The Arcanus Project

by [Pedro Blas González](#) (July 2022)

Ptolemy II Philadelphus in the Library of Alexandria, Vincenzo Camuccini, 1813

1

Like the illustrious Dante Alighieri, I become lost, wandering through this earthly soil.

Unlike the Florentine genius, I was not lost in the underworld, replete with ravenous demons ready to gnaw at my flesh and soul. My disorientation, as is evident from the unconventional story I am about to tell, is a tale of the

mystery of space and time.

Having once visited the ancient sites of Mesopotamia, that splendid land between two life-affirming rivers, I vowed to return.

My unforeseen adventure occurred recently while on an excursion to some of the ancient archaeological sites of the Middle East. My trip was a greater educational experience than I and my colleague, who accompanied me, could have envisioned. Once again, I found myself awed, imagining people in ancient times treading the soil I walked on.

2

My father, I.M. Peterson, is elderly. He is a retired professor of philosophy. Shortly after my return trip from the Middle East, I told him my mind-boggling adventure. I can't think of anyone more deserving of knowing what I witnessed than my father.

The year was 1946. Our trip took us across portions of modern-day Iraq. From the land of Sumer and Babylon we trekked west, across the present-day border with Jordan. We made our way to Israel. Our objective was to end the trip in the area across the west bank of the river Nile.

I was in the good company of my friend, professor Charles Remington, and two local guides from that region.

Our means of travel was somewhat unorthodox. Our journey officially began in Turkey. We traveled by train across vast stretches of that lovely country, until we came upon the majestic Tigris. There we boarded a reed boat, the type that is constructed and still used today by the marsh Arabs of southern Iraq. The boats are made using the reeds that are abundant in the marshes of that region. The explorer, Thor

Heyerdahl, made them famous some years later.

We took time to visit the enchanting city of Baghdad. We boarded our small boat and proceeded down the gentle river, interrupting our sailing to visit Ninevah, Uruk, and Ur.

Several days later we found ourselves on the Shatt-al-Arab, a river that is formed where the two great rivers meet, which flows into the Persian Gulf, also called the Arabian Gulf, depending on who one talks to in that part of the world.

After days of traveling on the gentle Tigris, the shipping traffic on the Persian Gulf intimidated us. While that body of water is called a gulf, it didn't take long to become convinced that the name is an arbitrary formalism. As far as I am concerned, it is a sea teeming with shipping.

The massive oil tankers we encountered rattled my nerves. Our guides assured us they knew the territory well, though, their words did not soothe my agitated condition. My idea of ancient Sumerians leisurely sailing on that waterway was shattered by the crude realities of the modern world.

The Persian Gulf is no mere river. The oil tankers were an ominous reminder of the fragility of human life. Though sturdy and river worthy, our minuscule boat was a throwback to a simpler age. The scene was reminiscent of Virgil's depiction of the entrance to hell. I had no poet with me to calm my nerves.

On our first moonless night aboard, we found ourselves having to anchor the little vessel as fast as possible, after finding ourselves in the precarious situation of being caught on the water with only a small gas lamp. We were about 4,000 years behind the times.

The night was clear and cool.

Sitting against the small mast of our primitive boat on that

dark night, I was dazzled by the array of stars. I could easily make out the nebulous and colorful Orion Nebula. While the others slept, I remained awake, bewitched by the breeze that caressed my skin.

I was like a neophyte kneeling before the altar of the Absolute. I wanted to spend one more night in that region, once home to Hammurabi, King Uperi of Dilmun, the great Sumerian astronomers, and the Indus civilization.

My feet dipped into the murky water, I imagined Gilgamesh's inner turmoil on his travels seeking immortality. I reflected about what the Sumerians and Babylonians called the lower sea – the sea of the rising sun.

It was on the Modern-day Island nation of Bahrain, Dilmun in ancient times, that Ziuzusdra and his wife settled after the great worldly flood. On that small island, not far from where we were anchored, immortality was said to be bestowed to them by the god Ea.

