts sent by Philadelphus to Jerusalem, of the city of Jerusalem itself and of the banquet in Alexandria lasting seven nights during which the king interrogated the translators. Many of the details must be fictional and the whole composition is highly tendentious but two things are certain: one is that it originated in Jewish circles in Alexandria and the other is that the Pentateuch was actually translated into Greek at Alexandria during the Ptolemaic period.

The Alexandrian achievement in scientific fields under the early Ptolemies was no less impressive than in literature (nor are the two areas unconnected). Great advances were made in pure mathematics, mechanics, physics, geography and medicine, to which a brief and eclectic summary cannot do justice. The achievement of Euclid, working in Alexandria *c.* 300 BC was, in effect, to systematise the whole existing corpus of Greek mathematical knowledge and to develop the method of proof by deduction from axioms. Archimedes worked for some time in Alexandria in the third century BC and is said to have invented the Archimedean screw when he was in Egypt;<sup>58</sup> more important still were his original researches into solid geometry and mechanics. Ctesibius, who was active in the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, is credited with the invention of a water-clock and a pressure pump. The application of mathematical principles to practical issues and problems lay at the very core of the advance in scientific knowledge. If further illustrations were needed we could point to Eratosthenes: his famous assessment of the circumference of the earth was based on a geometrical calculation from observation of the length of the shadows cast at noon on the day of the summer solstice at Alexandria and at Syene, which he assumed to lie on the same line of longitude; the degree of accuracy achieved in the result is uncertain only because we cannot determine with precision what unit of measurement he used. He also appears to have been the first to attempt a map of the world based on a system of lines of latitude and longitude. The temptations to erect barriers, between disciplines or between eras, should be resisted. In the middle of

the first century AD Hero of Alexandria produced important works on pneumatics and the construction of artillery and automata and all the advances mentioned point forward, over 400 years, to the colossal achievements of Claudius Ptolemaeus, who worked in Alexandria c. 150, in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, optics, music, geography and cartography. That the same goes for medical science, is emphasised by the words of Ammianus Marcellinus.<sup>59</sup> The foundations had again been laid in the Ptolemaic period. The names of the most distinguished physicians include Herophilus and Erasistratus, both at work in the third century BC, who did a great deal to establish the nature of the nervous, digestive and vascular systems. The price of such scientific progress might seem high: the monarchs are said to have provided criminals from their prisons for experimentation and vivisection.<sup>60</sup> The names of these pioneers are perhaps less familiar than that of one of their successors, the greatest physician of classical antiquity, Galen of Pergamum – he too received his training in the medical schools of Alexandria in the middle of the second century AD.

The roster of great names and great achievements peters out somewhat after the middle of the second century BC. Internal troubles at the Ptolemaic court connected with the accession of Ptolemy VIII in 145 BC forced some distinguished scholars to leave and it is possible that the Ptolemaic loss of power and prestige abroad was accompanied by a failure to attract intellectually distinguished visitors. Be that as it may, there appears to have been something of a revival in the last few decades of the dynasty, when we can adumbrate the origins of a great tradition in a field in which Alexandria had not been distinguished under the earlier Ptolemies – philosophy. This owed a good deal to external circumstances; one of the results of the first war of Mithridates of Pontus against Rome (89–5 BC) was that Athens, hitherto the epicentre of philosophical studies, had witnessed an exodus of philosophers, several of whom subsequently settled in Alexandria. The most influential was one Antiochus of Askalon, whose pupil Dion died in Rome in 57 BC, where he was participating in an ambassadorial visit by a hundred leading Alexandrians to protest against the reinstatement of Ptolemy XII Auletes. Dion himself was a Platonist, an affiliation which represents the most important strain in Alexandrian philosophy for the next four centuries. Such labels are, however, often confusing in some respects for the philosophical ambience was very mixed and distinctions between different schools of thought were not rigid. Another distinguished pupil of Antiochus was Arius Didymus, labelled as a Stoic, who developed a close personal relationship with Octavian at Rome in the 30s BC and returned with him to Alexandria after the battle of Actium; Octavian is said to have decided to spare the city and its inhabitants on three grounds – the reputation of its founder, its size and beauty and as a favour to his friend Arius.<sup>61</sup>

