Ancient Libraries of Egypt

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Abstract

The Civilization and libraries came into being in Egypt and Mesopotamia for the first time in the history of the mankind. The libraries have always played an important role in helping humans to meet their basic needs for survival and self realization. Hence the libraries were established in each and every part of the civilized world since remotest past. In this paper an attempt has been made to give a brief account regarding the emergence of the libraries in Egypt. Many libraries have been discovered in Egypt especially the libraries of Edfu and Remises-II.

Keywords: Libraries, Ancient—Egypt Civilization, History

Introduction

The supremacy of Man over other lower animals is due to his articulation, communication, knowledge, faculty of wisdom and above all recording his experiences in term of history, literature, revelation and scientific achievements. Man has always used knowledge and information for various purposes and keeping record of it. The place where the record of knowledge was managed had been known as the Library. And as a social institution, it is creation of the society and its (sole) goal is the improvement of the social order by helping individual to understand himself and the world of which he is a part. (Shera, 1976).

The individuals and nations who use that preserved knowledge have been progressing while other regressing. The reason is quite obvious that the library has always helped the man to meet even his two basic needs i. e. survival and self realization.

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Survival in the sense of food, dress, health, livelihood and adjustment in the ever changing environment; while the self-realization in the connotation of personal identification, faculty for appreciation of science, arts; philosophical and religious activities. (Bystrom & Swank, 1943).

In addition the knowledge collected in the libraries serves as means for enhancing the ability to earn; gain power; ensure safety; get rid of worries; solve ~~the~~ problems; take benefits from past events or experiences; fulfill aesthetic satisfaction; control emotions; discover secrets of the Universe; guide to utilize time in a better way; understand other human beings; develop sense of appreciation and criticism; know about far and distance located areas or countries; provide information regarding current affairs; help teacher to guide students; promote literacy among masses; enhance people's intelligence and understanding of cultural, democratic, political, religious and social values; help government to receive taxes; guide citizens to know their rights. In nutshell, it has been rightly said that. "Without books God is silent, just dormant, natural science at a stand, philosophy lame, letters dumb and all things involved in darkness." (Bartholin; Alexander as Quoted by Sabzwari, 2005).

Thus keeping in view such matchless importance and value of the library, each and every civilized nation had established libraries during its apex of their rule or golden days. But what to say about the height of ignorance rather blunder of Man in this regard that nobody can assert that where the first library was established? Anyhow, it can be safely said that first library was established on the earth where the first civilization emerged. It is equally interesting that each and every nation owing old civilization claims for its credit without any solid proof. Nevertheless, it has been proved that it was Egypt and Mesopotamia the land of three great rivers, Nile, Tigris and Euphrates where the civilization was born first time in the history of mankind. Hence first cities and towns in real sense were founded, irrigation system was introduced, agriculture was promoted, big dams were constructed and prosperity was gained, power was organized, wealth was accumulated, the knowledge was recorded and artistic skill was developed. (Hoylland, 1925).

The credit of this civilization goes to Egyptians, Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians, Chaldeans, and Akkadian. Here an attempt has been made to show the contribution of the old Egyptians.

The land of Egypt is an arid belt. The Greeks used the word, "oasis" for this land meaning a safe place in the Desert. The ancient Egyptians also called their land, "Kemet" which means black land (Steven, 1963). Egypt has been cradle of civilization since the time of Bayser Bin Ham, the grandson of Noah (Ibn-e-Tugheri, (n.d.). It has proved now that by about 2700 B. C. Egypt had reached the first peak of her prosperity. Her rise had been speedy. Internal unity, a series of able rulers, and safety from external invaders had led to a remarkable advancement in civilization. (Drower & S.R.K.G., 1953) It is remarkable that it had a fertile land due to the river Nile. And according to the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) the river Nile is amongst those four rivers which stream in Heaven. (Majmat Al-Sihah Al-Sittah, v.5 n.d.). Herodotus the Greek historian also says that Egypt is a gift of Nile which is peerless on this Earth.

