History of Libraries in the Western World

Compact Textbook Edition

Michael H. Harris

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The work before you represents a new edition of a book first published in 1965, incorporating significant changes. First, in the light of the recent publication of dozens of books and hundreds of articles on various special aspects of the history of libraries in the West, I have heeded reviewers who called for the deletion of certain detailed portions of the text that slowed the reader interested in a general overview of the subject. Substantial cuts have been made on this basis since the reader who wishes to pursue any specific aspect of the subject in detail may now do so with considerable ease by consulting the specialized literature.

Second, bibliographies for each chapter have been shortened and updated. A considerable body of new work in library history, especially American and English, has been completed since the publication of the last edition. I have attempted to cite that new work wherever appropriate. At the same time the end-of-chapter bibliographies have been shortened considerably due to the recent appearance of a number of comprehensive bibliographic guides to the literature of library history. The ready availability of these bibliographic tools, cited in the relevant chapters, made unnecessary the extensive bibliographies found in earlier editions of the History of Libraries in the Western World.

Third, the last chapter of the third edition has been dropped entirely. Since that chapter, entitled "The Library in History," recapitulated themes already covered in other parts of the text, it was not considered essential.

Fourth, it will be noted that Dr. Elmer Johnson's name no longer appears on the title page of this work. Dr. Johnson's retirement and other interests persuaded him to withdraw from involvement with this project. This change should not, however, obscure the fact that he was the author of the pioneering first edition of this book. That the History has been

a mainstay of library history courses for some twenty years attests to his wide knowledge of the subject and the value of his accomplishment in undertaking the formidable task of writing the first comprehensive history of libraries in the West.

A number of other people helped in the preparation of this edition, including reviewers of the third edition who made pertinent and useful suggestions. My colleagues Dr. Wayne Wiegand and Dr. Robert Cazden furthered my knowledge of this and kindred subjects through many discussions. That we often disagreed about specific interpretations proved of considerable value, leading me to examine more critically my own positions on various aspects of the subject. Finally, I am pleased to acknowledge the help of Albert Daub of the Scarecrow Press.

Michael H. Harris
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PART I

LIBRARIES IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

THE ORIGIN OF LIBRARIES

The origin of libraries, like the origins of speech and of writing, is not known. Unlike speech and writing, however, the beginning of libraries came after the end of the prehistoric era, since the preservation of written records is considered to have begun the historic age. Conceivably, it should be possible to decide just when and where the first library existed, but all we know is that at certain times and in certain locations early libraries existed. Before that, there were undoubtedly collections of graphic materials approaching the form of libraries, but specific details are more difficult to pin down. One of the purposes for the development of writing was to preserve human communication--to extend its duration beyond the sound of the human voice and beyond the memory of mortal man, and it is probable that written communications were kept almost from the beginning of writing. Early written forms were often considered sacred, which was another reason for their careful preservation. If these early records were kept in an orderly manner, suitable for future use when needed, then they had all the earmarks of a proto-library or archive.

In order to discuss the history of libraries, it is necessary to have a working definition for the term library. What is a library? What distinguishes it from a collection of graphic materials or from an archive? For the purposes of this work it is assumed that a library is a collection of graphic materials arranged for relatively easy use, cared for by an individual or individuals familiar with that arrangement, and available for use by at least a limited number of persons. This definition includes early religious and governmental archives. The distinction between a library and an archive is relatively modern, and for historical purposes the two can be

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considered together, although where they diverge distinctively, only the library proper will be considered.