The presence of great names inevitably attracted disreputable lesser fry; in the first century Dio of Prusa was scathing in his condemnation of the street-philosophers, the Cynics who 'gather in groups at street-corners, in alleyways and at temple gates and play upon the credulity of lads and sailors and a crowd of that sort, stringing together rough jokes and much gossip and badinage that reeks of the market-place . . . and accustom thoughtless people to deride philosophers in general.'<sup>62</sup> But there was no lack, then or later, either of respectable and popular teachers – of whom the unfortunate Hypatia was one – or of serious philosophical thinkers. The most



**143 Limestone relief.** A slab in the form of a niche, probably portraying the birth of Venus. Fifth or sixth century. The posture of the goddess emphasises the ubiquity of conventions in the iconography of 'pagan' and Christian elements in Coptic Christian art.

interesting figure in the early Roman period is the prolific Jewish writer Philo, a member of a wealthy hellenised Alexandrian family.<sup>63</sup> In his case the social and cultural context was crucial, for it produced a scholar deeply immersed in Platonic philosophy and interested, above all, in applying it to the Jewish Old Testament tradition. It appears that his familiarity with the latter was largely through the medium of the Greek translation of the Septuagint, for his knowledge of Hebrew does not seem to have been profound.

Such cross-fertilisation could hardly have taken place anywhere else and the result was the creation of a new intellectual current which was particularly important as a precursor of the vital interaction in the following two centuries between Platonist philosophy and Christian theology. One factor which may have contributed indirectly to this was the decline of the hellenised Jewish intelligentsia in Alexandria after the revolt of 115–7. The effect which Greek thought had on Christianity in the first century of its existence came primarily through the medium of hellenised Jews like Philo. Whether or not there was a vacuum to be filled, it was the crucial influence of the currents of Greek philosophical thought which helped to draw the developing Christian doctrine away from the strictly Jewish exegetical tradition which had given it birth. Alexandria therefore occupied a unique role in the history of Christianity – without it, the development of Christian thought would have looked very different indeed.

This line of development leads directly from Philo to the great Christian thinkers of the second and third centuries. The foundation of the Catechetical School at Alexandria in the second half of the second century provided the necessary focus. Its first head was Pantaenus, said to be a convert from Stoicism, his pupil and successor in 190 was the bishop Clement who fled under threat of persecution in 202 and he in turn was succeeded by Origen, whose tenure was interrupted temporarily in 215 when he left during the carnage created by Caracalla and permanently in 230 when he went to Palestine. All three were steeped in the Greek philosophical tradition, drawing on Stoicism for their ethical and moral speculation, on Platonism for their metaphysics and Aristotelianism for their logic. Origen is, in many ways, the most interesting of the three, combining intellectual fervour and rigorous scholar-

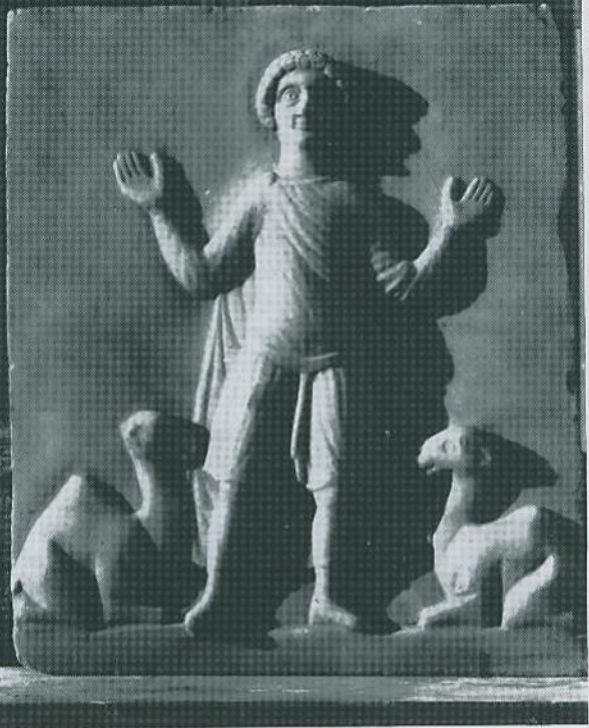
ship with extreme personal ascetism (he is said to have submitted to voluntary castration in order to be able to teach women without incurring suspicion).<sup>64</sup> He also took the trouble to learn Hebrew, which enabled him to compile a critical synopsis of the various versions of the Old Testament. He wrote an important treatise on philosophical and doctrinal matters, but his unique and lasting contribution to Christianity lay in his exposition and exegesis of the Scriptures. Over a century later, one of his successors as head of the Catechetical School, Didymus the Blind (c. 313–98), whose pupils included Gregory of Nazianzus and St Jerome, was still working in the Origenist tradition and writing learned commentaries on books of the Old Testament.

