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Excerpt

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Introduction

Approaching the ancient library

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Histories of ancient libraries

‘Bibliotheca’ takes its name from the Greek, for *bibliōn* is translated ‘of books’ and *thēkē* is a storeroom.¹

That definition of *bibliotheca* – the most common Latin term for library – is taken from the *Etymologies* of Isidore, Bishop of Seville, a ‘vastly important conduit for classical antiquity into the medieval world’.² Composed in the first decades of the seventh century AD, by which time most of the Iberian peninsula had been part of the Visigothic kingdom for nearly two centuries, the *Etymologies* themselves were both the last Latin encyclopaedic work of antiquity and one of the foundations of mediaeval scholarship. Like the *Natural History* of Pliny the Elder and Solinus’ *Collection of Memorable Things*, Isidore’s compendium preserved and passed on a small part of Greek and Roman knowledge, once the great libraries of antiquity were gone. Unlike them, the fruits of Isidore’s miscellenistic research were subordinated to a thoroughly Christian reordering of knowledge.

The research from which this book derives was conducted as part of a project sponsored by the Leverhulme Trust on *Science and Empire in the Roman World*. One of the objectives of that project was to examine the institutional and intellectual frameworks of knowledge production under the Empire, and the means by which that knowledge was organised and transmitted through space and time. A companion volume on pre-modern encyclopaedisms considers grand projects of synthesis and organisation at the level of the book.³ This volume considers the corresponding physical institution, the ancient library. As the example of Isidore shows, these discussions are in practice closely interwoven.⁴

Isidore offers us not only a definition of library – if one which we will need to refine – but also the only history of libraries that has survived

¹ Isid. *Etym.* 6.3.1. ² Henderson 2007a: 151. For expansion of the theme, Henderson 2007b.

³ König and Woolf forthcoming b. The project was also conceived as a successor to König and Whitmarsh 2007.

⁴ On encyclopaedism and libraries, see also Too 2010: 116–26, König and Woolf forthcoming a.

from antiquity. Yet Greek and Roman libraries were almost a thousand years old by his day, and there had been earlier reflections on the theme, reflections on which Isidore drew, if mostly indirectly. It is possible to trace a series of ancient attempts to write a history of libraries. Modern accounts of the phenomenon, based largely on the same snippets of information, have tended to reproduce the ancient narrative perhaps more than has been realised or admitted.

The first such account about which we know anything was a three-book work entitled *de Bibliothecis* composed by Varro in the last century BC. It is often mentioned along with the story that he was commissioned by the dictator Caesar to organise the first public libraries of Rome.⁵ At the very least both Varro's work and Caesar's project attest a growing sense in the late Republic of the centrality of libraries for both the history of books and for contemporary reading cultures. Varro's history of libraries is quite likely the main source for the Elder Pliny's account of writing materials, composed in the middle of the first century AD but which describes nothing after the time of Caesar. Pliny's theme is the rivalry between the Hellenistic kings of Alexandria and Pergamum which led to the invention of parchment as an alternative to papyrus.⁶ Another, shorter version of this narrative had already been related by Vitruvius.⁷ Varro's researches may also lie behind a chapter of Aulus Gellius' mid-second-century AD *Attic Nights* which summarises the story that the tyrant Pisistratus created the first-ever library in Athens; that it was stolen by the Persian king Xerxes; and was then returned by Seleucus Nicanor. Gellius too tells the story of how the Ptolemies accumulated books in Alexandria, and how many of them were destroyed during Caesar's Alexandrian War.⁸ Anecdotes of collection, theft and destruction are – as Christian Jacob points out in his contribution to this collection – repeated motifs in ancient writing about libraries. Most recur in modern histories too.