Before we discuss the kinds of libraries to be found in the ancient world, it would seem appropriate to pause for a moment to consider the societal conditions which contribute to the rise of libraries.   Library historians, from the publication of Justus Lipsius' Brief Outline of the History of Libraries in the late 16th century to the work of contemporary scholars, have dedicated themselves to discovering not only the ways in which libraries influence their coeval society, but also the ways in which society inhibits, encourages, or directs library growth.   The conditions which, most historians agree, are important prerequisites for library growth may be conveniently grouped under the following headings:

Social Conditions: Under this heading might be cited such positive influences as the rise of urban centers, which in their myriad activities produce innumerable records and require sophisticated information systems.   These needs naturally encouraged library, or archival, development.   Another social factor of significance is education; a formal system of education requires not only records and record keeping but also library facilities that will support the instructional system.   And, of course, the extent and nature of literacy will have an obvious impact on library growth.   Finally, social conditions such as the stability of home life, the availability of leisure time, the size of families, and the size of the population at large are all factors of significance to libraries.

Economic Conditions: Economic conditions are significant in many ways.   First, it is nearly axiomatic that large-scale library growth is directly related to the economic health or prosperity of a country.   Generally speaking, surplus wealth has had to be available in large amounts before the resources necessary for widespread library development become available.   Equally important is the fact that a well-developed and prosperous economy rests upon a sophisticated record-keeping system.   Libraries become essential "instrumentalities" of the economy; both as repositories for the records of business and as the research facilities from which future technological and commercial developments will be mined.

Many historians have also noted that an economic factor of real importance is the availability and cost of materials upon which written or printed records can be preserved.   The availability of an inexpensive and readily obtainable raw material

is an essential prerequisite for large-scale library growth.
Finally, libraries will develop most rapidly when books are
widely available and inexpensive; that is, when the book trade
is well established.

Political Conditions: Libraries and their contents are
in serious hazard in times of strife and turmoil. In contrast,
conditions of political and social tranquility are conducive to
widespread library growth. At the same time, libraries are
far more likely to develop rapidly and strongly when the gov-
erning establishment encourages their growth. And finally,
effective government generally requires access to great amounts
of domestic and foreign information, which from the earliest
of times has been gathered together and organized in librar-
ies.

In summary then, libraries will flourish generally in
those societies where economic prosperity reigns, where the
population is literate and stable, where the government en-
courages library growth, where large urban areas exist, and
where the book trade is well established. However, it should
be noted that there are numerous cases in history, some to
be discussed later, where these "favorable conditions" ap-
peared to be inoperative. In such cases one must look more
carefully into the historical record in order to discover the
motives of those who, for instance, encouraged library growth
in times of financial depression or who inhibited library growth
when conditions appeared to support widespread library de-
velopment.

Although early libraries were often associated with
religious edifices, it cannot be assumed that the temple li-
brary was the only, or even the most important, early form
of library. In fact, there seem to have been at least three,
if not four, types of graphic collections that contributed to the
general development of the early library form. The first of
these was the temple collection; the second the governmental
archive; the third, organized business records; and the pos-
sible fourth, the collection of family or genealogical papers.
Where religious and temporal rule were in the same hands
the first two types of collections sometimes merged; the sec-
ond two were also close when family and business records
came together. In either case, the written records contained
facts or information that were meant to be preserved for fu-
ture use, and for such use a logical order of arrangement
was necessary wherever the number of items amounted to
more than a dozen or two.

        The temple collection will be considered first, since
this is the usual example of the proto-library. A temple or
any other religious edifice of an advanced type presupposes
a formalized method of worship, a priesthood, and a hier-
archy of deities to be worshiped. Usually there is a story
of creation and a genealogy of the gods to be remembered.
For generations, possibly for centuries, such a religious lit-
erature could be handed down orally from parents to chil-
dren, or from priest to neophyte, but eventually it would be-
come necessary to regularize this story and to provide for
an established, orthodox form of religious worship. This
need might have been brought about through political change,
migration, the threat posed by other cults, or simply by the
growing complexity of the religious literature itself. Per-
haps the development of writing made such a religious stabi-
lization possible, or perhaps the need for such a stabiliza-
tion of religious practices helped to bring about the develop-
ment of writing. In either case, the temple collection began
with copies of the sacred laws, rituals, songs, creation sto-
ries, biographies of the gods and, later, the commentaries
of religious authorities on all of these. The basic scripture
might be carved on stone, inscribed on leather, copper or
brass, or embossed on clay to be baked into imperishable
bricks. Less important religious writings might be on the
common writing materials of a given time and place, such as
papyrus or parchment.