Origen might well be described, although it does not remotely do justice to the breadth of his interests and influence, as a Christian Neo-platonist. Platonism was without any doubt the dominant force in third century philosophical thought in Alexandria and pagan and Christian thinkers alike were immersed in it, often in a common context. A warning against the danger of drawing too rigid a division between pagans and Christians comes in the person of a mysterious but very influential teacher named Ammonius Saccas; he was perhaps a son of Christian parents who apostasised to paganism. He numbered among his pupils not only Origen but also the most profound and influential of all the pagan neo-Platonists, Plotinus, who came from Lycopolis in Upper Egypt and studied in Alexandria with Ammonius for about eleven years in the 230s and 240s.<sup>65</sup>

One thing which pagan and Christian Neo-platonists did tend to share was a hostility towards the other most prominent feature of philosophical thought at Alexandria in this period – gnosticism. Something has already been said about the importance of this in a later and perhaps less rarefied context.<sup>66</sup> Its main proponents in second-century Alexandria, Valentinus and Basilides, were active c. 130–160 and it is clear that although the strains of Christian doctrine which eventually became a more or less coherent orthodoxy viewed them as heretical, they considered themselves, and would have appeared to pagans, as Christians. Their intellectual fervour, passionate dualism, belief in the centrality of man in their system and claim to have access to knowledge (*gnōsis*) by revelation evoked strong antipathy, particularly from Christian thinkers (and even the pagan Plotinus indulged in rare polemic against them). But for the fortuitous find of the Nag Hammadi library of gnostic texts, we should know of them only from their opponents, whose inclination must have been to suppress or minimise their importance. But even this cannot wholly conceal the vitality of a tradition in Christian thought which, again, draws very heavily on the Jewish and hellenistic intellectual background in Alexandria.

The later history of philosophical thought in Alexandria is no less important, although by the fourth century its seminal contributions to Christianity had been made. Almost all the important Platonist and Aristotelian philosophers of the fifth and sixth centuries, several of whom were also literary scholars, studied at Alexandria at one time or another, including Proclus, the *doyen* of the Athenian Academy. After his death in 485, as the influence of Athens declined that of Alexandria increased, dramatically so after 529 when Justinian closed the Academy at Athens and forbade the teaching of ‘pagan philosophy’. But the writing and teaching of Platonic and especially Aristotelian philosophy continued at Alexandria into the seventh and

The marble relief shows the saint between two camels. Menas was a much revered figure who became an ascetic and was martyred in the reign of Diocletian. His church, built in the mid-fourth century to the south west of Alexandria (Abu Mina), became a centre of miracles and pilgrimages. 'Menas flasks', embossed with the figure in the same attitude as on this relief and made to carry sacred healing water, have been found all over the eastern Mediterranean.



eighth centuries, ultimately transmitting the tradition to the custody of the Islamic world.

After 529 the leading lights of Alexandrian philosophy presumably either were or became professed Christians, like John Philoponus (c. 490–570) who wrote commentaries on works of Aristotle. Prior to that, pagans and Christians had co-existed in the discipline, although the tradition of hostility between them is often sharply illustrated. Proclus, for instance, wrote a polemical work in eighteen books against the Christians and was in turn attacked by John Philoponus who tried to show that Proclus was ignorant and stupid in matters of Greek scholarship as well.<sup>67</sup> On the other hand there is no doubt that both pagans and Christians studied, for the most part peaceably, in the same schools and personal connections could transcend religious differences. The pagan teacher Hypatia numbered among her pupils and admirers Synesius of Cyrene, who became a bishop, perhaps after conversion later in life; but he remained deeply imbued with pagan Greek culture and retained his admiration for her to the end.

