

# Libraries of the Past in the Present and Future

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## Introduction

From Ebla to Alexandria, from Pylos to Pergamum – libraries litter the landscape of ancient history. Whether they be rightly called libraries, archives, or protolibraries, their legacy has lasted throughout the ages to modern times. But to what extent? Have the features of those ancient libraries informed the features we find in libraries today? And how useful is it to study the libraries of the past? Can such study be of any use in our modern ‘information’ society?

By looking at ancient examples of methods of librarianship, cataloguing, classification and indexing, this essay seeks to answer the above questions. Moreover, it intends to explore the ways in which the libraries of the past can be connected practically to the libraries of the today; indeed, of tomorrow.<sup>1</sup>

## The First Ancient Libraries

The earliest discovered library was unearthed in Ebla (modern Tell Mardikh in Syria) in 1974 (Wellisch, 1981). This archive of cuneiform tablets dated back to the third millennium BCE, and was found in storage rooms attached to the royal palace at Ebla, as well as a main archive room. The majority of these were administrative in nature, which pointed to the tablets being part of a royal archive. While Wellisch acknowledges this to be the case for the most part, he also notes “part of the tablets contain literary and lexicographic texts... [which] seems to indicate that the collection also served at least partially as a true library” (1981, p.490). A primitive form of shelf classification, so familiar to us today, was in evidence even then – around sixty dictionaries and twenty-eight bilingual lists were arranged on a top shelf, so as not be mixed up with the other material (Wellisch, 1981).

Modern systemisation of libraries includes essential practices of indexing and cataloguing.

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<sup>1</sup> For the purposes of this essay, the term ‘ancient libraries’ includes only those institutions that existed before 500 BCE.

From the archaeology, it seems that they had begun development as early as the thirteenth century BCE. Excavation of the Hittite capital of Hattusas, near modern day Ankara, yielded many tablets that through incipits, or a so-called 'title page' or colophon, were numbered and annotated. Casson gives an example:

Second tablet of Tudhaliyas, the great king, on the oath. End. This tablet was damaged; in the presence of Mahhuzi and Halwalu, I, Duda, restored it. (2001, p.5)

In addition, several tablets were found that appeared to be catalogues, lists that include entries of palace documents, sometimes adding information as to the author, the number of volumes, and so on. While primitive, we can see in these early catalogues the very beginnings of library practice today.

Whilst at this time libraries were clearly the prerogative of kings and princes, enough people had access to them for theft and damage to become a problem. The famous library of Nineveh, amassed by the scholarly Babylonian king, Ashurbanipal, evidently suffered from such misdemeanours. In his book, Casson makes reference to the threats and curses that were the precursors of today's fines and overdue warning notices, where Ashurbanipal declares, "whoever removes [the tablet] , writes his name in place of my name, may Ashur and Ninlil...cast him down, erase his name, his seed, in the land." (Casson, 2001, p.12) Whether such execrations were more effective than their modern counterparts is a mystery, but they speak forcefully of the problems libraries have faced throughout time.

## **Ancient Libraries in the Western World**

James O'Toole considers the examples listed above to be more appropriately called 'proto-libraries', whilst he considers the Greeks to have been the first civilisation to see the "possibility of libraries", inasmuch as they "devoted the necessary attention and resources to teaching people how to use it by setting up and maintaining schools" (2004, p.174). Yet even before the great library at Alexandria was established, the seeds of the library had already been sown in ancient Greece.

From 1939, excavations at the site of ancient Pylos in Greece uncovered thousands of tablets inscribed with the then undeciphered script, Linear B (Taylour, 1983). Written in the second millennium BCE, they were found in a concentrated area which seemed to imply the existence of palace archives. From the weave-like patterns printed on the clay, the storage medium was readily surmised to be baskets, and labelling tablets describing the subject of the basket's contents were

found. Even at this early stage, the systemisation of documents was taking place in Greece. This was probably due to the influence of the Hittites, who it has been proposed, had contact with the Bronze Age Greeks (Taylour, 1983).

With the decline of the Mycenaean Greeks, this early attempt at systemisation only recommenced about 300 BCE, with the founding of the Library of Alexandria in Ptolemaic Egypt. Much literature has been dedicated to this famous library; therefore only the most salient features will be touched upon here.

The first alphabetical classification of books can be attributed to the supposed librarian of Alexandria, Callimachus, a brilliant scholar who set to work recording the holdings of the library (Manguel, 2006). These tables or *Pinakes*, ordered by genre, no longer survive, though they influenced subsequent scholarly bibliographies. To what extent the *Pinakes* may be considered a catalogue in the true sense of the word is debatable: it was not comprehensive, and sought only to list the works of the foremost Greek authors. Nevertheless, it was the first catalogue to be arranged in alphabetical order (though only as far as the first letter), including bibliographic data also recorded in this manner. As such, it may be more appropriate to call the *Pinakes* a set of bibliographical lists; although its impact on the subsequent art of cataloguing cannot be underestimated. Our modern concept of “the author of a work for its entry” certainly developed from it (Strout, 1956, p.257). This is not to say that these practices were ‘bequeathed’ to the modern world through some evolutionary process; for example, the Greek art of the alphabetical catalogue was lost to the medieval world, and was only born again centuries later (Lerner, 2001). But at the very least it influenced what we have today.

During this time books had developed from tablets to rolls of papyrus or parchment. How then were books identified? In the absence of the colophon, or a title written across the spine, basic information was recorded on tabs which were tucked into the edge of the roll. Sometimes provenance was added to the tab; an aspect which is of great importance to the memory institutions of today (Casson, 2001). Not only this, but many high-demand items (such as the Homeric epics) were made available for copying by the public (Lerner, 2001), a practice that continued into the medieval times and beyond with the invention of the printing press. Could this be considered the forerunner of the modern library-user’s ability to photocopy library holdings (at a price, of course)? In all these humble practices, it is easy to see mirrored those practices we are so familiar with today.

What can be considered the true ‘birth’ of the public library began in Rome (Casson, 2001). Sometime after 39 BCE, the general and author Pollio established the Rome’s first public library. Others soon followed, including Augustus’ Palatine Library. The layout of the library as we know it today found its precursor here, where it included spaces within the library for the reading of texts,

unlike the Greek libraries. Casson also raises the possibility that separate storage areas were created for those books that weren't often used.

It was in Rome that libraries really opened to the masses, some even allowing the borrowing of books. They were designed with user's needs in mind, in their spacious reading areas, with easily accessible shelves (Casson, 2001). Location was everything, many public libraries being set up in the popular baths. Perhaps for the first time, libraries were catering specifically to the needs of their users, an aspect of the profession which remains highly pertinent to this day.

## Ancient Libraries in the Far East

We now turn to the Far East. China appears to have been at the centre of library development, as Lerner (2001) notes that the tributary states of Japan and Korea were heavily influenced by the precedents set by China, and even then only slowly.<sup>2</sup>

The Chinese first developed writing about 2500-2500 BCE, and unlike the administrative documents that comprised the first records in the West, the first Chinese documents are the so-called 'oracle bones' – ox bones or turtle plastrons on which were inscribed divinations related to the king and his household. Caches of these, sometimes in the thousands, have been discovered since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century; but since they appear to have been ritually buried, they cannot be considered libraries or even archives in the true sense (Xie, 1987).

Nevertheless, by the time of the Zhou dynasty (1046-256 BCE), the court post of *shiguan* or historian had been created, and as well as acting as official scribes, part of their role seems to have been the collating of various texts, both old and new (Xie, 1987). These texts were limited in scope, consisting mainly of divinatory, astrological and ceremonial records, but it certainly appears that the basis for a royal library had been established.

It wasn't until the time of the Han Dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE) that the library as a formal institution was born. This was in the form of the Imperial Library, established in order to re-gather the material that was scattered in the 'burning of the books' during the previous Qin dynasty, and to solidify the Confucian teaching that was the basis of Han policy (Lerner, 2001). As in Alexandria, private collections all over the country were searched in order to bolster the imperial collection. This inevitably led to the problem of how to organise the influx of documents. It was left to Liu Xiang (77 - 6 BCE), a court historian and government official, to head a team of experts in sifting through the documents (Tsien, 1952). The resulting report, the *Bie Lü*, may thus be considered the first peer-reviewed journal in history.

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<sup>2</sup> Since the concept of the library seems to have been adopted in Korea and Japan after 500 CE (Lerner, p. 65), these countries fall outside the scope of this paper, and shall not be discussed here.

Significant strides were made by Liu Xiang's son, Liu Xin (c. 50 BCE – 23 CE). Following in his father's footsteps, he consolidated Liu Xiang's work by compiling the *Qi Lüe*, essentially China's first cataloguing system. This was divided into six categories – general summaries, the (Confucian) Classics, philosophy, poetry, military science, mathematics and medicine. These included further subdivisions; for example, within mathematics were included the categories of astronomy, chronology, divination, criminal law, etc. Though imperfect, the catalogue was an impressive feat, consisting of roughly 13,269 bamboo tablet volumes (Xie, 1987), which covered most of the Imperial Library's holdings.

Liu Xin's work was seminal in more ways than one. Not only was it a first of its kind, it also laid "the groundwork for Chinese bibliographic classification" (Tsien 1952, p.307), despite having been lost in antiquity. As Xie puts it:

[Liu Xiang and Liu Xin's] process of perfecting library records, the methods of library organisation, and the recommended library skills made a deep impression on the following generations of cataloguers<sup>3</sup> (1987, p.47).

Despite undergoing various modifications over the years, the influence of the *Qi Lüe* made itself felt well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Initial attempts to integrate the Dewey system into the traditional Chinese system met with many practical problems, as well as some outright opposition. In 1952, Tsien acknowledged that "[i]n adopting new systems for Chinese classification, various serious problems are involved", (1952, p.323), citing language and administration differences between Oriental and Western books, although he was unable to offer any one solution to the problem.

