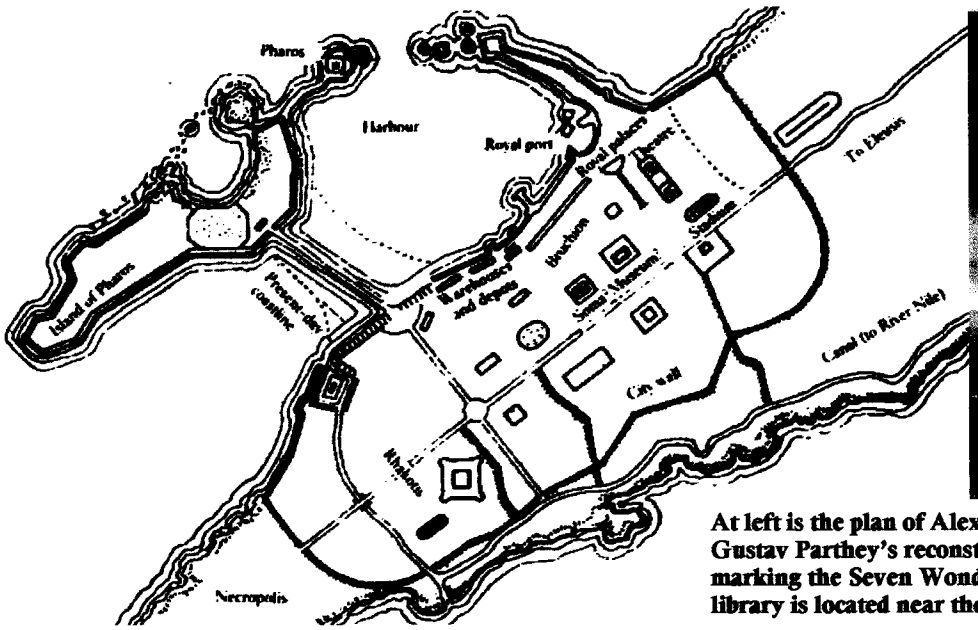
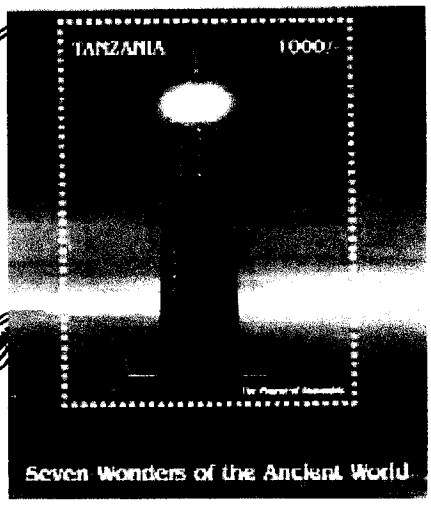
Biblioteca Alexandrina rises from ashes after 1500 years





At left is the plan of Alexandria in Ptolemaic times according to Gustav Parthey's reconstruction. Above is Tanzania Scott 1640 marking the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World. The rebuilt library is located near the site of Pharos.

The ancient world's foremost center of higher learning, the Biblioteca Alexandrina, rebuilt in modern splendour, opened May 3, 2001 near its original location.

Egyptian officials hope that the £140 million project, two decades in the making, will reassert its academic pedigree, which has never been the same since the library was destroyed by fire more than 1,500 years ago. The early-May opening was for journalists and academics with a formal opening ceremony in October.

The new oval building, designed by a Norwegian architect, has been widely hailed as a masterpiece. Its marble walls, inscribed with the alphabets of known and forgotten languages, sweep out majestically over the Mediterranean shoreline. Papyrus, the ancient source of paper for the old library, grows in a moat that surrounds the circular building.

The interior offers some of the most expansive research and reading space in the world. But even as the library, whose predecessor was built in the 3rd century B.C. and used by Euclid and Archimedes, is reopened alongside the ancient site, there are growing concerns for academic freedom of thought throughout the Middle East.

A senior official, Dr Mohsen Zahran, said: "The ancient library was not just a library; it was a university in every sense of the word, a beacon of learning for the entire world. Academic freedom was held in the highest regard then, and we hope that standard will be upheld within the walls of the modern institution."

Jews, Christians and even Buddhists were known to have studied at the ancient library, which stood near the Alexandria Lighthouse, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. The Ptolemaic rulers of ancient Egypt are known to have acquired books with a rare passion for the time.

The Athenian scientist and philosopher Demetrios of Phaleron, in charge of filling the shelves, had persuaded the Ptolemy Soter that "books have more courage to tell kings the truth then have their courtiers".

Alexandria's ancient library contained some 700,000 volumes and was by far the largest intellectual treasure of its day. But the main library was destroyed by fire in the 3rd century A.D. during the civil war under Aurelian, and a subsidiary library was destroyed by Christian zealots in A.D. 391.

The new library is starting with 500,000 volumes and thousands of CDs, musical tapes and videos.

RESOURCES:

Luciano Canfora, *The Vanished Library*, University of California Press, Berkeley. 1990.

United Kingdom Telegraph May 3, 2001, via *The Explorator*.

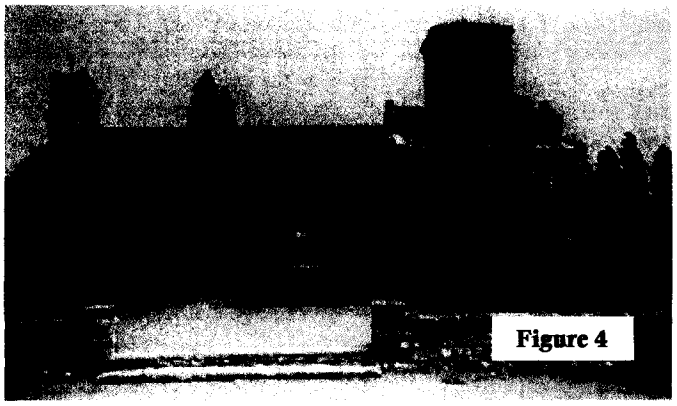


Figure 4

Great Art series for 2000.

It is moving to reflect that Charlemagne was viewing these same mosaic pictures in the oratory 1200 years ago.