A Brief History of Library

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Abstract: The world library history is connected to history transmission of knowledge, especially when this knowledge is fixed on supports as: book or any other written document likely to contain information. Our attempt includes a brief history of library, from ancient time until today.

Keywords: definitions of library, library history, Antiquity, Middle Ages, Renaissance, the library today, the library of the future, traditional – digital – virtual.

1. The Definition of the term library

With its four thousand years heritage, the library represents the oldest establishment of disseminating human culture. From a certain point of view, we can even claim that the history of the library is the very history of human culture.

The term library (dating back to 493), in most European languages, comes from Latin, i.e. bibliotheca, borrowed from the Greek word: βιβλιοθήκη (biblion = book; thēke = coffer, case, storing place).

The definition the DEX gives to library reads as follows: "1. a case or piece of furniture specially provided with shelves to keep books; 2. a room, hall where books are kept and read; 3. a collection of books, periodicals, leaflets, printed material, etc. An entity that collects books, periodicals, etc. In order to make them available to readers in an orderly manner; 4. a name given to a series of books sharing common characteristics and published by the same publishing house."[2]

In a specialised dictionary, Vocabular de biblioteconomie și știința informării, by Mircea Regneală, the multiple meanings of the top term is preserved: "1. Any orderly collection of printed books and serials, or any other such graphic and audiovisual document, available to be borrowed or read in the reading room; 2. An entity or part of an entity whose main purpose is to preserve a collection and facilitate, via its personnel services, the use of documents that meet the users' needs for information, research, education, or leisure; 3. A room where the library conducts its activity; 4. Furniture use to keep publications."[3]

In one of the newsletter of the Association for Standardisation in Romania (ASRO), the technical definition of the word bibliotecă, i.e. library, is: "An entity, or part thereof, whose main purpose is to preserve a collection and facilitate, by means of the services offered by the library personnel, the use of documents necessary to meeting its beneficiaries' need for information, research, education, or entertainment."[4]

In Dicționarul limbii române (called Dicționar tezaur), the term title has the following structure: "bibliotecă s.f. bibliothèque 1.Dulap cu rafturi (armar) în care sînt așezate cărțile cuiva. O bibliotecă de ștefan. 2. Locul (camera, încăpere) sau o clădire întreagă în care sînt așezate în rîndulială și se păstrează, spre citire sau consultare, cărțile (manuscrisele, stampele etc.) unei persoane sau ale unei instituții publice. Biblioteca Academiei Române. Să toată ziua înfundat în bibliotecă. 3.Colecție de cărți (manuscrise etc.) așezate în rîndulială, spre citire sau consultare. Să se poată alcătui bibliotecă națională (a. 1828) URICARIUL, VII, 181/12. Am alergat la biblioteca tatălui meu, care era într-o ladă mare purure deschisă, în coridor. C. GREZZI, I, 10. Diferitele biblioteci din

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[1] The oldest library was the one of the Assirian king, Assurbanipal (668-626 B.C.),


străinătate... ne-au procurat într-o mare parte masa materialului utilizat. HASDEU. I.C. VIII. Bibliotecii răspânte ale oamenilor bătrâni. EMINESCU, N. 79. I.Fig. (despre un om care e toă să b.urdul de carte) O bibliotecă ambulantă. Publicaţie în mai multe volume, cuprinzând scrieri cu un caracter (extern s. intern) comun tuturor. Biblioteca românească. (Titlul unei reviste vechi). Biblioteca pedagogilor clasici. Biblioteca pentru toţi. (Pronunţ.-bli-o-. Accentuat şi: bibliotecă. I.(de-a dreptul din grec.) şi: bibliotecă. Acum au bibliotecă şi alte multe lucruri de mare preţ. GOLESCU, I. 85 / Derivate: (diminutiv, rar) bibliotecuţă s. f.LM.; bibliotecă s.m. Cel puţ pos să ală în grăi o bibliotecă; şeful personalului unei biblioteci. Bibliotecariul nu este volnic a scoate din şcoală vreo carte (Molda, a. 1803)
URCARIUL, III, 30[pe]-5

Diccionario de uso del español de América y España, definecea biblioteca astfel: „1. Edificio o local donde se conservan un conjunto de libros ordenados y clasificados para su consulta o préstamo bajo condiciones: la biblioteca de una escuela, la biblioteca de un museo; en la Biblioteca Nacional se conservan numerosos libros únicos y valiosos; 2. Conjunto de los libros conservados en este lugar: la Biblioteca del Congreso de Washington está compuesta por unos 18 millones de volúmenes. 3. Conjunto de libros con características comunes o que tratan de una misma materia: una biblioteca de autores clásicos; una biblioteca de derecho romano. 4. Conjunto considerable de libros que una persona posee: a lo largo de los años fue comprando libros hasta hacerse una rica y selecta biblioteca. 5. Obra en que se da cuenta de una colección de libros y de sus autores. 6. Mueble grande con estantes para colocar libros ordenados: una gran biblioteca ocupa la pared del fondo de su despacho.”

