

SSISIM 2022

# **THE LIBRARY OF ALEXANDRIA: KNOWLEDGE TO ASHES**

**BACKGROUND GUIDE**

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# EQUITY DISCLAIMER

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Throughout this committee, delegates will be engaging in complex debates and discussions covering a wide array of topics. As SSICsim seeks to provide an enriching educational experience that facilitates understanding of the implications of real-world issues, the content of our committees may involve sensitive or controversial subject matter for the purposes of academia and accuracy.

We ask that delegates be respectful, professional, tactful, and diplomatic when engaging with all committee content, representing their assigned country's or character's position in an equitable manner, communicating with staff and other delegates, and responding to opposing viewpoints.

This Background Guide presents topics that may be distressing to some Delegates, including but not limited to:

- War and political tension
- Property damage and destruction
- Destruction by fire
- Imperialism
- Religious conflict

Great care will be taken by staff in handling any/all of these topics should they arise.

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SSICsim recognizes the sensitivity associated with many of our topics, and we encourage you to be aware of and set healthy boundaries that work for you. This may include: refraining from reading certain parts of the background guide, preparing yourself before reading this background guide, doing some self-care or seeking support after reading the background guide, or anything that can help make you feel more comfortable. We ask that all Delegates remain considerate of the boundaries that other Delegates set.

SSICsim expects that all discussions amongst delegates will remain productive and respectful of one another. If you have any equity concerns or need assistance in setting boundaries or navigating sensitive subject matter, please do not hesitate to reach out to me or our Director-General of Equity Affairs, Aidan Thompson, at [equity@ssicsim.ca](mailto:equity@ssicsim.ca). We want you to feel safe and comfortable at SSICsim!

If you wish to switch committees after having read the content warnings for this committee, please:

- Contact your Faculty Advisor/Head Delegate with your request if you are a part of a group delegation
- Email our Director-General of Equity Affairs, Aidan Thompson, with a brief explanation of why you would like to switch committees if you are NOT a part of a group delegation.



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DIRECTOR-GENERAL OF EQUITY AFFAIRS

# LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

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Dear delegates,

My name is Nazaha, and it is my greatest honour to welcome you to SSICsim 2022. I am very delighted to introduce to you the world of ancient academia through this committee, Knowledge to Ashes!

Currently, I am a first-year Math and Physical Sciences student at University of Toronto, pursuing a double major in Cognitive Science and Computer Science. I'm extremely privileged to be a Director this year for SSICsim 2022, and I hope to give back to you the same experiences that made every one of my MUN conferences a blast!

First and foremost, I'd like to share the reason I chose the Library of Alexandria to be the apple of this committee's eye. I was first introduced to the world of philosophy through my Grade 12 Philosophy class and found myself drawn to the arguments made by several influential philosophers and scholars. This committee is very loosely based on my summative assignment in that same Philosophy class, which featured philosophers, their arguments and ideas, and how they all fit together to explain the philosophy of our society.

While the historical background of this committee is based on real historical accounts, most of the characters and upcoming events in this committee are fictional. Many of the characters are either based on real people from the Library of Alexandria's time, or they are entirely unique to this committee. If you are playing a character based on a real figure in history, it is completely optional to do any background research on your character (although it is recommended). You may also notice that some characters have descriptions that

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address only part of the committee's issues. You are welcome to 'fill in the blanks' wherever needed. The character description and your creativity are enough to play your character!

Whether SSICsim 2022 is your first conference or your fifth, I hope that Knowledge to Ashes will leave you with a lot of fond memories. Because this is a novice-friendly committee, we wholeheartedly understand any difficulties you may face - you are free to contact me through email for anything, committee-related or not!

With that, let the esteemed dias and I take you back in time to a small port city on the Mediterranean. The crisis team and I look forward to hearing about your ideas for the newly-proposed Royal Library of Alexandria, and cannot wait to see how your ideas turn into reality.