I thought of Gilgamesh's sorrow and his fruitless appeal to the Gods for immortality. The story goes that he was granted immortality, but had it stolen from him by a serpent that dove deep below the surface of the sea, where the sun comes up. Gilgamesh tasted the flower of immortality, though he remained a mere mortal. His reward was that he was allowed to keep the wisdom he earned.

I dozed off. The next morning, we left the boat with the guides who would return it to its owner in northern Iraq.

We were taken to Kuwait City by car and stayed in the downtown district; we were showered with modern accommodations.

We waited in the hotel lobby for a guide to take us on a tour of the city. I sat with a cup of coffee, my mind reeling from witnessing the Ziggurat at Eridy in the city of Enki.

Our tour lasted about four hours, taking us to cafes, restaurants, and other attractions.

After leaving Kuwait City, we spent the next three days making our way through central Saudi Arabia. Just getting permission to do so was a minor miracle. Our plan was to reach the Sinai Peninsula of Egypt. Our final destination was Cairo. Who can visit Cairo without spending time in the great pyramids of Giza?

We took the train going west to the capital city, Riyadh.

In Riyadh, I was introduced to a friend of professor Remington's, who would introduce us to his colleagues at the university. It was Remington who planned the trip, and who, with his many connections, facilitated the never-ending quest for visas. Remington is my brother-in-law.

Dr. Sayyid Nasser received a doctorate in archaeology at the university where Charles and I teach. Charles was his advisor. Sayyid's family is part of the Saudi royal family. Returning to his country, he worked as an archaeologist at one of the national universities. He joined us on our trip to Cairo.

Our next challenge was to find transport that would link the territory between Riyadh and Medina, our next stop. After several days of rest, we were informed that trucks make their way through the roughly 500 mile stretch daily. A trucker would take us for a small fee.

While in Medina, Sayyid took us to visit the mosque of the prophet Mohammed. Mohammed, the founder of Islam in the 600s A.D., is buried there. Our stay in Medina was short. We stayed longer than we expected in Riyadh due to Sayyid's hospitality.

We were fortunate to find a truck driver that would take us over the western mountains. From mount Jabal Radwa, with its red sandstone and black lava peaks, I could faintly make out the outline of the Red Sea. We descended to the coast. I felt

energized. The long trek up the mountains depleted my energy.

We rode camels and donkeys along the coast while travelling north. In cape Ra’s Abu Madd, we hired a boat that took us across the Red Sea and Ra’s Banas in Egypt.

We welcomed the rest.

Not used to riding these animals took a toll on my back. We visited the Berenice ruins and continued up the Nile to Thebes and the Valley of the Kings.

A few men came to help us dock the boat. One of them, an Egyptian archaeologist friend of Sayyid’s, I was later told, greeted us by saying, “gentlemen welcome to the country of the Kemet.” This is the Egyptian name for their land, which means black, as in the black soil of some regions of Egypt. The word Egypt comes from the Greek word Aigyptos, after the name of the main temple at Memphis, one of several ancient Egyptian capitals.

I was excited to be in Egypt.

The rich soil confirmed why the Greek historian, Herodotus, called Egypt the gift of the Nile. In Upper Egypt the Nile is flanked by cliffs unlike the north, known as Lower Egypt. There, the land is flatter and the soil is not dry, making it ideal for agriculture.

We visited the temple of Amon-Re in Karnak. Its 79-foot high and 12 feet wide columns are something to see. The columns are so thick in diameter that it takes roughly nine men with outstretched arms to encircle them.

We sailed north with the help of the Nile’s current, disembarking in many places. We travelled segments of the trip on foot, donkey, and automobile. Our guides told us this was the best way to take in the splendor of the ruins.

We made our way through Deir el-Bahri, Abydos, Thimis, Assiut,

Tell el-Amarna, and Hermopolis. We continued north to Cairo. We stopped at Herakleolis, Lisht, Memphis, Troia, and Sakkarah before arriving in Giza.

Little could I have imagined that my real adventure was about to begin. To think that just a week ago I was strolling through the streets of Manhattan.

What I revealed to my father took a great deal of consideration. I pledged to my guides and Sayyid that I would never tell anyone the astonishing secret I witnessed on my trip.

3

One early morning, it must have been about 6:00 a.m., Sayyid knocked on the door of my hotel room. I was surprised to see him and Charles outfitted with backpacks and some provisions.

