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The Bibliotheca Alexandrina: A Progress Report On The Revival Of An Ancient Dream

by **Ron Chepesiuk** (Winthrop University Library) (782 Wofford St., Rock Hill, SC 29730; phone: 803-323-2131) <110423.2656@compuserve.com>

Founded in 295 B.C. by Ptolemy I in the Egyptian city of Alexandria, the Alexandrian Library was one of the wonders of the ancient world, a cultural institution that was more than a repository of books and manuscripts. The famous library also served as the world's first university, with a distinguished faculty of scholars that included such names as Euclid, the mathematician, and Heron, the inventor of the first steam engine.

Now, more than 2,300 years later, the Egyptian government, UNESCO, the United Nation's educational agency, and private groups in several countries, including the U.S., are close to resurrecting the magnificent memory of the ancient library at Alexandria by building another library in the city in its honor: the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**. The library is expected to open in late 1999.¹

In May 1997, **Dr. Mohsen Zahran**, Project Manager, wrote a memo to Bibliotheca Alexandrina friends and supporters in which he made this positive report: "I want to bring you up-to date on the many exciting events occurring at the Bibliotheca Alexandrina project, listed herewith. The construction on Phase 2 (superstructure) is proceeding according to the execution time schedule. Several contributions in various formats, in-kind and financial, have been received by the Alexandrina and the activities of collection development and staff training are proceeding ahead. Our total collection of catalogued and indexed

books in the Alexandrina has surpasses 140,000 volumes.²

Costing between \$150 and \$180 million, the library, its supporters hope, will achieve four objectives; become one of the world's major public research libraries used by scholars as well as lay persons; serve as a catalyst for peace in the troubled Middle East; fulfill the function of a national library for Egypt, a country that has none; and help boost the economy of Alexandria, a decaying Egyptian coastal city designed by Alexander the Great in 332 B.C.

"It's a library that belongs to the human race," said **Dr. Mohammed Aman**, the former chair of the **Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina U.S.A.**

"The Bibliotheca Alexandrina will once again be a central repository for a great historical tradition."³

UNESCO officials say the international agency has never been involved with a library project of the Bibliotheca's size and scope. Indeed, the library can be described as one of the great cultural building projects of the twentieth century.

"Only one comparison can be made," says **Wolfgang Lohner**, Director of UNESCO's **General Information Program**. "It was the

library project involving the Shah of Iran. The Shah came to UNESCO in the 1970s and asked if we could help him rebuild the library Persepolis. But before the project could get off the ground, revolution erupted and the Shah had to leave Iran. The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is the only international project to involve building a library that once existed but doesn't anymore."⁴

Given the project's size and scope and the involvement of so many parties, it's perhaps understandable that it hasn't all been smooth sailing. The library was scheduled for opening in July of 1995, but more than seven years after **Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak** laid the cornerstone, the project became mired in Egypt's cumbersome bureaucracy and differences between the project's two principal supporters: UNESCO and the Egyptian government.

"UNESCO claims they are the project's owners, but the Egyptians are saying, 'Hey wait a minute, we own the project,'" explained one source. "It became a power struggle in terms of ego, and a lot of people want a big bite out of the project."⁵

President Mubarak launched the project on June 26, 1988, when he laid the library's cornerstone. Two years later, **Amadou Mahtar Mbow**, then Director-General of UNESCO, initiated the idea of international aid for the project during his first visit to Egypt. UNESCO organized an international architectural competition under the auspices of the **International Union of Architects**. **Snohetta**, an Oslo, Norway, architectural and landscap-

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Fourth: Does your consortium intend to provide an archival function for journals? The GALILEO members reported their group does provide "some archiving of titles." Most consortia have not even discussed archiving, two or three reported they "didn't know," and two more said definitely, "No." The consortium Director in this survey reported his consortium "was looking into archiving e-journals" but there was more work to be done in this area.

Fifth: Has subscription agent and/or publisher reaction been positive or negative? Overall this picture is mixed. One answer, which can't be typical, is that subscription agents and publishers "don't know what we are doing." Only two answered this question in a definitely positive manner. Another said agents and publishers were "cautiously positive," others... "more or less positive," two more "mostly positive," and another reported vendors were "indifferent."