*Let's just hope nothing burns this time around.*



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NAZAHA FAZIL (SHE/HER)  
DIRECTOR FOR KNOWLEDGE TO ASHES

# INTRODUCTION

## For *The Library of Alexandria: Knowledge to Ashes*

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In today's day and age, information regarding nearly any subject is available with a few taps on a digital screen; we are only limited by our finite curiosity and initiative. But over 2000 years ago, all the information available in the world was housed in one place that later burned to the ground.

There is something incredibly symbolic about both the life and death of the library. There existed people who revolutionised the idea of centralising all information in the world, an idea that is still relevant today through our dependency on the internet. And on the other side of the coin, there existed people who decided that a mass of ambiguous information is a dangerous thing.

The foundation of the famed Library of Alexandria was the large population of scholars, philosophers, scientists, writers, librarians, teachers and builders who brought it to life, each with their own opinions, ideas, and arguments about why the world works the way it does. Many of the works written under the roof of the Library are still relevant in several high school courses. The Royal Library of Alexandria truly lives well beyond its time.

Let us explore the intricacies of the people who lived to see it built. You, as a delegate, are invited to portray one of the characters who might've had a big say in how the Library was built. However, as you will see, a couple of complex decisions ultimately led to its destruction. You have the privilege of going back to 300 BCE and remaking these complex decisions for yourself, with the occurrences of the future in mind. In other words, you will be going back in time to rebuild the library with the knowledge of the people, events, and factors that may destroy it

# DEFINITIONS

For *The Library of Alexandria: Knowledge to Ashes*

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## **Pharaoh**

The title of an Egyptian monarch, originally describing the palace in which an Egyptian monarch resided.

## **Hellenism**

The culture, history, and religions that spanned the Ptolemaic Period (320 BCE to 30 BCE) that were rooted in that of ancient Greece.

## **The Muses**

The nine goddesses of literature, science, and the arts in Greek mythology. In ancient Greek culture, they were considered the source of knowledge.

## **Aristotle's Lyceum**

An institution of a gymnasium and philosophical school founded by Aristotle in ancient Athens.



# HISTORY/CONTEXT

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## The History of a Port City

Before Alexandria was an established city, it was a small port town called Rhakotis situated on the northern coastline of Egypt. Prior to the city, Egypt was a flourishing contender in trade with Greeks and other island states and cities. Imperial conflict with nations to the east brought on Greek alliances, who helped the nation secure their independence for 60 years before being conquered by the Persian Empire circa 340 BCE.

Shortly after, in 331 BCE, the arrival of Alexander III of Macedon – best known as Alexander the Great - introduced a new period in Greek history. Conquering the port town and renaming it, he sought to turn Alexandria into a large capital city and appointed his general, Ptolemy, to rule Egypt from the seat of Alexandria. Following Alexander's death in 323 BCE and the establishment of Ptolemy as the Pharaoh, the full expansion of Alexandria into an academic, intellectual centre began the great Ptolemaic Period.

Ptolemy, later Ptolemy I Soter, was a Hellenistic monarch. The city of Alexandria was established based on Greek beliefs and principles, much of which extended to the streets, palaces, temples and cemeteries. Both Egyptian and Greek culture were integrated into the city's expansion. Over the course of its life, the city also came to integrate Jewish language and culture through its interactions with Jewish scholars who were integral to the development of a giant library to come.

## Establishing a House of Manuscripts

A legend claims that one of Ptolemy I's subjects, Demetrius of Phalerum, proposed the idea to construct a house of all of the world's known manuscripts with the institution of a place of learning that would succeed Aristotle's Lyceum. Ptolemy I had approved the plan and

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begun its construction around under his rule, finishing under his successor Ptolemy II around 283 BCE.

The institution was established in the name of the Muses, having alternate names including the “Greek Mouseion”, “Seat of the Muses”, the “Museum of Alexandria” or the Royal Library of Alexandria. Although the “Library of Alexandria” is most often in reference to the large building that held the manuscripts, the Royal Library itself included the large archive of manuscripts as well as lecture areas, gardens, shrines for the Muses, and even a zoo. In many ways, the Library of Alexandria was intended and built to be much greater than a library; it was, in the modern sense of the term, a university.

Like the rest of the city of Alexandria, Greek influences of architecture reflected in the exquisiteness of the lecture and banquet halls of the Great Library. However, despite the enormity of the institution, very little is known about the details of its systems and layout.