        The theological collection was kept in a sacred place
and presided over by a priest. Only the most important of
the temple officials might have access to this library, and
probably only a few of them could read. In most early soci-
eties, the scribe or the trained individual who could read and
write was a most important person, and often only a few of
the temple personnel belonged to this select group. The
temple library may have been of the few, and by the few,
and for the few, but it preserved the most important litera-
ture of a given religion, which was a basic cultural heritage
for that particular group. In Egypt, Palestine, Babylon,
Greece, and Rome, the temple collection certainly was among
the earliest and most important forms of the proto-library.

        Next in importance were the government record col-
lections, or archives. To support the government, taxes or
tributes were necessary, and to make these sources of in-
come reasonably accurate and honest, property ownership had
to be guaranteed and tax records compiled and kept. Deeds
and property transactions had to be recorded and a graphic

representation of their legality filed in some government of-
fice.   Laws and decrees had to be published and preserved.
On a wider scale, agreements, treaties, and understandings
between rulers had to be put down in some permanent form.
Partnerships between kings and vassals were made and bro-
ken, tribute was exacted from defeated powers, satellite gov-
ernors made their reports and pleas for aid in times of
stress.   Some of the earliest known records are such quasi-
diplomatic bits of correspondence between chief rulers and
their subordinates.   These were all official government rec-
ords, and when they were preserved and arranged for future
use, they became government archives.   However, when codi-
fications of laws, accounts of military campaigns, genealogies
of rulers, and histories of reigns were added to these archi-
val collections, the latter took on the aspect of a library,
and examples of such collections are known.   Since records
of military conquests and biographies of kings often included
as much fiction as fact, they added an element of literature
to an otherwise staid collection.   Governmental archives are
prominent among the early library forms.   They existed as
clay tables, as papyrus or parchment rolls, even as copper
strips or bronze plates, but whatever their format they pre-
served an account of the major activities of governments and
formed a basis for future histories.

        The civilization that had progressed enough to have
government and temple libraries was also more than likely to
have a rather advanced state of business and commerce.   Cen-
ters of government or of religious worship were usually in
relatively densely populated areas.   Such urban or semi-urban
areas developed along rivers, on harbors, or at junctures of
overland trade routes.   Advanced civilizations required some-
thing beyond barter and simple exchange of goods, and hence
some form of money became a necessity.   As business went
beyond the barter stage, records had to be kept.   Records of
property, inventories, purchases and sales, taxes and tributes
had to be preserved and arranged for ready use.   Reports
from and instructions to employees or agents in distant towns
had to be recorded and kept.   Such records, of course, formed
a business archive, but eventually the nature of the informa-
tion included might be broadened.   Accounts of ocean voyages
or land explorations in search of trade, military and political
events affecting trade, natural disasters, manufacturing meth-
ods, or formulas for products--all these might well enter in-
to the business archive which then took on more of the nature
of a library.   Whether archive or library, such collections
were familiar in the great trading houses of Egypt, Phoenicia,

and Babylonia, and later in Alexandria, Athens, and Rome.
The business archive as an ancestor of the modern library
is not so obvious, unless we think of it as an industrial or
"special" library.

