Marta Pszczolińska, "Entry on: Once Upon a Time... The Discoverers (Series, S01E03): Heron of Alexandria [Il était une fois... les Découvreurs: Héron d'Alexandrie] by Albert Barillé", peer-reviewed by Elżbieta Olechowska and Katarzyna Marciniak. Our Mythical Childhood Survey (Warsaw: University of Warsaw, 2020). Link: http://omc.obta.al.uw.edu.pl/myth-survey/item/1150. Entry version as of November 05, 2026.

Albert Barillé

Once Upon a Time... The Discoverers (Series, S01E03): Heron of Alexandria [Il était une fois... les Découvreurs: Héron d'Alexandrie]

France (1994)

TAGS: Alexander the Great Alexandria Ctesibius Greek History Greek Science Heron of Alexandria Library of Alexandria Ptolemy





We are still trying to obtain permission for posting the original cover.

General information	
Title of the work	Once Upon a Time... The Discoverers (Series, S01E03): Heron of Alexandria [Il était une fois... les Découvreurs: Héron d'Alexandrie]
Studio/Production Company	Studios Procidis (see: Addenda)
Country of the First Edition	France
Country/countries of popularity	Australia, Austria, Belgium, Canada, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Indonesia, Ireland, Israel, Italy, Poland, Portugal, Russia, Serbia, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, United States of America
Original Language	French
First Edition Date	1994
First Edition Details	*Il était une fois... les Découvreurs: Héron d'Alexandrie*. Directed by Albert Barillé. Procidis, 1994, 26 min.
Running time	26 min
Format	VHS, DVD
Date of the First DVD or VHS	October 24, 2005 (DVD)
Available Onllne	hellomaestro.fr (accessed: October 26, 2020)

This Project has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union's Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme under grant agreement No 681202, *Our Mythical Childhood... The Reception of Classical Antiquity in Children's and Young Adults' Culture in Response to Regional and Global Challenges*, ERC Consolidator Grant (2016–2021), led by Prof. Katarzyna Marciniak, Faculty of "Artes Liberales" of the University of Warsaw.

Genre	Animated films, Cartoons, Instructional and educational works, Made-for-TV movies
Target Audience	Children
Author of the Entry	Marta Pszczolińska, University of Warsaw, m.pszczolinska@al.uw.edu.pl
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Creators



Albert Barillé in 2007, photo: Michal Maňas, fr.wikipedia.org (accessed: October 26, 2020), CC BY 3.0.

Albert Barillé , 1920 - 2009
(Director)

Albert Barillé (Warsaw, 1920 – Neuilly-sur-Seine, 2009) was a French director, television creator and producer, screenwriter and cartoonist. In the early 1960s, he was in the United States, where he noticed the huge impact television had on children. After his return to France, he realised that French TV offered a rather indigestible content to children viewers. He decided to create entertainment for children that at the same time conveyed knowledge and opened young minds to further search for knowledge. In 1962 he founded Procidis, a company whose first creation was a puppet animated series aimed at children: *Les Aventures de l'Ours Colargol* [Colargol's Adventures], the story of a little bear who wants to sing and travel the world but lacks the natural ability. In 1978, Procidis produced his most famous series *Il était une fois... l'Homme* [Once Upon a Time... Man] and then its six sequels (Space, Life, The Americas, The Discoverers, The Explorers, Planet Earth). He was also the creator of *Shadoks* and *Aglaé et Sidonie*. In addition, several projects were unsuccessful: in the 2000s, Albert Barillé designed a series on Greek mythology, as well as another part of the *Once upon a time* saga which would have been titled: *Il était une fois... le progrès*. He was also the author of medical documentaries, theater plays, and popularized philosophy.

Sources:

Wikipedia (accessed: October 26, 2020).

hellomaestro.fr (accessed: October 26, 2020).

Michel Doussot, "Il était une fois... Albert Barillé", blogpasblog.wordpress.com, published August 14, 2012 (accessed: October 26, 2020).

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Additional information

Casting	French voice actors: Roger Carel, Olivier Destrez, Marie-Laure Beneston, Patrick Préjean, Sady Rebbot.
Adaptations	Soundtrack translated into many languages, see: **Countries of popularity**.
Sequels, Prequels and Spin-offs	Episode 02: *Il était une fois... les Découvreurs: Archimède et les Grecs*. Episode 04: *Il était une fois... les Découvreurs: Les Mesures du temps*.
Summary	*Héron d'Alexandrie* is the third episode of the series about discoverers entitled *Il était une fois...* It presents in a way, suitable for children, the achievements of ancient Alexandrian science, in particular the character of Heron of Alexandria, against a historical and cultural background. The structure corresponds to the template used in all of the episodes in the series: the white-bearded old Maestro narrates tales of important inventions from the past to a group of children. The Maestro's story about Alexandria, the capital of the scientific world, begins with Aristotle and the peripatetic school. Maestro explains to the children that Aristotle was the first to think about school as they know it, although he taught his students geography, history and geometry not in a classroom but while strolling with them. Then, Maestro proceeds to talk about Aristotle's most famous student,

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Alexander the Great, who not only conquered Egypt but founded a city there named after him. Alexander is shown while establishing Alexandria in 331 BC.