" Herodotus's history of Egypt concerning the Nile river contains what is probably his deepest analysis of anything in Egypt. Herodotus explains the various exotic properties of the Nile, how it rises and falls with the seasons, and how the areas surrounding the river are inundated and later cultivated."[http://everything2.com/title/Herodotus+on+Ancient+Egypt]

race and origin of first Egyptians is not known. Anyhow it is believed that they came from the East via Aden and settled on the bank of the river Nile about in 5000 B.C. They turned up with stone tools but soon they became farmers and cultivated barley, flax and wheat. They have recorded the flow of the Nile which goes six thousand years back. Its measurement in term of rise and fall of the river enabled the Egyptians to invent the Solar Calendar, in 2776. (Rickard & Hyma, 1874)

As already mentioned the first Egyptians were safe from any kind of invasion for thousands of years and having rich and fertile land, they made rapid development in civilization of mankind. (Weech, 1960). It is also on record that the significant contribution made by the Egyptians was the preaching of Universal Monotheism, the providence of God, forgiveness of sins, and rewards and punishment after death. (Burns & Ralph, 1961). Unfortunately later on they became worshiper of deities

and local gods embodied in sacred animals. Among these gods the prominent were Horus-god of sun and sky; Osiris, the god of the Nile, Hathon-goddess of pasture; snake goddess; Thoth-god of knowledge and wisdom. As such the Egyptians were religious people but unluckily they worshipped many gods. It is very interesting that every village, town, and district possessed at least one distinguished separate god.

** Another remarkable contribution of the Egyptians was developing the art of writing known as "Hieroglyphic" which means sacred carving. According to Clement of Alexandria (200 A.D.) the Greeks called it Hieroglyphic Grammata (from Hieroes "Holy" Glyphein "to crave" and Grammata "Letters"). The ancient Egyptians had very high esteem for writing and called it mdw-ntr, "speech of god." (Derringer, 1996). They attributed the writing to Thoth, the god of knowledge and wisdom and Seshat the goddess of writing. (Sudell, 2005). Diodurus had also mentioned of god Thoth and his wife Safekhat, the goddess of writing. The most important source of Hieroglyphic is Rosetta stone. A French scholar Champollion discovered method of translating Egyptian literature. The Hieroglyphic was developed through the stages of Pictograph, Ideogram, Phonogram, Syllabic sound and letter sound pictures. Some researchers are of the opinion that the Egyptians had the credit to invent the alphabets (Rickard & Hyma, 1956), while others believe that "only one step remained to invent letters." (Durant, 1942.) (Maher, n.d). Finally, letters and words were represented by signs, until a cursive or running hand of writing came into use. (Guest, 1936). With the passage of time there was extension in Hieroglyphic i.e. Hieratic and Demotic writing. The former was used by the Royal and Religious people and later was used by common people.

Enormous numbers of Papyrus rolls of thousands years old have been found that were thrown away as waste once. From deciphering it became evident that are some stories, some histories, some records of trials (including the trials of tomb-robbers of nearly three thousand years ago) and a great many are business records and reports. There are many private letters, too. There is one famous letter from a very angry little boy named Theon whose father had gone on a visit to a big city without him. In it Theon declares that if his father did not send for him, he won't write or speak to him again. He will refuse to eat or drink and will generally make a real nuisance of him. (Alen, (n. d.). So far as the nature of material is concerned "from 3000 B. C. onwards to Christian times,

new material, literary and non-literary is such that any portion of it will provide a life's work for one man. (Beloff, 1948).The Egyptians produced a very extensive literature indeed probably nowhere at the time was writing so widely and actively carried on as in the land of the Nile (Hessel, 1955). In the near past at his palace of Tell-el-Amara an Arab lady got some tablets. These tablets were broken down before their reading. Anyhow the pieces of these tablets have been sold to the various Museums of Europe and America. (Rider, 1968).

The Book of the Dead had been discovered from the various tombs. The Ancient Egyptians use to bury their dead books along with the wealth of the dead body. A Book of Dead has been preserved in the British Museum which belongs to 1800 B.C.

According to their belief the money or wealth will be useful for the dead person during the journey to the next world. They also used to keep a book with a dead consisting of a biography of an earlier dead person with some direction to keep on journey.

So far as the knowledge of Egyptians is concerned it is on the record that after the great flood of Noah, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Philosophy, Medicine and Magic were at the apex. (Fazil, 1988). Rather the ancient Egyptians had full command on Architectural as well as Artistic Funs, Mathematics, Geometry and Medical Sciences. (Farah & Karls, 1999).

The Egyptians had developed their Educational System to great extent. The priests were responsible to impart the basic education as well as higher education to the children in schools attached to the temples and offices of the state's treasury respectively. The teachers persuaded their pupils to be eloquent as well as write essays regarding the advantages of education. Give thy heart to learning and love her like your mother for there is nothing as precious as learning. There is another saying that "there is no profession that is not governed; it is only the learned man who rules himself." (Durant, 1942). From these statements, the place of education in old Egypt can easily be determined.