Comments from those surveyed, such as **Jeri Van Goethem** of Duke University, reflect continued support for consortia when she said, "we are benefiting by having access to a fairly large array of electronic information and by being able to recycle the dollars which we

tunities within the group," and "improved interlending."

would have to pay for these resources."

When it came to discussing the basis for membership in a particular consortium, **John Hempstead** of Viterbo College put it succinctly when he said, "we actually participate in three consortia: one is for private academic libraries, one is for the seven-county area in Wisconsin, the third includes the entire state. The first consortium is by type of library, the other two are geography-based."

Carol van Zijl of South Africa reported her consortium is only a year old and is "still getting off the ground but is already quite active in the interlending field. Efforts have also been made to get special consortial rates for subscriptions to especially **ABI/Inform** but the vendors don't seem to be falling over themselves to be helpful."

What can we learn from this? 1. The concept of consortial arrangements is working! 2. The more active the consortium (requesting vendor cooperation), the more cooperation from subscription agents and publishers. 3. Shared resources among members can be helpful and economical. 4. Like the Internet and email, this can be a global development for the library community. (For many it is already an international activity.) 5. Libraries are looking to provide a strong unified front through membership in consortia and are striving to have participation result in increased savings for their institutions. 🐾

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ing company, won the design competition in 1989 over 1,333 entries from seventy-seven countries.

In February 1997, **Craig Dykers**, an architect with the Snohetta firm told *The World and I* magazine that Snohetta "has created a (library) design that has no counterpart. It is not a copy. It is not necessarily a direction for the future. It is simply pure and unique ... in library planning and represents a new type of planning for information centers."⁶

In discussing the features of the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**, the *World and I* reporter noted that, "the terraces, connected by a series of ramps, and the barrier-free interior together create a 'living room' environment that contrasts sharply with the often sterile and impersonal interior of other major libraries."⁷

The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is being built on a ten-acre site provided by the Egyptian government, and will occupy 566,800 square feet of floor space. Most of the building will be underground, but a glass roof will allow sunlight to illuminate reading rooms. A 3,000 seat conference center, which already has been built at a cost of \$20 million, is expected to be an integral part of the new library. There, the library plans to sponsor conferences, workshops, seminars, and studios about Egypt's historical, geographical, and cultural heritage, as well as that of the Mediterranean region. A planetarium and landscape gardens are also planned as part of the complex.

The library will be fully automated, operate with a staff of 530 workers, and have an initial collection of approximately 200,000 volumes, a number that is projected to grow eventually to eight million. The collection will include books, manuscripts, microfilm, videotapes, and audiovisual materials — the full range of library materials — and will be equipped with an up-to-date laboratory, providing high-quality restoration services for the

rare and precious manuscripts that are expected to be received from monasteries, mosques, and other libraries located throughout the world. Indeed, the lab is already restoring rare Egyptian manuscripts.

The library plans to formulate its collection development policy in cooperation with UNESCO and other experts around the world in an effort to help avoid duplication of its services and resources with other libraries in the region and at the international level.

Here are some other features, programs and services the Bibliotheca Alexandrina plans to provide:

- A "Young People's" section (age 14 to 18) that will include "all the services to youth, including audiovisual and multimedia resources, in order to prepare the younger user for the coming 21st century information age."

- A library for the blind that will include computer equipment that can convert Arabic and Latin language materials into Braille.

- An International School for Information Science that can be a "Center of Excellence" for post-graduate library work.

- A Hall of Fame that will give recognition to "notable and worthy" persons from both ancient and modern times.

- A Calligraphy Museum where the history of the written word can be studied.

- A planetarium and science museum that can educate the world about the universe.

- A documentation institute that will have depository library functions.⁸

"The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is truly going to be a library of the world with so much to offer Mankind," said **Rosalie Cuneo Amer**, a librarian at **Cosumnes River College** in Sacramento, California, and a member of the steering committee of the **California Friends of the Alexandrina Library—Valley Group**.⁹

Rosalie Cuneo Amer attended the first international meeting of the **Friends of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina** in Athens, Greece, on May 29, 1996, where several important recommendations were made. They include:

- A donor manual should be published in order to guide fund-raisers in facilitating gifts of money, rare books, manuscripts and other appropriate materials. The manual would be used by both the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** staff and friends' groups around the world.

- Publish and distribute a boiler plate press release in several languages that can be used by select groups in fund-raising activities.

