

## ***Libraries in the Ancient World* by Lionel Casson**

Library collections in the ancient Near East, (Mesopotamia and Egypt), Greece and Rome were of a specific nature that answered the needs of the civilizations. What were the needs of each of these civilizations vis a vis the production, storage, organization and consumption of information. How did libraries meet these needs?

How was the function of the libraries in each of these ancient civilizations similar and how was it different?

Libraries up until the Roman era are for the most part private institutions delegated to the record keeping needs of the administrations that govern them. The earliest libraries were actually archives that housed and organized the clay tablets that made up the first accounting records. Over time these collections grew to include omen texts, religious texts, scholarly texts, and a very limited selection of stories. The growth of the collections are attributed to scribes who copied works and to collection policy mandates that included purchasing, copying, and even stealing of all written works available. It is noted that many collections grew based on the winners in military conflict, which also meant that many collections were destroyed with as much vigor. These collections were maintained and organized by scribes or scholars who reported to the present ruler; and may also have been cared for as part of the religious duties of the priests. Access to the collections was restricted and most collections were the private reserve of the ruling family. Even with such strict access, theft and abuse of the collections was common enough to have deterrents in place against it. Throughout the history of libraries the needs of the civilizations grew with the advances in technology and the libraries responded by developing better ways to find information within texts, and contributed to the preservation of that information.

D.T. Potts<sup>1</sup> in his article "Before Alexandria: Libraries in the Ancient Near East," presented a clearer picture of the nature of these records, how they were used and how they were organized than Casson put forth in his *Libraries in the Ancient World*.<sup>2</sup> Together they speculate what the needs of the Near East (Mesopotamia) might have been vis a vis the production, storage, organization and consumption of information in the form of clay tablets. Neither author sheds much light onto the nature of Egyptian libraries, and Casson points out that "Though it produced a rich body of writing, both technical and literary, it has nothing to add to the history of libraries. They existed there, to be sure, but we know of them only vaguely and indirectly."<sup>3</sup> Fredrick G. Kilgour, must have felt that there should be more to the Egyptian contribution as he explained in *The Evolution of the Book*, when discussing the Petri excavation: "These materials include the temple archive, in which are the usual records, accounts, letters, and singular items, plus texts from residences. Among the latter the most interesting pieces are fragments of a gynological text and a veterinary text..."<sup>4</sup>

Mesopotamian archives are the earliest examples of storage and organization of information. Casson places these archives around 3000BC based on findings in Nippur, Elba, Hattusas, Ashur, and Nineveh; whereas Potts brings forth more detail into the Uruk discoveries that place the first archives around 3500BC.<sup>5</sup> Both authors describe archive rooms as having niches cut into the walls where clay tablets were placed directly onto the carved stone or placed onto wooden shelves. Placement of the shelves

allowed for tablets to be shelved much like books are today with the 'spine' out; or as Potts mentions: the tablets were placed on shelves in a 'file card' fashion so that they could be searched quickly. To aid in searching the tablets, those placed in 'file card' stacks showed evidence of notation along the upper edge or color coding of similar subjects with colored lines; and it was noted that there were three distinct shapes used for particular types of information: round for agricultural, small for daily economics, and long multi columned tablets for lexical lists.<sup>6</sup>

In regards to organizing information on the page, Kilgour points out that Egyptians used rubrication, 'the application of red ink to aid users in finding information within papyri and presents George Posner's four "rules for writing words in red: to make words stand out; to isolate them as in the modern use of parentheses; to separate them; and to effect differentiation." Also, titles and headings, first paragraphs, and first words or first sentences of paragraphs are in red.'<sup>7</sup>

Other examples of early Mesopotamian organizational practices can be seen in the various catalogs that have been found during excavations, Casson describes the first catalog as lists found at Nippur that later incorporated colophons that were being using on the tablets and ended up as detailed bibliographies as found at Hattusas. These catalogs list the types of information categories that made up various collections. The majority, of course, described as administrative although among literary holdings the majority of the texts were described as omen books by both Casson and Potts. Omen texts are assumed to have assisted rulers or priest of rulers in decision making processes.<sup>8</sup>

Libraries during Roman times are much different than earlier libraries in one very unique way; they were built for the use of the public. How libraries grew from private collections that met the needs of rulers in Mesopotamia and Egypt to public collections that met the needs of the Roman citizens is traced through the growth of the book in early and later Greek and Roman literary history. At this point it is assumed by Casson that the act of record keeping is still in place, but attention is now focused on the collections of literary works that have shaped the library as we know it today.