Where I was taken next is the stuff of dreams. Our two guides took us to a hilly area about seven miles past the great pyramids of Giza. Once there, we began a long and arduous climb up the barren rocky surface. We had not gone more than half a mile, though it felt like an eternity, when our guides told us we had been selected to see something few humans have ever witnessed.

I thought this was Charles' idea of a practical joke.

We arrived at what looked like the entrance to a cave. We let our eyes get used to the darkness. Two men showed up with flashlights to guide us through winding passages. The corridor, which was carved out of the natural rock, felt to be descending at a steep angle. It got colder.

At the end of the corridor there were about five or six entrance ways, all except one were blocked. The guides stood aside while the two strangers with the flashlights knocked

several times in a series of codes. We stood and waited. We were told this was standard procedure. An immense rock began moving to our left. When it stopped rolling, the men with the flashlights motioned us to enter. The rock was moved by an intricate system of pulleys and counterweights.

We entered a sort of anteroom. We continued walking for about fifty feet; we reached what looked to be a door. A rectangular block of stone moved aside from the floor in front of us, revealing a descending, dark stairway that lacked handrails.

Throughout our trek outside on the rocky hill and inside the mountain, the guides hardly spoke, with the exception of, "Soon, very soon," in accented English. I knew not what to think.

At the bottom of the stairway, we arrived at an apparent dead end. There was nowhere to go. There was a rough, craggy wall, offering no clue of an entrance. I began to feel claustrophobic. After undergoing another series of knocks that sounded different from the previous ones, another large stone began to move on our right.

We entered a small room the size of an average kitchen. Four men awaited our arrival. One of the men began telling us what we were almost begging to know.

"Gentlemen," began the tall bearded speaker. "You have been allowed here due to your commitment to knowledge and wisdom. We believe that you are firm seekers of salvation. For this reason, we extend our warm welcome. You will be allowed to remain with us for as long as you wish. We only have one condition: We demand absolute secrecy. Let us walk," said the imposing figure.

I looked at Charles. He nodded.

We walked down a set of stairs and into a small room identical to the one we just left.

“Gentlemen, we have descended 32 feet. Let us know if you are cold. We will furnish you with sweaters. We will now enter a place where only several thousand people have set foot since ancient times.”

When he finished talking, he knocked several times on the wall. A short time went by. We waited in profound anticipation. After what felt like several minutes, a stone slab began to move aside.

The bearded man nodded and began to walk. We followed him. What I saw next made my insides quiver with excitement.

“My friends,” said the elderly man. “You are now inside the oldest library in the world. Welcome to the library of Alexandria.”

We could not begin to imagine what he meant.

“Come, come,” he continued, his enthusiasm evident. “Have a close look at our timeless volumes. Thanks to ancient Charakitai – scribblers – as they were called, we have many books, mostly originals, from antiquity. As you can see, we have many forms of written documents. You will notice that most are scrolls. We also have parchments, clay tablets, and modern-day books.”

He pointed: “Before you are the so-called lost books of Aristarchus of Samos, the ancient Greek thinker who first realized the Earth orbits the Sun.”

I was speechless. I thought the whole thing was a hoax. Yet, there I was, inside a mountain surrounded by lost ancient works.

The bearded man continued, “We realize this is unbelievable to you. Please be patient. Everything will be explained to you in due time. Here is *The History of the World* in three volumes by the Babylonian king, Berossus. Next to Berossus you will

find the seventy-three works written by Democritus, founder of the ancient Greek atomistic philosophy."

I could not formulate a single question. My hands felt sweaty; my heart was pounding.

The bearded man pointed, "There are the works of Claudius Ptolemaeus, the great astronomer who is better known as Ptolemy. Ptolemy worked in the library of Alexandria during the second century A.D. We know he received vast astronomical learning from the Greek, Hipparchus. He also learned much from the Babylonian magi, Tetrabiblos. It was his idea to build this library. He referred to it simply as the 'library.' Beginning in the 15th century, the library was re-named the 'Arcanus Project,' after the Latin word Arcanum, which means hidden or secret."