- Solicit more potential donors, including selected ethnic groups from around the world, such as Egyptian-Americans, Greek-Americans and Arab-Mexicans.

- Use the text-based Lynx browser and the Internet and its World Wide Web to advertise the project to the world community.¹⁰

The problems seem to have been overcome, and the close cooperation and financial support of the world community of nations is helping to make the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** project a success. To help sup-

Endnotes

¹ For further background reading on the Bibliotheca Alexandrina project, see the following articles: Ron Chepesiuk, "The Eighth Wonder of the World: The New Alexandrina Library," *Wilson Library Bulletin*, Feb. 1994, pp. 42-44; Mimi Mann, "Egyptian Government to Rebuild Alexandrian Legendary Library," *ACRL Newsletter*, Fall 1991, pp. 26-27; UNESCO, *Bibliotheca Alexandrina: The Revival of an Ancient Dream*, Paris, France, UNESCO, 1990.

² Memo, Dr. Mohsen Zahran to friends and supporters of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina, May 12, 1997.

³ Interview with Mohammed Aman, 1994.

⁴ Interview with Wolfgang Lohner, 1994.

⁵ Interview, off the record.

⁶ Henkin, Stephen, "From LA to Oslo to Egypt: Snohetta Firm Resurrects Alexandrina Library," *The World and I*, February 1, 1997.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Report of the California Friends of the Alexandrina Library—Valley Group, May 21, 1996.

⁹ Interview with Rosalie Cuneo Amer, 1998.

¹⁰ Report of the California Friends of the Alexandrina Library—Valley Group, May 21, 1996.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Interview with Lohner, 1994.

¹³ Interview with Amer, 1998.

¹⁴ Ibid.

port the project, UNESCO launched an appeal for international contributions, and government organizations, funding agencies, libraries, archives, and cultural institutions worldwide are being called upon to participate.

Recent contributions made in 1997 toward the building of the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina** highlight the generosity of the international community. In March, the **Arab League Documentation Center** provided an expert in informatics who will give a series of four-day training sessions to libraries involved with the project. The following month, the **Australian Wheat Board** gave a contribution of \$10,000 worth of books, as well as a painting. Also in April, the government of France provided a grant of 4.4 million French francs towards the design and construction of a new information system.

Other donors include the government of Italy, which gave \$40,000 towards the construction of the conservation/preservation laboratory; the government of Japan, U.S. \$40,000 for technical equipment; the University of Colima in Mexico, CD-ROMs that are the equivalent of about 100,000 books; and the government of Norway, \$5.5 million for library furnishings; and the governments of Turkey and Finland, books and experts.¹¹

The contributions give weight to the words of Egyptian President Mubarak, who said that "man does not live by bread alone, but [that] ... culture is the fund of thought, conscience, feelings, and this is no less important to man than his material needs." Mubarak made the

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BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA FACTS AND FIGURES

Total area of floor space: 566,800 meters

Number of staff: 530

Number of volumes: 200,000 initially; 8 million ultimately

Number of manuscripts: 10,000

Number of rare books: 50,000

Number of audiovisual items: 10,000

Number of multimedia items: 50,000

Number of maps: 50,000

Computer data bases: OPAC and Internet access to worldwide information superhighway

Web sites: <http://www.unesco.org/webworld/alex/alex.htm> <http://www.bibalex.gov.eg> (access 10:30-6:30 Pacific Standard Time)

Chaos — EDItEUR

by Brian Green (Managing Agent, EDItEUR and Book Industry Communication)

Column Editors: **Sandra K. Paul** (President, SKP Associates) <skpassoc@internetmci.com>
and **Albert Simmonds** (Director, ISBN —US Agency, R.R. Bowker)
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Since EDItEUR was conceived at a meeting at the 1991 **Frankfurt Book Fair** as 'The European Book Sector EDI Group' it has expanded both geographically and in its activities, becoming known as 'The International Group for Electronic Commerce in the Book and Serials Sectors'.

EDItEUR has truly become an International group, with members from US, Canada, South Africa, Australia, Japan as well as all the European countries. It now covers books, serials and digital publications and is concerned with all aspects of the standards infrastructure for publishing.