His successor, Ptolemy, is presented as the founder of the temple of science – the Museum and the Great Library of Alexandria, as well as the ruler of a wealthy city with a harbour full of enormous ships and a lighthouse considered one of the Seven Wonders of the World. Maestro describes how the library obtained the most essential works of Greek literature, philosophy and science, including those written by Aristotle, Hippocrates of Kos or the comic playwright, Aristophanes. He points out that the acquisition of the scrolls was occasionally controversial (confiscations, frauds). In the first century, the famous school of Alexandria collected all works of Greek philosophers and scholars, as well as sacred Egyptian and Chaldean scrolls. Numerous eminent researchers worked at the Alexandrian Library, including Ktesibios/Ctesibius, an inventor and engineer, or later, Heron, whose inventions like the steam engine or the ancestor of the piano endured for centuries. When the Library was destroyed by the Romans in an accidental fire, humanity lost a great deal of its records and documents. Still, Alexandria, as part of the Roman Empire remained a world centre for science. Maestro also recounts the pillaging of the Library and its eventual demise after the demolition of its last remaining part, the Serapeum, in 391.

Analysis

Barillé's policy to light the path of children by combining amusing cartoons with science, allowed to cram plenty of interesting information embedded in the cultural context into a short episode and designed to attract a young viewer. A timer appears in the corner of the screen indicating the year when the discussed historical figure lived, or narrated incidents happened, to facilitate understanding and promote retention.

The manner of referring to Antiquity is simplified, but all information provided has been verified, sometimes involving the consultation of many books, as Barillé's is reminded by his librarians. The need to establish the truth corroborated by a variety of sources is signaled and reaffirmed in a humorous manner.

The episode shows much more than just the title character, Heron.

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The city of Alexandria, with all her riches is a protagonist as well. Although the creators depict the city as the Hellenistic centre of Graeco-Macedonian culture and then a "typical" Greek city, Ptolemy himself is portrayed as a pharaoh with symbolic Egyptian attributes, such as a scarabaeus on his breastplate; his people, e.g., servants or peasants, are also attired in the Egyptian fashion. The acquisition of scrolls and the running of the Library only involve people from the Greek culture. The viewer sees Demetrius of Phalerum, an exiled Athenian statesman living in Alexandria, who travels the Hellenistic world to obtain original works *per fas et per nefas*. Ptolemy's desire to create the best library in the world forced Demetrius to act without customary scruples. The producers introduce the young viewer to the interior of the Library, which is an intricately decorated space full of stacks with many papyrus scrolls, but also the workspace for numerous scholars from the Greek world and scriptorium producing copies of the scrolls.

The scholars introduced in the episode include Ktesibios, inventor of the pump, the hydraulis (a water organ) and, according to the film, also, the thermometer. Maestro speaks about Ptolemy, who was an excellent geographer and astronomer, author of maps that were used until the 14th century, and finally, we hear about the title figure, Heron of Alexandria. As a scientist working in Egypt under the Roman rule, he has his opponents – envious Romans presented as sneaky disturbers of his work. Despite their efforts, Heron surprises the sceptics with his invention: a steam-powered device called an aeolipile (or "Heron's engine"). The created steam under pressure allows to convert heat to energy and causes rotary movement to automatically open the doors to a temple.

This is an easy, amusing, and suitable way of showing children the Great Library of Alexandria, its importance for both, science and culture. The simplified introduction to Hellenism provides young viewers with an attractive preview, hopefully leading to a more serious interest in the topic and an encouragement to further learning.

Classical, Mythological, Traditional Motifs, Characters, and

Alexander the Great Alexandria Ctesibius Greek History Greek Science Heron of Alexandria Library of Alexandria Ptolemy

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Concepts

Other Motifs, Figures, and Concepts Relevant for Children and Youth Culture	Heritage Historical figures Intellect Science Students Teachers

Further Reading

Bowles, Edmund A., "On the Origin of the Keyboard Mechanism in the Late Middle Ages", *Technology and Culture* 7.2 (1966): 152–62 (accessed: January 31, 2022).

Kitsikopoulos, Harry, "From Hero to Newcomen: The Critical Scientific and Technological Developments That Led to the Invention of the Steam Engine", *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society* 157.3 (2013): 304–44 (accessed: January 31, 2022).

Steadman, Philip, "The Automata of Hero of Alexandria", in *Renaissance Fun: The Machines behind the Scenes*, UCL Press, 2021, 111–32 (accessed: January 31, 2022).

Tybjerg, Karin, "Hero of Alexandria's Mechanical Geometry", *Apeiron: A Journal for Ancient Philosophy and Science* 37.4 (2004): 29–56 (accessed: January 31, 2022).

Addenda

STUDIO / PRODUCTION COMPANY:

Studios Procidis, with input from television stations which broadcast the series, in the order of credits: France 3, Canal+, Televisión española (RTVE), Westdeutscher Rundfunk (WDR), Südwestfunk (SWF), Société suisse de radiodiffusion et télévision (RTSR RTSI), Radiodiffusion-télévision belge (RTBF), Oy. Yleisradio Ab.

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