My dear friend Aratus,

How is Athens? I often remember our times in school there. How I miss the sun shining on the Acropolis.

Alexandria is a busy city full of life. You must find the time to visit. There is a continuous flow of ships from the entirety of the world. Alas, I have not gone home to Cyrene since the passing of my father. Instead of travel, my focus has been on the scrolls.

You would be amazed at the number of scrolls housed in the library here. The Ptolemies have a way of ensuring we acquire every book possible, when a ship is in harbor at Alexandria, their soldiers search for scrolls. Any scrolls found are brought to the library and copied by scribes. We keep the originals and return copies. Our goal is to own a copy, preferably the original, of every book ever written. Along with Greek texts we hold Babylonian, Hebrew, Latin, Egyptian, and any other works we can acquire.

I work in the main library at the Ptolemaic Mouseion Academy. The estimated holdings at this time are over 300,000 scrolls. The library is near the harbor. The sun rises like the radiant smile of Aphrodite, but I fear the strong winds full of salt water are affecting the scrolls.

Many scholars come to study at the Academy. They read the scrolls, have some copied, and share in their knowledge. A man named Archimedes came for a time, his studies in mathematics are quite advanced. He is from Syracuse, as is my wife, so they enjoyed speaking of home together.

The Serapium, our secondary library, is farther inside the city. The current holdings there are estimated at 42,000. This library is open to the masses with less scholars studying.

Before I came here, Zenodotus had begun organizing all the scrolls in a revolutionary way. He used a form of alphabetic organization with the first letter of the author’s name. For the past ten years I have been working to design a new system. Implementing a system worthy of the vast amount of scrolls, has been long, but I feel it will immensely help scholars to find a particular scroll. It should help the confusion sometimes faced because we have books by authors with similar names. Someone will be able to search these scrolls first to know what the library contains and where to find it. We may be able to inventory and count the scrolls also.

I call this work the Pinakes. However, the “Tables of Persons Eminent in Every Branch of Learning Together With a List of Their Writings” is preferred by our chief librarian. We have taken each scroll and recorded the author’s name and categorized the works by the area of literature. Yet, sometimes we must become investigators to discover who wrote a work.
The poetry books are divided into six categories: epics, elegy, iambics, melodrama, tragedy, and comedy. Prose are divided into history, rhetoric, philosophy, medicine, and law. I have even added miscellanea categories for the cookbooks that are growing in number. Each entry then gives the first line of the scroll, a summary of the contents, and the total number of lines.

In order to identify the author better, we include the author's last name, father's name, the author's teachers, names of the school they attended, other pertinent information about the author, and finally a list of their other publications. A few scribes have been assigned to help me with this massive task. We spend all day gathering the information and adding it to the Pinakes. I pray to Apollo that we finish in my lifetime.

The library at Pergamum has requested a copy of our Pinakes so that they too may organize their library. Our chief librarian is currently negotiating a trade for some rare scrolls.

But enough of work, let us talk of more enjoyable things. You may remember my love for poetry in our school years. I write brief, meticulous poetry in the iambic form. Some time ago, Apollo himself, the god of poetry, gave me a vision showing that brief poems are the best. Being surrounded daily with huge scrolls overflowing with words, I now abhor the long epic poetry of old. The epics require so much space in the library and the authors seem to drone on.

So as not to drone on myself, I shall end this letter.

I pray Zeus grants you wealth and virtue,

Callimachus
References:


