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Library History Paper – Greece and Rome

Several significant aspects of ancient history precipitated the rise of the library in the Greco-Roman world. First and foremost, it was necessary that there be books, authors, and readers, which formed the foundation of a literate culture. Initially, the Greeks constructed a writing system based on an earlier Phoenician syllabary to create written records of their great oral epics (Casson p. 19). In the Classical Period (ca. 500 CE), the focus of written works expanded to include transcripts of religious dramas performed in Athenian festivals and the works of prominent philosophers (Casson p. 29). The rise of philosophy as a central principle of Greek life saw the desire to create an educated citizen body (Casson p. 53). This, in turn, encouraged widespread literacy, especially among the upper and middle classes of both mainland Greece and Greek colonies in Asia minor and southern Italy (Casson p.28). Writing materials used by the Greeks varied depending on the purpose. While simple notes were scratched on to shards of pottery known as *ostraka*, lengthy documents were often written on papyrus scrolls acquired through trade with Egypt (Casson p.25). A more costly alternative was found in parchment, which was often used as an alternative when papyrus was in short supply (Casson p 26).

The first Greek institutions that can properly be called libraries came into being under the auspices of local Greek kings, known as *tyrants*. As autocratic rulers of small city-states, these leaders vied with each other to obtain as courtiers the foremost minds of the Hellenistic world. Libraries arose from the collections of scrolls acquired by these scholars, and the works were housed in structures attached to, and considered a part of, temples (Casson p. 48). The collection of a given library was usually varied, since in the ancient world it was possible to have all of the

world's knowledge housed under one roof (Staikos v.1, p. 45). Depending on the tastes of the tyrant or local culture, however, certain libraries did become known for having special collections. Athens, for instance, housed a valuable collection of dramatic transcripts, while Sicily, which was known for its cuisine, was known for its collection of cooking instructions and recipes (Casson p.29). Obsessed with being poisoned, the tyrant Mithridates of Pontus had his courtiers establish one of the world's first medical libraries in search of antidotes to all known toxins (Staikos v.2, 75).

In the later Classical Period, the Greek world saw the integration of libraries into *gymnasia*, which previously existed solely to provide physical education to a city's upper class youth (Casson p. 57). With the rise of philosophy, education and literacy became a critical aspect of cultural self-image, allowing intellectual pursuits to gain equal footing with the military training traditionally associated with *gymnasia* (Staikos v.2, p. 90). Additionally, well-known philosophers were allowed to establish institutions of higher learning such as Plato's Academy and Aristotle's Lyceum, which had attached to them storehouses of papyrus scrolls that we would today deem 'libraries (Casson p. 28).'

Pivotal to the spread of Greek culture and the rise of the library was Alexander the Great, who desired to establish a great center of culture and learning for the betterment of his empire (Casson p. 48). Though Alexander himself did not live to see it, his successor Ptolemy established such a center around 250 BCE, gathering together innumerable scrolls and scholars at Alexandria (Thornton p. 11). In direct competition with the Library of Alexandria for academics and books was the Library of Pergamum, founded by the tyrant Eumenes II in Asia Minor sometime in the late 3rd Century BCE. So strong was the rivalry between the two that

Alexandria at one point stopped its export of papyrus, forcing libraries around the Mediterranean to adopt more costly parchment and vellum (Thornton p. 12).

As with most other elements of their culture, Romans appropriated a great deal from the Greeks over several hundred years. The Latin alphabet was borrowed from that of the Etruscans of northern Italy, who had in turn taken theirs from the Greeks. For a time, the Roman elite turned to Greek literature and philosophy as their main means of acculturation (Staikos v.1, p. 45). By the time Rome had seriously gone about building repositories for literature, the preference for access to both Greek and Latin had become the norm. Thus, the great majority of Roman libraries took the form of *bibliothecae bilinguae*, or ‘libraries of two languages.’ The average Roman library, therefore, usually consisted of two separate, identical chambers in which the collections of each language were kept (Staikos v.1, p. 5). It should be noted that the size of Greek collections often dwarfed that of Latin ones due to the great influx of scrolls taken as spoils of war by generals during Rome’s expansion (Savage p.17).

Initially, Roman libraries were created by wealthy, private citizens for their own leisure as well as that of their peers (Staikos v.1, p. 63). It was only during the last years of the Republic that the idea of public access to libraries came about, mostly at the insistence of Julius Caesar (Savage p. 16). Like Alexander, he proclaimed his desire for an enlightened citizen body, and had taken steps to realize a public library for Romans shortly before his assassination. After Augustus’ rise to power, he carried out the wishes of his adoptive father, but to different ends. Under Augustus, several libraries were opened in central Rome, usually attached to temples (Staikos v.2, p. 120). While Augustus himself was a great patron of the arts, he regularly and with great zeal made efforts to censor materials he thought ‘un-Roman,’ and began to see the value of public libraries as propaganda tools (Staikos v.2, p. 131). Though there were

exceptional cases of emperors who wished to create more open literary discussion (notably Marcus Aurelius and Trajan), the general trend for the rest of the Empire's lifespan was towards censorship and indoctrination (Staikos v.2 p. 139). Literacy became more widespread as Rome reached the apex of its power, and smaller libraries were opened inside Rome's bath houses (Staikos v.2, p. 180). Though there is reason to believe that such public libraries were spread throughout the Empire, given the intellectual climate of Rome, to the present there is a lack of concrete evidence to prove so, and even less evidence as to exactly who was given access to their resources (Staikos v.2, p. 77).

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