The library as we know today is a combination between the traditional library and the virtual one; it is a space with a communicative and informative role, playing an educating and civilising role, a socialising venue.

2. The Library in Antiquity

The largest library in the Ancient era is thought to be the one in Alexandria, destroyed by a devastating fire some two thousand years ago, when all the papyri contained were consumed.

“The library in Alexandria was in fact a mouseion, a library and a museum, which, around 300 B.C., used to shelter – according to some sources – around a million volumes. Actually, there were two libraries; the largest one (Braheion) was part of the mouseion, a Greek culture centre and home of scholars, following the model of the Peripatetic School in Athens; there were in excess of 500,000 volumes the roof of this centre; the latter was in the proximity of the temple in Serapis (Serapion), and was founded as an extending solution when the former proved to be too cramped.

The first collections of the library had been brought from Greece and belonged to Demetrius of Phaleron (284 B.C.). [...] The wish to increase the number of papyri was so intense that all ways of acquisition were resorted to: documents in the entire Greek or Roman world were bought, the Assyrian-Chaldean, Babylonian, and Phoenician books were translated or compiled, scribed copies the originals or transcribed the final editions. Ptolemy III (247-222 B.C.) would

8 Commissioned by the Egyptian Kings Ptolemy I Soter (323-280 B.C.), who turned Alexandria into the world’s cultural capital city; Ptolemy II Philadelphus (280-247 B.C.), and Ptolemy III.
ask all owners of libraries that left Alexandria to hand in the documents of their libraries. They even borrowed from other centres works to be copied, and some were never given back.\textsuperscript{9}

In the nineteen-eighties, UNESCO launched an architecture and design contest for a new library in Alexandria. Works started in 1995 and the building opened its doors in October 2002.

The new building is shaped like a disk tilted towards the Mediterranean Sea, evoking the image of Ra, the Egyptian sun shedding light onto the Earth, which demonstrates that in the designers' view the new library has its roots in the past and is open to the future.\textsuperscript{10}

Another important library of the Ancient world was the one in Pergamum. Located in the north-east of Asia Minor and commissioned by King Attalus I (241-197 B.C.), the library's fund grew quickly rich under the reign of King Eumenes II (197-159 B.C.). The library had over 200 thousand volumes in papyri and scrolls, ranking second in terms of size and fame to the one in Alexandria.\textsuperscript{11}


\textsuperscript{11} According to the legend, offended by the majesty of Pergamum library, the Egyptian pharaoh forbade the sale of papyri to Pergamum to reduce competition. He wanted no rival to the library in Alexandria. Krates, a Sard artist, found a solution to this issue. He produced a delicate material by treating goat's skin, which he called 'vellum' or 'Pergamum papyrus,' on which one could write easily. This was an outstanding invention at the time. Scribes and scholars used the 'vellum,' later known as 'parchment,' to enrich the collection of writings in Pergamum. The fate of books sometimes takes an ironic side: when the city fell under the Roman rule, in 133 B.C., all manuscripts in the Pergamum Library were taken to Alexandria, and were offered to Queen Cleopatra by her lover, Marc Antony. This explains why the fire that would destroy the Library of Alexandria burned the Egyptian papyrus as well the Pergamum parchment rolls. The two rival libraries of Antiquity perished together, burnt to ashes by the same spark. (Magda Cristina Ursachi, \textit{Poveste scrisă pe un pergament}, în "Jurnalul Național", 12 April 2010).

3. The Library in the Middle Ages

Even if library appeared as such in Antiquity, it was defined some time later. Hence, by the end of the Middle Ages, the humanist Justus Lipsius defined library as follows: "Bibliotheca tria significat: Locum, Amarum, Libros."\textsuperscript{12}

At that time, due to wars, libraries were housed in monastic cells. The monastic libraries contained, besides religious writings, lay ones as well, among which there were ancient works salvaged from destruction.

Monasteries were the main copying centres, where scribes (generally, monks) copied books and decorated them. Hand making books was time-consuming and required huge efforts so that only the rich and the churches could afford them.

The oldest libraries are to be found in the Muslim world, in Baghdad, during the Abbasid Caliphate (750-1258), in Cordoba during the Umayyad Caliphate (750-1031), and in Cairo under the Fatimides dynasty (909-1171).\textsuperscript{13}

Other important libraries were to be found in Byzantium, on Mount Athos and on Mount Sinai, in the monasteries Corbie, Saint-Gall, Fulda, Monte Cassino.