The Byzantine period also saw a revival of the Greek literary tradition in Egypt and Alexandria again made its distinctive contribution. This was, however, a far different world from that of Ptolemaic Egypt. The literature still shows clear signs of being in the tradition which goes back to the poets of hellenistic Alexandria and classical Greece, though there are also now clear indications of familiarity with Latin poetry. 'The Egyptians are mad about poetry, but have no interest in any

serious study,' remarked Eunapius of Sardis, writing *c.* 400.<sup>68</sup> By this time open-handed royal patronage, the Museum and the Great Library had long disappeared. The poets of the later age were scholars and teachers as well, making their living from pedagogy and from writing commissioned encomia or narrative poems on militaristic or political subjects for important public figures. Few of them were Alexandrians; Palladas, a writer of epigrams, and Claudian are the only ones certainly known to have been natives of the city and the latter pursued his art (in the form of Latin epic) at the court of the emperor Honorius in Rome. The remainder came not from the Mediterranean cities, but from Upper Egypt, and particularly the area of the Thebaid around Panopolis; for most of them, too, Alexandria was both a cultural centre in its own right and a stepping-stone to wider travels to Constantinople and other cities of the east.<sup>69</sup>

Few literary critics would favourably compare the often contrived, florid and overblown productions of these writers with the poetry of the earlier age. The phenomenon is important nonetheless, not least for the fact that the literature works with the genres, themes and motifs of the pagan Greek tradition, with little or no concession to the contemporary, predominantly Christian, context. Some of the men of letters, indeed, were not only pagans but combative and militant pagans who, perhaps not surprisingly, sometimes became central figures in the intimidation and persecution of Christians. There is an instructive story involving Horapollon, a poet-scholar of the late fourth century from the region of Panopolis, who wrote commentaries on Sophocles, Alcaeus and Homer and taught not only in Alexandria but in Constantinople as well. A pupil named Paralios became disenchanted with paganism, taunted his teacher over his pagan beliefs and announced his intention to convert to Christianity; whereupon Horapollon's other pagan pupils chose a moment when their teacher was not there and there were few Christians present and beat him within an inch of his life.<sup>70</sup>

The golden age of these pagan literary figures was certainly the first half of the fifth century. It is possible to discern traces of antecedents in the previous century or so (and perhaps even a feeble flicker later on), but the efflorescence and coherence for even a relatively brief period demands some explanation; perhaps the most persuasive is that it was a reaction to the official outlawing of pagan religious practices in 391 – what was left of the pagan tradition had to express itself in a form which was legally permissible. Its decline after the middle of the fifth century perhaps merely reflects the inexorable advance of Christianity. The family of Horapollon might exemplify it; a son and grandson remained staunch pagans, until the latter experienced a sudden conversion to Christianity at the end of his life.

The Alexandrian contribution to the intellectual history of the ancient world stands in no need of defence or apologia. A satirist of the third century BC might mock the members of the Museum as 'well-propped pedants who quarrel endlessly in the Muses' bird-cage,'<sup>71</sup> and the Byzantine poets might seem like anachronistic pedants who could produce adulatory verse to order. But from the beginning to the end of its unique history Alexandria promoted the spread, survival and augmentation of the classical Greek tradition, just as it promoted trade and commerce, in two directions. The literate public of the eastern and western Mediterranean alike used and read texts and commentaries on classical authors made in Alexandria. Alexandrian

hellenistic poets, in particular, enlarged the horizons of Greek poetry (even if their work is sometimes dismissed as 'inferior' to that of epic and lyric poets of the classical age) and exercised an enormous influence on the development of Roman poetry and, indeed, on that of European literature after the Renaissance.

For the Greek elite of the towns of the delta and the valley, too, it was the ultimate source of their reading matter, which has left its legacy to posterity in the shape of several thousands of literary texts on papyrus. In the first place these have allowed modern scholars to reconstruct the literary tastes of this small but important reading public and occasionally to resurrect important lost works of literature, such as several of the comedies of Menander, or an unknown work of the lyric poet Archilochus.<sup>72</sup> Second, they yield uniquely important information about the way in which Alexandrian scholars edited the classical authors and thus help to fill a major gap in the textual history of this literature between the time of its composition and its appearance in the manuscripts from western Europe. Finally, they allow us to appreciate one of the most important ways in which Egypt as a whole made its contribution to the world of classical antiquity: the seeping and pervasive influence which could give an intelligent and cultured man the means to proceed to a powerful and respected position in the Roman or Byzantine world at large; or create the fertile ground from which an Egyptian town like Lycopolis could send Plotinus, one of its brightest sons, to Alexandria and thence to Rome, to become one of the major intellectual figures of later antiquity.