Isidore's history of libraries makes use of the same anecdotes but incorporates them into a new, Christianised master narrative. Book six of the *Etymologies* is entitled 'Books and Ecclesiastical Offices'. Its first two long chapters deal with the Old and New Testaments; and then there is the chapter on libraries. After the definition with which this chapter began comes the story of how Esdra the Scribe was inspired to restore and systematise the Old Testament after the Chaldeans had burned the Law, and the texts of other works had become corrupted by the Gentiles. There follow the

⁵ e.g. Fedeli 1988: 49, Casson 2001: 79. More tentatively Rawson 1985: 51.

⁶ Plin. *HN* 13.68–70. Varro is cited, but the precise work is not specified.

⁷ Vitruv. 6 Praef. 4. ⁸ Gell. 7.17.

stories of Pisistratus, Xerxes and Seleucus, just as in Gellius; then the great competition between kings and cities to amass books and translate them into Greek, culminating in the creation of the library of Alexandria. Isidore is interested in the translations of the scriptures into Greek and Latin: in chapter four the divinely inspired translation of the Hebrew scriptures into the Greek Septuagint is set in the library of Alexandria. The fifth chapter provides an account of the creation of the first libraries at Rome through plunder and accumulation: Aemilius Paullus and Lucullus who brought Hellenistic libraries back to Rome are followed by Caesar and Pollio who set out to create the first ‘public’ ones in the city. Then in chapter six we come to the creation of the first Christian libraries, pride of place being given to the library created at Caesarea by Pamphilus, based on the collections of Origen, which would provide the crucial resource for Eusebius’ scholarship.⁹ There follows chapter seven on who had written the most books – *apud Graecos . . . Romae . . . apud nos* – (among the Greeks, at Rome, and among us [the Christians that is]). His answers were Varro in Latin, Didymus in Greek¹⁰ and among the Christians Origen, Jerome and Augustine. Isidore continues with accounts of different kinds of books, of book production and thence, via calendars, into sacred offices. Considerable work has gone into stitching together the classical and the biblical, and the Greek, the Roman and the Christian. The anecdotes giving each library a founding genius remain, and have been supplemented with new ones drawn from the Old Testament and the lives of the Fathers.

Perhaps the most vivid example is provided by Isidore’s account of translators in chapter four of book six of the *Etymologies*. Following the claim at the end of chapter three that the library of Alexandria contained 70,000 books, he tells the story of Ptolemy asking Eleazar the priest to provide seventy translators to render the scriptures of the Old Testament, which he had in the library of Alexandria, from Hebrew into Greek. Each scholar sat in a separate cell and each produced a complete and identical version, that which we call the Septuagint. A longer version of this legend, in which a key role is also played by Demetrius of Phaleron, a pupil of Theophrastus and so in the Aristotelian tradition, is provided in the *Letter of Aristeas*, a Hellenistic work of uncertain authorship and date but which was used by Philo and Josephus.¹¹ Isidore then adds the names of three other Hebrew to Greek translations, those of Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, and mentions the anonymous Fifth Edition. He then discusses the Christian

⁹ On which now Grafton and Williams 2006. ¹⁰ See Hatzimichali (this volume).

¹¹ Bagnall 2002: 349–50 for a recent discussion of this problematic source.

editions produced by Origen and ends by celebrating Jerome's expertise in all three languages and his creation of the Latin Bible, more or less what we know as the Vulgate. From Alexandria to Caesarea the story of libraries reveals a clear pattern. Isidore has woven together all these stories into a history of divine inspiration in the world.¹² God was in the Library.