"Sir," I finally got the courage to ask. "How many volumes do you have here?"

We have over 500,000 volumes dealing with an infinity of topics. We have the entire library of Alexandria. The rarest of the world's rare books: *Explanation of the Creation* by Theodorus of Mopsuestia; *Replies to Aristotle on the Eternity of the World* by John Philoponus; "*Egyptian History*" by Manetho, a priest from Heliopolis; Hecataeus's *History of Egypt*; Theocritus' "Idylls"; Anaximenes' *Philippika*. We can go on for a long time describing and commenting on the many books kept here. Let us sit in one of our sitting rooms. I am sure you have many questions for us.

We walked into a room that was austere, bare walls lacking any decoration. Three other men came into the room. We were told that the master librarian, the bearded man who gave us the tour, was named Eusebios Digregorio.

He was a monk, though it was not clear to us to what order he belonged.

“Gentlemen,” he began. “These men and I, and others who come and go throughout the day are responsible for taking care of the books. We have been entrusted by the Egyptian government to be the keepers of these books.

“Tell me, please,” I said. “How did the books end up here?”

“That is a complicated question. You see, given the violent nature of the Romans, it was decided long before the city of Alexandria was besieged by Julius Caesar in 47 B.C. that it was in everyone’s best interest to build this place. After construction was completed, the manuscripts were deliberately brought here. We acquired many manuscripts from other ancient libraries, including Pergamum and Antioch. I regret to say that from those libraries not all works were saved.

“Did anyone realize that this operation had taken place? Taking the books from Alexandria must have been a difficult task,” asked my colleague.

“Oh, yes. Of course. The Roman threat was imminent. The danger that the Alexandrians would lose their treasured library was very real to them. This was their grave concern. No one was as concerned as the many scholars who worked in and around the library and museum. The secret was theirs to keep.

“What about the traveling scholars who came to make use of the library? What were they told?” I asked.

“In some cases, they were told what we are now discussing. They were told the truth and were directed to the new library, where we are sitting. In other cases, they were told that the books they requested were unavailable because they were lost, stolen or damaged. Sometimes they were told that works either no longer existed or would not be available for a long period of time. That depended on the length of time that scribes at the library would need to copy a book.

“Did this library ever come under attack by the Romans or

others?” asked my friend.

“The risk has always remained overwhelming, as you have suggested. The library was made useful to thinkers throughout the world, without attracting a crowd of thrill seekers. The founders and keepers of the library swore they could not take a chance with the exquisite works – the likes of Hermes Trismegistus, who was better known as *The Thrice Great Intelligencer*; *The Avesta* of the Zoroastrians, which contrary to popular belief, was taken by the army of Alexander the Great from the royal treasuries of Persepolis and Samarkand, when these cities were attacked by the Greeks in 330 B.C. The twenty-one books were taken complete.”

I looked at my travel companions in disbelief.

“We have copies of the Qabbalah that were written after the plundering of the temple of Jerusalem in 54 B. C.,” he continued.

“We possess the original hermetic and gnostic texts, as well as the original Papyrus of Ani – known to us as *The Egyptian Book of the dead*. Here is the interesting *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, who lived during the first century A.D., and whose biography was written a century later by a Greek named Philostratus,” said the man, carefully taking the volume from a self.

“Gentlemen, the list is extensive. Over there we have our clay tablet area. There you will find tablets that were discovered in what was once the southern Mesopotamian city of Nippur. The tablets date to two thousand years before Christ,” he said, leading us to the area.

“Over there,” he pointed, “is part of the collection of tablets that belonged to king Sennacherib of Assyria, ruler from 704 to 681 B.C. We have a great number of works in papyrus. We know from secondary sources that there were extensive papyrus libraries in ancient Egypt. Two well-known

sources make reference to the library of Amarna in 1300 B.C., and the one at Thebes, around 1200's B.C. Those libraries were destroyed. What is not known is that most of the holdings of those libraries are here.

I asked him about the art of illustrating manuscripts.

"It was customary to make copies of documents, so that in the event of fire, raids, war, etc., books would not be lost. One important copy is the *Harris Papyrus 1* that is housed at the British Museum. Luckily that is not the only extant copy," he said, with a slight smile.

"We have one identical to the one in England. We also have the papyrus scrolls of the great library that the Greek ruler, Pisistratus established in Athens around 500 B.C. To everyone's delight, we have Aristotle's entire library – the one housed in the Lyceum."

This news made me very excited.

"We have good reason to believe that the contents of the Lyceum were not sold, as is commonly believed, to the Alexandrian library. Instead, we can say with some degree of confidence that those scrolls were recovered from the home of the Roman general, Lucius Cornelius Sulla, who took the scrolls to his home after he sacked Athens. We also have an extensive collection of works that have come to us from the private collection of Roman aristocrats. These individuals found it rewarding to have their own library.

"We have books from the Roman Octavian library, which came about from the plans Julius Caesar made. Construction began in 37 B.C., seven years after Caesar's untimely death. I present you with the Ulpian library," he went on, pointing to the shelves to his right.

"Built around 110 A.D. by the emperor Trajan, that library was particularly interesting because it had separate sections for

Greek and Latin works. The Romans, you see, encouraged the building of libraries throughout their empire. One such library that quickly comes to mind is the Hadrian library that the emperor Hadrian built at the foot of the Acropolis in 125 A.D.

"As you have seen," he continued, "we have many manuscripts written on animal skins. This was the case when papyrus was either unavailable or became scarce. This is the case with the *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, which unfortunately we do not possess. We do possess other documents from the Essenes, the people thought to have written the *Dead Sea Scrolls*. We have many works in parchment. Parchment was a refined way of writing. The longevity of animal skins, as you can witness for yourself, is time-proven. The origin of parchment is truly fascinating. This is my favorite type of book," he said, showing some emotion.

"The legend goes that when the rivalry between the libraries of Alexandria and Pergamum became too intense, the Alexandrians stopped their supply of papyrus to Pergamum. As you can imagine, once they found themselves with no papyrus, they had to turn to other resources. This is believed to be the origin of parchment. Thus, parchment comes from Pergamum. But that is not all. Because parchment fragments cannot be combined like those of papyrus, the librarians at Pergamum came up with an ingenious way to put the pages together. They folded the sheets of parchment and sewed them together. This practice gives us the look of modern books."

The bearded librarian was more knowledgeable about ancient history than anyone I had ever met. He left us enchanted.

He went on: "There is a very interesting anecdote that I would like to share with you. When the Roman historian, Ammianus Marcellinus, stated in 378 A.D.: "The libraries are closing forever, like tombs," he was not only assessing correctly that the Roman empire was by then suffering its last pangs of

death, he was not aware that the work of this library had already begun several centuries prior to that. By 476 A.D. the western portion of the Roman Empire was virtually destroyed. Our past librarians were tireless in attaining books from all parts of the world. We have one of the original copies of the *Justinian Code of Law.* That work is very important to the city of Constantinople. Here I have an early copy of the *Suidas*," he said, taking the work from the shelf. "This is an encyclopedic work that was written in the hope of recording knowledge that would otherwise be taken for granted. Whatever original works the library was not able to secure, we managed to make copies. We have a scriptorium that you will visit soon. Everyone that you meet here is much like you. Their zest for knowledge and wisdom fuels their existence, as I am sure it does your own lives. I will now leave you to process what you have witnessed. I will return shortly and show you other things that I am sure you will find of interest."

I turned to Charles. "What do you make of this?"

"I'm as lost as you. I can't really gauge what I think or feel. I'm rather numb, to be honest." He shook his head in disbelief.

"You suppose this is a well-planned and intelligent hoax?" I asked.

"A hoax? Why would anyone want to play a hoax on a couple of American university professors? On this scale? How does one react to such a secret? I'm as confused as you are."

Turning to the two guides, Charles asked, "You men have obviously known this for a long time."

"I have known for several years," said Sayyid, Charles' one-time archaeology student. "I was told by the main curator of the Cairo Museum. One day after a dig he summoned me to his office and told me. We're not supposed to talk about it."

“How many people know about this place?” I asked.

“I don’t know. Only serious scholars have been told.”