Why EDItEUR had to be invented

The original *raison d'être* of the group was the realization that many European countries were working to establish or expand EDI in their national book trades, using a variety of different national or ad-hoc standards but all planning to move to UN/EDIFACT, the international EDI syntax developed under the auspices of the United Nations. EDIFACT, however, is not an "off-the-shelf" standard. It is a defined syntax together with a complex and wide-ranging directory of data elements, segments, messages and code lists, which provides an enabling framework for EDI application designers to use to meet the needs of a particular trading community.

It would not only be wasteful for each community of users to design their own subset, it would result in a lack of interoperability that would hinder international communication.

So EDItEUR was created as an umbrella group to develop and maintain a book trade subset of EDIFACT on behalf of its members. Sponsored by the European publishers, booksellers and library associations and with fund-

ing from the **European Commission's TEDIS** (the Trade EDI Systems Program of the European Commission) program, EDItEUR rapidly produced its first manual of messages and implementation guides. Rather than start from scratch, EDItEUR made the decision to work with EAN, the International Article Numbering Association, to use their existing EANCOM subset of UN/EDIFACT, already widely used in the retail sector, as the basis of the EDItEUR book sector EDI messages. The EANCOM subset of UN/EDIFACT is one of the most stable of the "wide ranging directories of data elements, etc."

Expanding the brief

The serials community, that most international of sectors, asked EDItEUR to develop the messages for their use and, in collaboration with individual publishers, subscription agents, libraries and ICEDIS, (the International Committee for EDI in Serials), an implementation guide to the use of the messages for serials was developed.

Publication of the EDItEUR messages was welcomed internationally, with BISAC and SISAC immediately starting to review the messages with a view to adopting them. Indeed, the US library community were among the first users of the EDItEUR messages, with all the major integrated library systems vendors now implementing them in their acquisitions modules.

National book and serial sector EDI groups have been set up recently in Denmark, Italy,

Finland, Germany and Sweden to join the longer established **Book Industry Communications** in the UK and **BISAC/SISAC** in the US under the EDItEUR umbrella. They, like BISAC and SISAC, provide the national focus for promotion, dissemination, implementation and feedback, helping their members to reap the benefits of EDI.

Beyond EDI

In the last year or so, EDItEUR's activities have expanded well beyond EDI, with activities in the areas of product information, rights metadata and new standard identifiers.

BISAC and SISAC play a key role in these new EDItEUR projects, collaborating in a project to produce a data dictionary of product information and develop an EDIFACT message to transmit it, jointly hosting a rights and descriptive metadata workshop in New York and working on international identifiers for authors, publishers and imprints.

The area of identifiers and descriptive and rights metadata, enabling automated rights trading, is a particularly hot topic crossing traditional media barriers and involving the music, visual arts and film and video communities in joint standards activities.

In a networked multimedia world, traditional geographic and media barriers break down and EDItEUR will be there to coordinate activities on behalf of its member organizations and user communities.

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comments in 1990 at the **Aswan Conference**, where \$65 million was raised for the **Bibliotheca Alexandrina**.

Several Bibliotheca Alexandrina friends groups have sprung up in the U.S., with California being the most active state. "Our American friends see the value of the library for both the preservation of culture and the promotion of peace and democracy," Lohner said.¹²

The **California Friends of the Alexandrina Library—Valley Group** is an independent grass roots support organization

of educators, scholars and librarians and others that was formed in 1991. "We help in a lot of ways," said Rosalie Cuneo Amer. "We publicize the project, give money and materials and provide advice to the planners."¹³

When Bibliotheca Alexandrina finally opens its doors, the library is sure to be a boom for culture and libraries for decades to come. UNESCO reports that it has received requests from several countries, including Iran, Thailand, Kuwait and Afghanistan asking if the international agency can implement library projects in their countries, similar to Bibliotheca Alexandrina, once it is completed.

"The Bibliotheca Alexandrina is an ex-

ample of an institution developing within a peaceful environment in a region noted for war, strife and violence," said Amer. "Its existence and function will be a beacon of peace and world culture, representing interests, heritage and knowledge of the people of the Middle East, Africa, Mediterranean and Asia, along with the rest of the world. Moreover, it will be a place to access global information in the twentieth century."¹⁴

Ron Chepesiuk is a contributing editor to **Against the Grain** and Editor in Chief of **International Leads**, the international arm of ALA.

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