Modern historians of ancient libraries have struggled to tell a different story.¹³ For the total amount of testimony is rather small. Platthy gathered 182 *testimonia* relating to Greek libraries.¹⁴ No similar collection exists for Roman libraries, and in fact there is surprisingly little mention in the literature of the period of buildings that were clearly central to much literary production.¹⁵ Many of the chapters in this collection necessarily return to careful re-interpretation of the same few key passages. An indication of the scarcity of testimony is that the recent discovery of Galen's *On the Avoidance of Grief* has dramatically increased our knowledge.¹⁶ We do, of course, possess some additional evidence from outside the literary tradition. Epigraphy helps understand the management of the imperial libraries.¹⁷ A handful of inscriptions and one letter of Pliny record municipal library building in the West.¹⁸ To this we can add rare and precious papyrological documentation.¹⁹ Finally, archaeological data help us visualise ancient libraries. But this evidence too must be used with more caution than hitherto. It looks increasingly likely that there were no monumental libraries before the early imperial period. Even then, libraries acquired no distinctive architectural form, and so are difficult to identify without epigraphical support.²⁰ Much recent research has been concerned with establishing the physical organisation of the monumental libraries of the Roman period, and the implications for their use.²¹

¹² The theme is expanded in the chapters contributed by Andrew Merrills and Elizabeth Keen to König and Woolf forthcoming b.

¹³ Jacob (this volume). ¹⁴ Platthy 1968.

¹⁵ Johnson (this volume) on the rare and limited mention of libraries within literary texts of the early Empire.

¹⁶ Boudon-Millot *et al.* 2010, discussed in many chapters of this book, among them those of Johnson, Neudecker, Tucci and Zadorojnyi. For a clear account of its significance for library studies, see Nicholls 2011.

¹⁷ Dix 1994, Dix and Houston 2006, Bowie (this volume).

¹⁸ On Comum, Plin. *Ep.* 1.8 with *CIL* 5.5262 discussed in Dix 1996. For municipal libraries more generally, see Cagnat 1906, Fedeli 1988: 51–4, Casson 2001: 109–23 (with the comments of Houston 2001) and Nicholls (this volume).

¹⁹ Houston 2007, 2009 and (this volume).

²⁰ For a cautionary tale, see Coqueugnot (this volume).

²¹ Discussions in the contributions to this volume of Neudecker, Nicholls, Petrain and Tucci. The issue is also the subject of the first third of Perrin 2010.

On the basis of this material, a number of histories of the ancient library have been written, each telling broadly similar stories of the gradual emergence of institutions that have seemed familiar to many scholars.²² This collection does not seek to replace those works, but it does aim to challenge them, and on more than just the particulars. William Johnson writes of a ‘revisionist view of Roman public libraries’ and Christian Jacob advocates the deconstruction of ‘the synthetic surveys, the continuous narrative of the history of ancient libraries’. This is the work we are currently engaged on. Very few pieces of the available testimony and material evidence are not interrogated in the pages that follow. No single programme unites the two dozen or so scholars who have contributed, most of whom gathered in St Andrews at a conference held in September 2008. But we share a willingness to press the evidence harder; to be more open to alternative and less familiar reconstructions of ancient libraries; and to set the slender testimony in some wider contexts. Among the contexts deployed to this end in this volume are perspectives from wider non-Greek and Roman literacies;²³ reading cultures that are unlike our own;²⁴ and comparative approaches.²⁵

Alien libraries

Our goal, in other words, is to understand that centrality of libraries remarked on by Varro and his successors, but to do so within cultural scholarly practices quite different to our own.

To take a simple example, our notion of public libraries is profoundly misleading if applied to antiquity because of the close connections between modern public libraries and ideals of universal literacy, of widening access to knowledge, and state and municipal promotion of education.²⁶ Making libraries public at the end of the Roman Republic was, by contrast, just another aspect of the opening up of aristocratic cultures of exclusion, and described in the same language as the opening up of aristocratic gardens to the people of Rome, or the creation of sculpture galleries in the porticoes of the city for the display of Greek art works and especially depictions of

²² Cavallo 1988, Blanck 1992, Casson 2001, Höpfner 2002f. We have learned much from the essays gathered in Perrin 2010.

²³ Robson (this volume), Ryholt (this volume). Compare Savaş *et al.* 2003.

²⁴ Johnson (this volume) drawing on Johnson 2010 and also on Johnson and Parker 2009.

²⁵ Jacob 1998, Martínez and Senseney (this volume).

²⁶ On which, see the chapters by Nicholls and Neudecker (this volume).

Greek myth. Collections of books had until then been housed in specialised rooms within grand rural residences, which excavations of the Villa of the Papyri at Herculaneum and descriptions of Lucullus' library allow us to imagine as decorated with busts of philosophers, and connected to secluded porticoes and gardens.²⁷ Vitruvius in his manual on architecture discussed libraries alongside private picture galleries (*pinacothecae*), elegant private rooms (*cubicula*) and dining rooms (*triclinia*), in other words the most secluded and exclusive portions of the aristocratic house. That no Latin word was coined for either picture gallery or library marks their enduring exclusivity within the elaborate geography of Roman culture.²⁸ Making libraries public was about making the people of the city of Rome feel like aristocrats, not about emancipating the upwardly mobile or educating the masses.

Equally, when we think about the knowledge production associated with ancient libraries we need to put aside Enlightenment notions of scholarly enterprise independent of political or religious affiliation. Ancient libraries were often housed in temples, and they were closely connected with the display of the power and reputation of their founders. *Bibliothecae* displayed one kind of treasure, just as *pinacothecae* displayed another. Both books and paintings were most often acquired by war, or else purchased and reproduced at great cost. Either means of acquisition signalled the power and status of their founders. Much of the mythologising of the library of Alexandria, considered in several contributions to this volume, evidently contributed to building the reputation of the Ptolemies as successors to the Pharaohs and rivals to other Macedonian kings.²⁹ Even municipal libraries were closely attached to the names of the benefactors who created them. At Ephesus, the sophist Celsus was buried in his foundation, just as the emperor Trajan's remains had been placed just a few years earlier at the base of the column that rose between the Ulpian libraries attached to the vast forum he had built at the heart of Rome from the spoils of the Dacian Wars. Ancient libraries were created by political and military power, and there is no sign that they powered the development of any kind of intellectual activity independent of it. The librarians of Alexandria and Rome alike were royal or imperial

²⁷ For vivid evocations of the Villa of the Papyri, see Sider 2005 and Zarmakoupi 2010. On visual elements within the ancient library, see Petrain (this volume). On Lucullus' library, Dix 2000.

²⁸ Vitr. 6.4.1 discusses all these rooms as component parts of a grand house grouped around its main halls. On the co-ordination of 'Greek' and 'Latin' rooms within aristocratic houses, see Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 190–6.

²⁹ Among others, the essays of Jacob, Handis and Zadorojnyi. See also Bagnall 2002 for a devastating debunking.

appointments.³⁰ Most of those we know to have used these libraries were drawn from the ruling elites of the Empire. It is no surprise that ancient libraries did not spin off academies, like those founded in European nations from the seventeenth century on, nor foster the creation of anything like a modern intelligentsia that might stand back from the higher echelons of state and society alike.

Modern preconceptions of the function and organisation of libraries, then, can easily obstruct investigations of their ancient analogues. Yet we need a common starting point even for a different and fragmentary history, and Isidore's etymological definition – that libraries are storehouses for books – is not quite sufficient. After all that would allow bookshops and warehouses containing books to qualify, and (depending on how we defined 'book') also accumulations of legal material, contracts and private letters.

Implicit in the notion of *bibliotheca* is the principle of *selection*: a library is not an indiscriminate collection of books. That selection depends partly on content, and partly on the kind of use envisaged for the future. Robson in her contribution offers a further pragmatic distinction between *archives*, that contain 'legal, epistolary, and administrative records', and *libraries* that contain deliberate collections of scholarly and literary works. We may extend this dichotomy based on contents to a distinction in use. Both archives and libraries store books which have been selected with future readers in mind. The creators of both archives and libraries envisage the possibility that what is stored there may be accessed and used by others. Often posterity is imagined as a new version of the present: scribes write with scribes in mind, government officials for their successors, scholars for colleagues yet unborn and astrologer-priests painstakingly record their observations of the heavens for the benefit of future priests. Archives store information that scribes and their masters might, in some imaginable future scenario, wish to recover. On Augustus's death he left a brief account of the numbers and deployment of the troops, of the financial reserves and of monies owed.³¹ It is possible to imagine his successor, the imperial freedmen and perhaps others wishing to access this material either to recover information about the past or plan for the future. A letter of Trajan claims that he had consulted the *commentarii* of earlier emperors (in vain) to look for a general ruling on how to deal with foundlings raised as slaves.³² Documents of these kinds were the material of archives. But the books stored in the Palatine and Ulpian libraries were

³⁰ Houston 2002. Hatzimichali, Bowie this volume. ³¹ Suet. *Aug.* 101.

³² Plin. *Ep.* 10.66. On imperial archives, Posner 1972, Culham 1989, Gros 2001b, Moatti 2003. In all periods it is easier to document the creation of archives than their effective use.

different because they were designed for different kinds of readers who would not consult them simply for information.

What distinguishes libraries from other bookstores, then, is the identity of their imagined future readers, and the uses they can be imagined making of treasure houses of literature, scientific writings and the like. This takes us back at once to the question of reading cultures and scholarly practices.

The essays gathered in this volume offer a series of vignettes of reading communities clustered around the precious collections of literary works that formed ancient libraries. One snapshot is provided by the intensive use of a small number of texts by Aristotle and his successors in the teaching of philosophy.³³ Then there are the successive stages of philological enquiry carried out at Alexandria, practices that not only generated better texts of the classics of the new canon, but also secondary texts, commentaries, systematic works on grammar and the like.³⁴ The domestication of such practices at Rome in the late Republic offers another snapshot, with large collections being mined for historical data among other things.³⁵ At later stages Plutarch and Gellius, Athenaeus and Galen and a few others offer tantalising images of the use of libraries as places for the very erudite to hunt down either very rare texts, or else more reliable versions of commonly copied ones.³⁶ How about the smaller municipal libraries? Pliny does not say why he created a library at Comum, but at the same time he created a foundation to support children there, and on another occasion contributed to the cost of a teacher in the town.³⁷ Should we imagine this local library connected more with educational than scholarly activity?

Our histories of the ancient library also need to leave space for serendipity. Collections of books inspire uses other than those for which they were created. Who knows what the Ptolemies thought would be the consequence of their book collecting: a better title to Hellenism for Macedonians ruling Egyptians? A better text of Homer? The pleasure of winning in an arbitrary competition played among kings? But they could not have envisaged the effects of their activities on either scholarship or poetics. Half a millennium later Pamphilus created a library of Christian texts at Caesarea in support of a sort of Christian philosophical school, which would promote Origen's controversial application of philological techniques to scripture. His pupils

³³ Pinto this volume. ³⁴ For example, the chapters of Harder and Hatzmichali this volume.

³⁵ Tutrone and Hogg, this volume.

³⁶ Johnson and Zadorojnyi in this volume. See also Jacob 2000 and Wilkins 2007 on Athenaeus, and on Galen Nutton 2009, Nicholls 2011.

³⁷ Plin. *Ep.* 1.8 on the library foundation and the alimentary scheme, 4.13 on the provision for a *praeceptor's* salary.

included the Cappadocian Fathers and Jerome, but the library also allowed Eusebius to generate innovative fusions of Christian and classical literary genres in Greek, rather as Isidore would do later in Latin. The consequences of book collection are unpredictable.