The relationship between the family manuscript collec-
tion and the development of libraries may also be tenuous,
but it had a direct connection with the development of private
libraries and is part of library history. Some of the earli-
est known examples of written records relate to private mat-
ters. Property ownership and inheritance are important fac-
tors in any organized society, and wills, deeds, sales forms,
inventories of cattle or of slaves form some of the earliest
surviving family records. Genealogies indicating family line-
ages and relationships were often kept for generations. If
the family were of an upper class, religious scriptures and
rituals or works of astrology and divination might be added
to the collection. Lists of omens seem to have been a fa-
vorite family item in Babylonia. Perhaps a king-list, a his-
torical chronology, or even the works of a local poet or
storyteller might be added. Finally, the family collection
might become a genuine private library with the addition of
religious commentaries, traditional epics and tales, and other
writings of historical or literary content. The family ar-
chive is thus the ancestor of the private library, and by the
time of the Greeks and Romans, if not earlier, the well-
stocked private library was not unusual.

One other factor in the early development of libraries
was the official or "copyright" collection of manuscripts. As
literary works were produced and widely copied, assurance
of the accuracy, or purity, of the copied text was required.
Historical texts might vary slightly from copy to copy, and
so long as the actual facts were unchanged, little damage
was done. But when poems and plays came to be written,
the author's original words were all-important to its literary
value. For this reason, in ancient Athens in the days of
Sophocles and Euripides, official copies of plays were placed
in a public collection to guarantee that any person might have
access to the correct texts. Because plays and other literary
works could be pirated with ease, corrupted texts often circu-
lated as readily as the original wording of the author. When
correct texts were always available in an official library, all
other copies could be checked against the official one at any
time, and any question as to accuracy or authenticity could
always be answered. Egypt had a similar practice in con-
nection with religious scriptures. The official, or orthodox,

scriptures would be kept under guard as a guarantee of the
authenticity or authority of their contents. The Ark of the
Covenant of the early Hebrews is also an example of this.
Where such collections were large enough, arranged and
available for use, they became early forms of public librar-
ies.

Central to the rise of libraries was the form of the
graphic materials utilized to store information, since his-
torians have clearly shown that the use and arrangement of
libraries will vary as the form of their contents vary. In
the course of history people experimented with almost every
known material in search of the most suitable writing instru-
ment and the most satisfactory writing surface. In the proc-
ess they tried wood, stone, various metals, many types of
hides and leather, leaves, bark, cloth, clay, and paper as
writing surfaces, and succeeded fairly well with all of them.
For writing instruments they applied chisels, brushes, sticks,
wooden and metal styluses, bird feathers, and quills--in fact,
almost any kind of pointed object that could be used with
paints or inks.

Generally, however, three forms of writing surfaces
were most widely used in the ancient world, and most of the
surviving records are on one of these three. The first of
these, and probably the most widely used in time and geo-
graphic area, was papyrus, which grew along the lower Nile
and throughout the Mediterranean area. To prepare a writing
surface from the papyrus reed, the outer bark was removed
and the inner, soft pith was sliced into thin, narrow strips.
When these strips were placed in two layers, the top layer
perpendicular to the lower one, and pressed or pounded light-
ly while moist, a sheet of rough paper-like material was pro-
duced. This sheet was then dried and polished with pumice
stone to form a good writing surface that would readily take
ink and still withstand ordinary handling. Papyrus of various
weights and grades was produced, with the grade depending
upon the quality of the reed, the care with which it was made,
and the size of the sheets. Once the sheets were finished,
they could be used singly for letters, short poems, or docu-
ments; and for longer works, they could be glued side to
side to form a long strip. The writing was usually done in
lines parallel to the length of the strip, forming columns or
pages perpendicular to the length. A completed strip could
form a roll from ten to thirty feet in length, and from six
to ten inches wide. Some rolls were wider and longer, ap-
parently for special purposes. The Harris Papyrus, for
example, is 133 feet long by 17 inches wide. The end of a

completed manuscript was glued to a cylindrical stick of wood, metal or ivory, and the strip wound around the central core. The complete roll might be encased in a cylinder of pottery, metal, ivory, or leather. A note on the contents of the roll and perhaps the seal of the owner could be attached to the roll on a tab of wood, metal, or ivory. Such rolls could be ornate or plain, but the roll in this form constituted the "book" of the Greek, Egyptian, and Roman libraries. Small collections or rolls might be kept in pottery jars, but larger numbers were usually kept in niches or "pigeon-holes" on the library walls.