As book production and the selling of books grew, private citizens were able to amass their own private libraries that they shared with their friends and household staff. Literature that was available consisted mainly of dramatic works by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides that were meant to be performed; and the Homeric epics and various philosophical treaties which were meant to be read out loud. Clay tablets were still in use and papyrus rolls were quickly becoming the main literary form. Aristotle is said to have had one of the larger personal libraries of the time period and is attributed to having inspired, via Demetrius of Phalerum, Ptolemy in setting up the library of Alexandria.<sup>9</sup>

With the growth in book production, came the growth in errors brought about through the process of making copies. This was such a problem at the time that a law was passed denoting official copies of the dramatic works and penalties that would ensue for altering such works.<sup>10</sup> However, even the large private library of Alexandria-open only to invited guests of Ptolemy-fell victim to errors brought about by over copying and over editing. Library contributions directly related to the Library of Alexandria include: "the authoritative text edition, the commentary, the glossary, and grammar".<sup>11</sup> Having once been known as a great place for scholarship the Library of Alexandria diminished in popularity with later

ruling Ptolemies, and the quality of scholarship produced declined.<sup>12</sup> Casson notes that although popularity of the Library of Alexandria declined, it still held sway for over 300 years; overlapping the creation of the public library and is said to have been finally destroyed in AD270.<sup>13</sup>

Access to information for all citizens came about in 30BC when the first public library opened its doors. Although there is some evidence to suggest that libraries were more common earlier than 30BC, they are attributed to private donations and are presumed attached to gymnasiums.<sup>14</sup> The idea of the first public library is said to have come from Julius Caesar: 'to build for public use a library of Greek books and one of Latin books'; and it was this idea that was carried out after Caesar's death by Asinius Pollio.<sup>15</sup>

The Roman library had one other difference from the Greek style in that the Roman architecture allowed for a central reading area surrounded by the books. The books were stored in wall niches similar to the shelved reading rooms found in local libraries today without the grand statuary or marble columns. However, the grandeur of the Roman library did not allow for growing collections and the last library of this type was Tragen's two story structure comprising of two wings with a square portico in the center.<sup>16</sup> Casson explains that although Tragen's library was the last of its kind, libraries continued to be constructed as part of the Roman baths. The baths became more than an 'establishment of warm rooms, hot rooms, sweat rooms, cold plunges, and massage chambers, ...they served as recreation and cultural centers ...comprised of gardens with paths for walking, courts for exercising or playing games, rooms for meetings or recitals or lectures, and libraries.'<sup>17</sup>

"The public baths were patronized by all Romans, men and women, young and old, rich and poor. They came there not only for the bathing facilities but to pass time in leisurely activities, to walk in the gardens, play ball or watch others play ball, listen to lectures, chat with friends—or browse in the library. The contents of the bath libraries must have reflected this state of affairs, namely that the readership would consist primarily of people who turned to the books there as a pastime, as an alternative to tossing a ball or indulging in casual conversation, and only secondarily of professionals and literati who found it convenient to combine a bath with some study."<sup>18</sup>

The example above reminds me of the more recent library history where the first modern public libraries were much like the early private research libraries of individuals, then they grew to larger group libraries that were still private even if via subscription. The Boston Library appears to have much in common with the first Roman library and the later libraries at the public baths resemble the current trend in public libraries to provide not only a place for research, but more so a place for the community that includes eating facilities, lecture areas, performance areas, software tutoring, computer access, day care, bathing facilities and big comfy couches. The libraries throughout history have adapted to meet the needs of owners, sponsors and patrons--be they private or public --until such a need was no longer necessary. This is important to ponder as information goes digital.

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1. D.T. Potts, "Before Alexandria: Libraries in the Ancient Near East," *The Library of the Alexandria*, edited by Roy MacLeod, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 19-33.
2. Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002).
3. Ibid, 15-16.
4. Fredrick G. Kilgour, *The Evolution of theBook*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 30.
5. D.T. Potts, "Before Alexandria: Libraries in the Ancient Near East," *The Library of the Alexandria*, edited by Roy MacLeod, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 20.
6. D.T. Potts, "Before Alexandria: Libraries in the Ancient Near East," *The Library of the Alexandria*, edited by Roy MacLeod, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 21-22.
7. Georges Posner, "Sur l'emploi de l'encre rouge, dan les manuscrits Egyptian," *Journal of Egyptian Archeology* 37, (1951), 75-78 as quoted in Fredrick G. Kilgour, *The Evolution of theBook*, (New York & Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 25-26.
8. Ibid, 24 and Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 7-9.
9. Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 29.
10. Ibid.
11. Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 45.
12. Roy MacLeod, "Introduction: Alexandria in History and Myth," *The Library of the Alexandria*, edited by Roy MacLeod, (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 8.
13. Lionel Casson, *Libraries in the Ancient World*, (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2002), 47.
14. Ibid, 60.
15. Ibid, 79.
16. Ibid, 84.
17. Ibid, 89.
18. Ibid, 91-92.