## **The Life of the Alexandrian Hub**

Over several centuries, the Library of Alexandria was the centre of life for the philosophers, scholars, learners and thinkers of the time. After its establishment under the rule of Ptolemy II, he reached out to rulers everywhere to contribute their literature to the library. Written material came in the form of papyrus scrolls, and at the peak of the library’s popularity, there may have been nearly half a million scrolls in the library – the largest collection of manuscripts in ancient history.

The manuscripts held knowledge ranging across a variety of schools, including literary works, philosophical tractates, scientific explanations, and religious, mythological and medical literature from major figures in history, including the likes of Plato, Hippocrates and Sappho. Many important works that are still used today came from within the walls of the library.

Agents were sent out to find these manuscripts, and due to the royal status of the library, price was not a limitation. They were organised through systems devised by its librarians,

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which form the basis of library catalogues in the present day. A second branch library was introduced in the Temple of Serapis circa 240 BCE.

## **The Faltering of Alexandria**

Although Greek, Jewish, and Egyptian cultures lived together in Alexandria, the emphasis on Hellenistic culture led to tensions between Greek and non-Greek communities. In the late Ptolemaic Period, under Ptolemy IV, these tensions began to manifest into civil warfare and purges.

The decline of the Ptolemaic Period matched the rise of Rome, hitting its course with the complicated affairs of the last of the Ptolemy rulers, among them being Egyptian Pharaoh Cleopatra IV. Complex battles and attempts at keeping power to the Ptolemaic name led to Julius Caesar, the dictator of Rome at the time, seizing control of Egypt from the seat of Alexandria and having an affair with Cleopatra circa 45 BCE, unofficially putting Alexandria under Roman power. Following Caesar's assassination, and later the suicide of Cleopatra and her husband Mark Antony, Egypt was formally brought under Roman rule by emperor Octavian - later known as Augustus - in 30 BCE, thus ending the Ptolemaic Period in Egypt.

Many historians agree that Caesar's seizing of Alexandria may have involved an accidental ploy that harmed parts of the library. However, there is evidence to suggest that it remained intact and as popular as ever among academics after the beginning of Roman rule. Despite this, the fires that burned parts of the Great Library continued to spread over the course of history.

## **An Inflammatory Demise**

With the beginning of the common era, religious tension among Jews, pagans, and later Christians, spread through the city. Over time, verdicts that began to rule Christianity over pagans and Jews began a line of civil battles over religious differences that led to the assassination of Hypatia of Alexandria and the complete destruction of the Temple of Serapis, in which the second branch of the Great Library of Alexandria was stored. The city declined after scholars began to leave the city in the midst of the religious turmoil,

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overturning the city from an academic capital to an impoverished battlefield.

Egypt shifted under the rule of Sassanid Persians, the Christian Byzantine Empire, and Arab Muslims until it was conquered entirely under Islamic rule by the mid-7th century CE. Over the next couple of centuries, the Great Library, along with most Greek, Egyptian and Jewish remnants of culture in the city, were taken down.

It has been reported that the scrolls of the library were burned gradually in order to heat the city's bathhouses. The leader of Islamic Arabic had supposedly regarded the scrolls as contradictory or redundant to Islamic principles and beliefs and discarded them readily. Most of Ptolemaic Alexandria, including the Royal Library of Alexandria, had been completely eradicated by the end of 1200 CE.

# STATE OF AFFAIRS

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After the conception of the Great Library, a couple of complex decisions ultimately led to its destruction. However, you, as a delegate, have the privilege of going back to 300 BCE and remaking these complex decisions for yourself, with the occurrences of the future in mind. In other words, you will be going back in time to rebuild the library with the knowledge of the people, events, and factors that may destroy it.

The Royal Library of Alexandria has just recently been approved by Pharaoh Ptolemy for construction. You, among your other delegates, have been selected as part of an Alexandrian Council to organise, plan, debate and execute your visions for the Library.