Very different in substance and appearance, but similar in form, was the parchment roll. Parchment, or vellum, its close relative, was the cured hide of the young sheep or goat. The hide was scraped clean of hair and fat and then cured or tanned until it was thin and of almost translucent whiteness. The completed parchment was trimmed to page size and also glued into long rolls. Parchment was developed after centuries of using hides and leather in cruder forms, but leather continued to be used for writing for special purposes, especially religious works and ceremonial scrolls. Both leather and parchment were more durable than papyrus in ordinary usage, and parchment had the advantage of being suitable for writing on both sides. Papyrus, on the other hand, was more porous, allowing the ink to show through, and restricting the writing to one surface. Parchment came into general use in the second century B.C., and it and papyrus were equally popular for several centuries.

The third popular and widely used writing material in ancient times was the clay tablet, used in the cuneiform writing of the Mesopotamian Valley and neighboring areas. It was used from Persia to the Mediterranean from the fourth millennium B.C. on into several centuries of the Christian era. Essentially the clay tablet was just that--a tablet of soft, pliable clay of a firm consistency--suitable for taking impressions from a stylus of wood, bone, reed, or metal. The clay was kept soft until used, then kneaded into the required size and shape. If the writing took more than a short period of time, or if additional writing was to be added at a later date, the clay had to be kept moist, and this was usually done by wrapping it in a dampened cloth. The usual clay tablet was pillow-shaped, about two or three inches wide by three or four inches long, and about one inch think. Some tablets were larger, reaching eight by twelve inches, and not all were rectangular; some were circular, triangular,

cylindrical or cone-shaped. The writing instrument, a sty-
lus with a square or triangular tip, was held at an angle to
the writing surface, and was used to make an impression
rather than a continuous stroke. This gave the writing the
appearance of wedge-shaped dents with long tails; hence the
name cuneiform or wedge-shaped, for this style of writing.
After the writing on the tablet was completed, it was left to
dry; if it was to be kept permanently, it was baked in an
oven. Sometimes an outer sheath of clay was placed around
the baked or inscribed tablet, and for legal documents the
text might be repeated on the outside tablet. If the outer en-
velope of clay was unbroken, the inner text could be con-
sidered intact and correct, thus giving a sort of carbon copy
to prevent tampering with texts.

The earliest writing on clay tablets was in vertical
columns, beginning at the top of the right-hand side of the
tablet and ending at the bottom of the left-hand side. Many
centuries later the method of writing changed; it was done
in horizontal lines beginning at the top left-hand side and end-
ing at the bottom right-hand side, as in the modern style.
Works of some length might require several, even dozens of
tablets. A favorite method of keeping series of tablets to-
gether was in baskets, although sometimes they were merely
kept together on shelves. Each tablet was numbered sepa-
rately, and a key word or text was prominently inscribed on
the end of the tablet. In some cases a lengthy text was
simply inscribed on a larger tablet. One of the larger ones,
containing the Annals of Sennacharib, was six-sided, about
one foot high and five inches thick. It was found at Nineveh
in 1830 and is now in the British Museum.

Since it is known that clay tablets were widely used
in Egypt along with the papyrus roll, it is likely that papyrus
and parchment were also used in Babylonia, particularly in
the later centuries before Christ. Because the climate in
Babylonia was humid, any papyrus or parchment would have
decayed long ago, but clay seals that were apparently origi-
nally attached to inscribed rolls have been found there.
Moreover, there are also illustrations to be seen on the
walls of excavated Babylonian palaces depicting scribes read-
ing from a roll. There are also illustrations showing writ-
ers using what was apparently a waxed wooden tablet for
keeping temporary records.

In the classical ages of Greece and Rome, the roll,
either of papyrus or parchment, remained the dominant form