The matter was finally resolved in 1975, when the Classification for Chinese Libraries (CLL) was officially implemented. A compromise between Chinese tradition and Western classification, it drew upon both modern and ancient methods, still largely following the system of categories adopted by Liu Xin thousands of years ago.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> My translation.

<sup>4</sup> An example of this unique classification system can be viewed at <<http://web.zslib.com.cn/zslibeng/html/Classification.asp>> and <<http://www.zju.edu.cn/jzus/download/clc.pdf>> [both accessed 27 November 2011].

## The Practical Relevance of the Ancient Library to Today

The study of ancient libraries is old in its own right.<sup>5</sup> Libraries have progressed expeditiously even since such study began. So can ancient libraries and their features still be of practical use today?

We have seen some of the ways in which the practices of the ancient library mirror many of the features we see today in the modern library. But in our burgeoning information age, how can the traditions of yesterday be relevant to tomorrow?

Perhaps the most obvious defence is that the past gives context to the present. As Strout states: - “[k]nowledge of the historical development of an institution or concept helps to clarify it.” As far as the future goes, she adds; “a survey of origins and manner of development may make it easier to evaluate present usages; it may, by furnishing better perspective, help to free us from...the bonds of tradition.” (1956, p.254). Though this was written in 1956, to a great extent it still holds true today.

In Manguel’s view, libraries public and private, their owners or custodians, have always sought to impose their own hierarchies and visions of the world upon the collections they own (Manguel, 2008). In our modern era of globalisation, in a world where information has become in a sense democratised, we are moving from a plethora of eclectic, idiosyncratic systems of classification to more homogenised ones. Yet our human need to organise and classify information has remained essentially the same throughout the ages. It is for this reason that Cappon encourages modern archivists to study the activities of his ancient forbears when he writes; “[The ancient archivist’s] problems are still [the modern archivists] problems, though in many respects under vastly different conditions.” (1973, p.69). The implication is that modern practitioners may learn from those of the past, embracing what is useful, avoiding what has proven to be detrimental.

Why do we organise documents? The reasons may be manifold, but surely it must be our own need for expediency that dictates both *why* and *how* we organise the way we do. The practices of the past were formed in order to meet the needs of the user, just as they are today. Yet information and the forms it takes have expanded – burgeoned – throughout the ages. In many ways, the practices of all information specialists throughout time has been a process of adaptation to this constant increase in information.

The challenges we face as modern practitioners is, in a sense, nothing new. The proliferation of information through digital means – most notably the World Wide Web – has

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<sup>5</sup> Walker (1991) claims the *De bibliothecis syntagma* (1602) by Justus Lipsius as the “prototype of early historical library writing”.

presented unique hurdles for us to jump; yet such hurdles were faced during the print revolution of the fifteenth century. Newer forms of document, like the sheet and the journal, made more demands of libraries than ever before. But even then such dilemmas were not unknown. As O'Toole writes:

The ways in which information is captured and recorded, the ways information moves around in society, the uses (for good and ill) that we make of records and information, the constantly changing formats of records and the prospect that we will be unable to retrieve them from particular hardware- and software-dependent systems - all these daily realities of archivists in the early twenty-first century are arguments for taking as broad an approach as possible to understanding their work... The introduction of writing systems into previously oral cultures was more of a revolution in human affairs than the spread of cheap and available computer technology, and it seems obvious that understanding such earlier revolutions might help us get through our own. (2004, p. 163)

## Conclusion

The art of the librarian, the archivist, the cataloguer, the information manager is an art essential to human nature. Our need to express, collect and organise the body of our knowledge is integral to our lives. Even in the mundane minutiae of every day routine we gather and we order. *What* we gather and *what* we order has progressed since the earliest of days. From cuneiform tablets to emails, from codices to bank statements, the information has always existed; it is merely the format that has changed.

And that change has engendered a need for adaptation. Adaptation in the ways in which we store that information, from our own homes to the national library. What works in the past has informed what works in the present. So many thousands of years down the line, we still separate documents by subject matter, just as the ancient librarians at Ebla shelved their literary tablets apart from the administrative records. Likewise, Callimachus' method of arrangement by alphabet has stood the test of time, refined and perfected in order to accommodate the now vast numbers of material that doubtless would have left Callimachus breathless.

It is for this reason that the study of ancient libraries and their features is still invaluable today. In giving context to our present practices it grounds what we know and do already. But more importantly, it teaches us how the generations before dealt with the tides of information change that they faced; where they triumphed, and where they failed. With the rise of the internet

and the World Wide Web, we face a monumental challenge, not only in organising such ephemeral, sometimes invisible information, but also in reassessing the very life of the library itself. But it is not a challenge we face alone. As O'Toole emphasises: "By studying the same or like processes in other societies in the past, societies that were experiencing equally disconcerting shifts, we gain a critical perspective on our own experience and, perhaps, the courage to face the challenges ahead." (2004, p.175)

From the birth of the visible record, we seem to have come full-circle. What once was merely spoken and passed down orally is now hidden deep inside the web, often lost before it is found. The dilemma we face in recording, collecting and organising the transitory is the dilemma our ancestors faced thousands of years ago, and doubtless will be our descendant's in the future.

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