Keep in mind that, as mentioned in the Historical Context section, the Royal Library of Alexandria refers to the large institution of lecture halls, gardens, and library archives, rather than just the archives of manuscripts. This entire royal institution is under the jurisdiction of your planning.

During this time, civil and political tensions are rampant throughout the city in the wake of new leadership. It has been about 40 years since the Persian invasion of Egypt, 30 years since its successful vanquishment by Alexander III of Macedon, and about 5 years since Ptolemy came into official rule as Pharaoh. With a new leadership came new Greek cultures, beliefs and principles that integrated into already existing Egyptian cultural and religious principles.

There is pushback on the Greco-Egyptian monarch from native Egyptians, who have begun to feel as though they are second-class citizens to the Greek immigrants in Egypt. Additionally, having been caught up in imperial wars for over 40 years, there is more pressure on the Pharaoh to take measures that ensure the stable security of all Egyptian

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citizens. While these issues are not among the issues that the Alexandrian Council will need to directly face, the city's political tensions are likely to affect the decisions that must be made regarding the Royal Library of Alexandria.

# TOPICS OF DEBATE

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## The Organization of the Library

Naturally, an enormous library catering to a large public body will need to have plans, proposals, and organised ideas. This planning must include a physical structure of the library, a systemic outline of how it will function, and a means of managing it.

Given that this library is under royal jurisdiction, no limits of money or grandeur will be placed on the types of physical establishments housed under the Royal Library of Alexandria, provided that these establishments are reasonable.

As an example, the real Library of Alexandria included a large archive of manuscripts, as well as lecture halls, gardens, and a zoo. The Alexandrian Council will need to decide what institutions to establish, where to establish them, and how they best fit into your personal visions for the Royal Library.

With the physical construction of the library comes its systems of functioning. These systems could include processes of hiring workers for the library's management (i.e. librarians, janitors, builders, etc.), a means of acquiring material for the library's written works (keep in mind that paper has not been invented yet), and acquiring the knowledge from scholars and academics to integrate into the library. The library's functioning systems are the backbone of its management.

It's important to note that you are recommended to act, plan, and create with the information of the historical Library of Alexandria in mind. This could mean establishing your plans the same way they were established historically or choosing another course of action entirely.

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**Guiding Questions:**

1. How will the library be physically structured?
2. How will people be selected to contribute to the library as workers or sponsors?
3. What systems will be implemented for the Library's management?
4. What fields of knowledge will be accessible at the library? To whom will it be accessible?

**Safety and Security of the Library**

Is the repetition of a fiery destruction preventable? With any large, communal institution comes public disagreements and debates that may threaten its existence and success. Additionally, knowing what you know about the historical Library of Alexandria's unfortunate loss to fire, the security of the Library, its knowledge, and its dwellers should be at top priority.

While the Library does not face any direct threats, civil tensions in Alexandria must be taken into consideration in creating both the structural and functional parts of the Library. It may need to be built to be reinforced against threats of fire, explosions, or decay, and it may need to take into account the ideas and complaints of the public in Alexandria. Depending on your views of the urgency of the civil unrest, the influence of the public could heavily influence the plans for the Library.

Among the most dangerous of weapons is information, and an institution that relies heavily on its abundance is prone to being dangerous itself. Although the historical Library of Alexandria did not originally believe in limiting what fields of knowledge were integrated into the institution, the Alexandrian Council must decide on the fate of all the knowledge that is stored, taught, or retrieved at the Royal Library of Alexandria.

Censorship and filtering of sensitive or refuted knowledge has the potential to carry benefits – for example, manuscripts detailing past historical defeats, dangerous ideals related to violence or mass destruction, or knowledge that directly contradicts the religious scriptures and beliefs of its dwellers. However, the freedom of access to a wide



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multitude of information has its compulsions as well. The Council has a duty to decide for the wider public on the content that the Library will house.

**Guiding Questions:**

1. Are reinforcements and security measures necessary to protect the Library? If so, which ones?
2. How can the Library be prepared to adapt to difficult political situations or major changes in the city?
3. Should all fields of knowledge be accessible in the Library? Should there be focuses on certain fields?
4. Should there be a mode of censorship of certain information? What rules would decide what information is censored?

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