It is also mentionable that the priests were scribes as well as writers and they were placed in a high position. The priests had authority in the development and control of sciences and pseudo-sciences such as

Astronomy and Astrology. (Revil, 1956, p. 26). They were treated as patron gods. Moreover, the writers and scribes had great impact, even in the functions of the Government. It is also notable that the King was nominally High Priest of every cult in Egypt but he used to delegate his power to High Priest to perform day to day rituals. (Sudell, 2005)

Although in some cases the Egyptians used solid rocks, walls of temples and libraries, soft and baked clay tablets, sheets of wax, skin of the trees and leaves as a writing material to save the record of their accomplishments, yet generally they have used the fragile Papyrus. Consequently, most of the records pertaining to the establishment of libraries and their contents could not survive in their actual form and shape. Nevertheless, the Archeologists have discovered various documents at various places about the establishment of libraries in the ancient Egypt as back as 2000 B.C. Moreover, we learned much of the religion, industries, sports, amusements of the ancient Egyptians from the coloured printing of monuments, walls of temples, walls of Palaces and Tombs. (Guest, 1936, p. 13)

Libraries have come down to us from as far back as 2000 B. C. (Durant, 1942). Likewise other ancient nations, the Egyptians attached their libraries with the temples (Savage, 1908), as it is evident from the discovery of the library of Edfu which was attached with a temple. It is not known how many roles were preserved in that library. Anyhow, the catalogue was inscribed on the walls to indicate the collection of the library and the catalogue of Edfu library consisted of 21 subjects. Besides the catalogue, some sacred texts, drawings and writings have also been discovered. This temple was established in the name of Horus the god of Sun. (Rider, 1976).

It is also to point out that the libraries in these temples consisted of the religious materials as well as material on Science, Medicine and Magic. As such in most of the cases the library contained all kinds of material to serve the community. The best example of these kinds of libraries is library of Abu Simbel. This temple was located on the upper part of Nile where different kinds of people use to work. The material was collected in order to meet the demands of the workers. (Johnson, 1976)

There were Medical Libraries which were known as Magic Libraries and the Librarians were called learned men of the Magic

Library. In case of Lady Librarian they were known as Ladies of Letters / Mistress of the house of books. (Johnson, 1976)

In some temple libraries the material was divided into two major categories i.e. general readers and specified religious readers. This class of the religious readers was known as House of Life. These religious readers were supposed to record the traditions of the Kings and history of the Temples as well as scientific inventions, including the development in Arts. They were privileged to have their own library, a kind of copyright collection of authentic religious texts kept separately to guarantee authenticity. The libraries have also been discovered where-in the material and their commentaries were attributed to the specific god. As such a library has been found in the name of the god Thoth – the god of knowledge. (Johnson, 1965).

Moreover some libraries have been discovered having the collection on religious customs and their methods of performance. It is noticeable that a part of sacred drama of Osiris has been found which was of 1800 B.C.

Beside the temple libraries, there were some big libraries discovered which were attached with the Royal Palaces. Among these libraries, the Library of King Khufu (1600 B.C), King Akhenaton (1350 B.C) and Remises-II (1279 B.C to 1213 B.C) were remarkable. The Royal Library of Remises-II was attached with his palace at Thebes. Diodorus Siculus, the Greek historian of the 1st century BC visited the library. The library was known as "Clinic for Soul" (or the healing place of the soul). (Casson, 2002). This library contained the official documents as well as the religious material. (Fazil, 1986). As such those libraries were treated as sacred place. On the edifice of this library it was written as "Sacred Library." The ruins of Tell-el-Amara indicate that such record was also available in the Royal Palace. These tablets consisted of the correspondence between Amenphis-II and the King of Egypt. (Johnson, 1965).

Some documents have been discovered from the ruins of historical palace of the Remises-II at Dar-ul-Medina which consists of bills, payments of workers, letters, reminders, religion, magic and literature.(Johnson, 1965). Moreover, the excavations have proved that there were public and private libraries in the ancient Egypt. The material

of those libraries was about the genealogical, commerce and popular literature.

The private libraries were usually established in separate buildings by the people usually with low income. They preserved their books in the clay jars and arranged them in Almirahs. Some families used the rolls of leather. (Johnson, 1965).

In nutshell the history of the libraries in Egypt is as old as the history of civilization but as the Egyptian use to preserve their knowledge on fragile Papyrus, so with the passage of time even the names of the libraries vanished. It is beyond imagination that the nation having the knowledge of Chemistry, Physics, Philosophy, Metaphysics and Mathematics before the Great Flood of Noah, would have the large number of libraries at its credit.

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Prophet Idress (As) as mentioned in Quran was given Pen and taught writing. He was the first inventor of writing in the world. The first revolution in human history came when writing was started. [Quran. Sura Alaq 4-5. Mufti Muhammad Shafi. Ma'ariful Quran v.6 p41] ***IN* Sabzwari, Ghaniul Akram. First Famous facts of Muslim World. Karachi: Library Promotion Bureau, 2012 p87-88