“How does the Egyptian government keep the secret?” insisted Charles.

“They told us there are many places in Egypt yet to be explored and many that are kept secret on purpose by Egyptian cultural authorities.”

“Did they mention the purpose of these secrets?” I asked.

“Their reasoning is that just as there are national security secrets, there are secrets that have to do with culture and knowledge. They are terrified that if the press catches hold of this, there will be an explosion of curiosity seekers,” he said, trying as best he could to convince us.

4

About half an hour of roaming around shelves replete with manuscripts, the tall librarian returned. He asked if we were ready to continue on our tour of the library. I was thrilled with the prospect of further discovery.

“Gentleman, this library is incommensurate with the expectations of the modern world. If we make the existence of the library public, we will undoubtedly destroy any possibility that the library has to serve serious students and thinkers today and in the future. The idea of the founders of the library was to safeguard knowledge and wisdom for posterity, for people who seek such wonders,” he said, unapologetically.

After answering several questions, the librarian continued: “The founders were not interested in the present. For this reason, we will beg you to remain discrete and understand the

importance of the library for people who seek enlightenment. We do not want to become victims of mundane curiosity. We do not care to make the library into a popular attraction and circus. If you do not have further questions, I will proceed to show you our next section. What I am about to show you is even more intriguing than the manuscripts."

We followed the librarian through a winding, semi-dark corridor at the end of which stood a wooden door. He opened the heavy door and let us pass.

"Gentlemen, I am proud to introduce you to the crypt. As far as we know, no other such place exists in the world today."

I stared into what must have been thirty to forty above ground tombs, each containing some modest sepulchral decorations.

"This is Aristotle the Stagirite."

"Aristotle?" I could not contain myself.

"Aristotle, yes. The philosopher, as he was called. Allow me to share with you how his body came to us. It has to do with his wife, Pythias. She was very much in love with him and made it her wish to be buried alongside him. Here she is next to him," he said, walking over to her tomb.

"This story is very interesting. As you may know, after Pythias died, Aristotle had an illegitimate son, whom he named Nicomachus, with Pythias' handmaiden, Herpyllis. It was Herpyllis who made sure that Aristotle and Pythias were not separated at death."

Still shocked, I read an inscription by the foot of Aristotle's sarcophagus that read: *Knowing Yourself is the Beginning of all Wisdom*.

"Aristotle's final years were not easy. He moved around a great deal, until he succumbed to some type of stomach disorder in 322 B.C., around 62 years of age, one year after

the death of Alexander the Great. I will leave you to reflect on what you have witnessed."

Charles and I looked at each other in amazement.

Several spaces removed from Aristotle, we came upon the resting place of his best pupil, Theophrastus.

The librarian returned with four other men.

"Gentlemen, we have gone through the trouble of bringing you here because of your respect and great devotion to this aspect of man's history. We have checked your background and were very pleased to see the exemplary lives you lead. When he finished talking, the four men began to remove the lid from Aristotle's sarcophagus.

"Step closer," the librarian said proudly. "I present you with Aristotle."

Nothing had prepared us for what we witnessed next. The body was supremely preserved. His hair and beard were kept tidy and in order. He wore a champagne-colored tunic that was clean and well kept.

"With the assistance of Egyptian embalming techniques, we have been able to preserve him for posterity. Some people speculate that the cause of his pristine state of preservation is the result of his strong conviction about the immortality of the soul. Either way, there he lies before us, we, the privileged few."

My father remained speechless while I told him my story.

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University, Miami Shores, Florida. He earned his doctoral degree in Philosophy at DePaul University in 1995. Dr. González has published extensively on leading Spanish philosophers, such as Ortega y Gasset and Unamuno. His books have included *Unamuno: A Lyrical Essay*, *Ortega's 'Revolt of the Masses' and the Triumph of the New Man*, *Fragments: Essays in Subjectivity, Individuality and Autonomy* and *Human Existence as Radical Reality: Ortega's Philosophy of Subjectivity*. He also published a translation and introduction of José Ortega y Gasset's last work to appear in English, "Medio siglo de Filosofia" (1951) in *Philosophy Today* Vol. 42 Issue 2 (Summer 1998).

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