4. The Library in the Renaissance

During the Renaissance, libraries enjoyed the peak of their flourishing and development. Along with the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, the German Johann Gutenberg, has opened a new era in the history of world where the book, as a means of information, becomes accessible to an increasingly wider audience.


\textsuperscript{13} Denis Pallier, \textit{Bibliotecile, Traducere din franceză de Teodora Duş, Grafart, Bucureşti, 2007, p. 11}.
An important moment for libraries in this era is marked by 1537, when King Francis I passed for the first time the act of the legal deposit (i.e. the obligation for all publishers, printers, producers, to deposit each document that they publish, print, produce, providing a specific number of free copies their printed work to certain entities) with a view to endowing the royal library with a copy of each book published in France. This act was later adopted throughout the world and libraries have benefited of ever since.14

During this period, the flowing libraries developed: the Laurenziana Library in Florence (thus called in remembrance of Lorenzo the Magnificent), St Mark’s Library or Marciana, the Mazarine Library, the Ambrosiana Library (funded by Cardinal Federigo Borromeo), Matei Corvin’s [Matthias Corvinus] Library, the Library of Philip II’s in the Escorial, the Bibliotheca Vaticana of Pope Sixtus V, The Bodleian Library in Oxford (funded by Thomas Bodley), the Trinity College Library in Cambridge, etc.

Libraries during the Renaissance played a culturally multiple role; they had not only custodial, educational, and research functions but artistic ones as well as they provided the venue for musical and literary recitals, they would host art exhibitions or artistic events.

From among the outstanding representatives of the Middle Ages we mention a few names Giovanni Bocaccio (The Decameron), Machiavelli (Il Principe), Dante Aligheri (Divina Commedia), Miguel Cervantes (Don Quijote), and William Shakespeare (Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, etc.).

5. The Library Today

Catinca Agache, in Biblioteconomie – valori tradiţionale şi moderne, gives the following definition to the library of today: "1. an organised public or private collection of books and serials, manuscript of printed, of other graphic, audiovisual, electronic documents, available to be borrowed or consulted in the reading room; 2. an establishment belong to reading (if it is a legal entity) or to the specialised service of the cultural area, which, having their own location and facilities appropriate to secure optimal operations (flow of books, readers, information personnel), appropriate furniture (shelves by age categories and types of documents, reading tables, bookcases) and personnel trained in library science and information. It networks, collections of documents (organised according to specific rules and criteria) and automated data bases, by means of projects and programmes implemented via a modern, flexible management, contributes to the development of general knowledge, to supporting the Instructive – educational process, and research, to leisure pursuits, to fast access to information, to solving social problems."15

6. The Library of the Future

The increasingly faster development in the IT field has led to the conclusion that the future library is the virtual one.

By virtual library, we generally understand a "digital library that consists of collections of electronic data, accessible via a computer networks."16

The digital library means a library having the following characteristics:
- collections that do not limit to documents representing digital works already existing in the traditional format, but also new documents that cannot necessarily exist in printed format;
- the digital library provides the opportunity to consult the bibliographical descriptions as well as the total information, via the interaction between the description and the content;
- the digital library involves technologies structuring with a view to accessing the library and to link the data coming for multiple information sources and services, while the connection between various items of information is "transparent" to the user;
- the digital library is an open system that allows for the information to expand by means of new components as well;
- the digital library contains electronic catalogues that include bibliographical descriptions for monographic works (book), serials (newspapers, magazines, journals, etc.), analytical ones (serial articles, chapters in a book, etc.), rare books, audio/video materials, etc.;
- the digital library can also include descriptions of other types of artefacts (heritage

items with images or other multimedia information attached). In the digital age, the library cannot remain a mere repository of books. It should redefine its role and place in the current information context, accepting alongside books on paper, books on electronic support as well.

The virtual world of cyber-space has revolutionized the coordinates of the real world of the human being. It is obvious that, at the beginning of the XXI century, the bibliology (and consequently, the librarianship) have undergone severe changes, which were caused especially by the usage of the new Technology of Information and Communication (TIC).

The researchers of the informational phenomenon consider that this one has nowadays two main features: the implosion of the communication time and its quantitative explosion.

The digital library adds to the former one the connection between other electronic libraries and their informing services, with the purpose of universal access for the users. The virtual library does not confine itself from the text documents, hypertexts or hypermedia, and also own the so-called digital documents which cannot be represented or distributed in published form.

The objective of the virtual library is to provide and promote access to the digitalised book fund.

Libraries of the twenty-first century will be digital or will not be at all.

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