Most difficult of all is the question of how these libraries were organised. The earliest collections were probably so small that a simple ordering by author was probably sufficient. For the larger collections several principles have been suggested. One way to imagine the choice offered the first librarians is to ask what pre-existing ordering principles might have been applied to the classification of books. The oldest was by author, not necessarily alphabetised of course: it was as common for ancients as it is for us to use the name of the author as shorthand for a text or group of texts ('I have been reading Homer', 'Varro argues somewhere that', 'From Aristotle we learn' and so on). Then there was the ordering of literary works implicit in the educational curricula, an ordering that in part corresponded to our map of ancient genres – tragedians together, then writers of comedy and so on. Finally there were the various philosophical orderings of the world, like that implicit in Pliny's *Natural History*,³⁸ or indeed today in the library of the Warburg Institute in London, which following a plan devised by its founder groups books on four floors devoted to the themes of image, word, orientation and action. How a library is ordered has clear implications for the way it may be used, especially in an age before analytical catalogues. Yet even the more basic principles – such as whether Roman libraries often, sometimes or always physically separated Greek from Latin texts – are matters of debate.³⁹ And there is no reason to think that all ancient libraries followed the same principles of organisation.

Libraries and literatures

The first texts that can be reasonably regarded as books appeared in the Bronze Age of the Near East, and the first collections of books are attested in the temples and palaces of third millennium Mesopotamia, and Syria and second millennium Anatolia and Egypt.⁴⁰ Libraries in this sense were

³⁸ For recent characterisations of Pliny's cosmology and its relation to the organization of the *Natural History*, see Beagon 1992: 26–33, Doody 2010: 23–30 and König and Woolf forthcoming a.

³⁹ Nicholls 2010a.

⁴⁰ Casson 2001: 1–16 for a short account. The greater durability of cuneiform tablets relative to papyrus probably explains why Egyptian collections are first attested later than Mesopotamian ones.

widespread in the Near East in the last millennium BC well before the development of alphabetic scripts. The care invested in amassing the huge collections, like those of the Hittite kings at Hattusas and of Assurbanipal at Nineveh, suggests libraries were already central to these cultures.⁴¹ Epic poetry, religious texts and royal decrees and letters featured in all these contexts, alongside administrative documents of various kinds. The various scripts used were complex and difficult to learn, and probably very few who were not scribes could read them. But ‘scribal literacy’ only refers to a restricted number of writers and readers, and many other members of those societies used these texts in other ways. Modern notions of literature privilege reading above other ways of consuming texts. Around the reading cultures of antiquity we should envisage wider communities of listeners, enjoying retellings of the Epic of Gilgamesh in Mesopotamia or the legends that grew up around the figure of Imhotep in Egypt. Even after the spread of alphabetic scripts, the situation did not change radically. The library of Pisistratus is certainly a myth, but if anyone had compiled collections of Greek texts in the archaic period they would have consisted entirely of verse, almost all of it written for oral performance on public occasions. Even the first Latin ‘literature’ consisted of plays and hymns, despite the fact that it was composed in a Mediterranean intellectual universe dominated by the Hellenistic amalgam of scholarship and poetics.

The contributions to this volume by Robson and Ryholt make clear there was no sharp break in either the Egyptian or cuneiform traditions before Roman antiquity. Ryholt discusses the presence in the temple library of Roman Tebtunis of texts written in demotic, hieratic and hieroglyphic Egyptian, and also in Greek. Many of the literary texts found in the temple libraries of Seleucid Mesopotamia and Roman Egypt were very ancient indeed. By the first millennium BC the technology of books was broadly similar, cuneiform tablets apart. Papyrus scrolls remained the dominant medium until late antiquity, but were always supplemented by texts written on parchment or linen, with shorter less permanent notes on pottery ostraka or wooden tablets and monumental writing on stone and occasionally bronze. Alongside the older traditions, however, there were now newer literatures, many of them written in the family of alphabetic scripts descended from that devised in Phoenicia around the start of the last millennium BC. Robson describes the rise of Aramaic and its relatives in the Near East. Through the mediation of Phoenicians and Greeks, versions of the alphabet spread throughout the Mediterranean world and were widely

⁴¹ On Hattusas, Savaş *et al.* 2003, on Nineveh, Robson this volume.