

Public Libraries:
Last Four Thousand Years

Vlasta Radan

Information and Society
Libr 200-13
February 16, 2005

Need for libraries (and eventually, for librarians) arose with development of high civilizations in Mesopotamia and Nil valley. The first, as well as many subsequent, state libraries grew from the insatiable need of state to collect, catalog and retrieve large amounts of data with which it controls the lives of its subjects. The biggest and the best funded were, and still are, the government libraries. However, their main concern is collecting of official documents and were intended to serve the wider public.

The libraries associated with schools or universities prospered mainly due to scholarly devotions of its members. The Cinderellas of this story are the public libraries. What is similar to many public libraries is that their existence relied almost exclusively on the good will and philanthropy of private citizens. Their survival was thorn somewhere between the passionate enthusiasm of few and indifference of many. But there is the more sinister reason why there should be public libraries, as Carl Sagan (1980) note in the case of Alexandrian Library:

"... there is no record... that any of its illustrious scientists and scholars ever seriously challenged the political, economic and religious assumptions of their society. The permanence of the stars was questioned; the justice of slavery was not. Science and learning in general were the preserve of a privileged few. The vast population of the city had not the vaguest notion of the great discoveries taking place within the Library. New findings were not explained or popularized. The research benefited them little. Discoveries in mechanics and steam technology were applied mainly to the perfection of weapons, the encouragement of superstition, the amusement of kings. The scientists never grasped the potential of machines to free people. The great intellectual achievements of antiquity had few immediate practical applications Science never captured the imagination of the multitude. There was no counterbalance to stagnation, to pessimism, to the most abject surrenders to mysticism. When, at long last, the mob come to burn the Library down, there was nobody to stop them." (p. 335)

- 2000s BCE** **Development of the alphabet.** Phoenician merchants from Levant developed script that was easy to learn and simple to use in everyday life. The system was so ingenious that alphabet is the most widely used form of transcribing the languages. The Latin alphabet is the most widely used alphabet script today. (Sacks, 2004; Robinson, 1999)
- 1400s BCE** **Invention of writing in China.** The inscriptions found on the Shang period oracle bones are a direct ancestor of modern Chinese script. This script uses logograms or pictograms to convey the meaning of messages. Today almost 1 billion people use some forms of Chinese script. It is the second most used script on the world. (Sacks, 2004; Robinson, 1999)
- 700s BCE** **Assurbanipal's Library in Nineveh.** Its documents consisted of clay tablets inscribed with the cuneiform script. The Library functioned as the state archive as well as a reference library for scholars. Royal librarians were already then trying to develop some ways of cataloging the documents. (Tolzmann, 2001; Harris, 1999)
- 400s BCE** **Philosophical Schools of classical Greece.** The 4th century BC saw the rise of many philosophical schools which, in return, fostered widespread literacy, book collection, and book trade. The famous scholarly libraries like one of Aristotle and his academy later enriched private libraries of Romans. (Casson, 2001; Lerner, 2001) See **Public education in Greece,**
- 300s BCE** **Library of Alexandria.** The best known library of the ancient world operated until 641 CE. Established by Ptolemy Soter (d.c.283 BCE) the library's function was to collect Greek intellectual work. The library was the part of the Museum and its primary goal was support of Hellenistic scientific research. (Sagan, 1980; Harris, 1999) See **Library in Pergamum**
- 200s BCE** **Public education in Greece.** An inscription at the coastal city of Teos describes how citizens left funds which should be spent for education of all freeborn children, boys and girls. Development of science in classical Greece would be impossible

without the widespread literacy made possible by publicly supported schools. (Casson, 2001; Britannica, 2001, History of education – Ed. in classical cultures – Ancient Greeks – Athens – Ed. of youth)

200s BCE **The Silk Road.** The power and stability of Han dynasty (206 BCE - 220 CE), whose influence reached well into central Asia enabled development of network of trade routes know as the Silk Road. The Road was used well into the 13th century CE and was the main engine of cultural exchange. (Tsien, 1962; Britannica, 2001, China's Imperial Highway)

197 BCE **Library in Pergamum** (in 133 BCE bequeathed to the Roman people). Although it never matched Alexandrian library in number of books or scholarship, Pergamum library is best known for developing a *parchment*, the primary writing surface for illuminated books of medieval Europe. (Britannica 2001, Pergamum; Casson, 2001)

100s BCE **Rise of Buddhism.** Dissemination of Buddhism in China, Tibet and Southeast Asia was followed by massive printing of religious books (*sutras*) and ephemera. Woodblock printing become primary way of book production in China and countries of their cultural influence. (Tsien, 1962; Britannica, 2001, Buddhism – Historical development – Central Asia and China)

39 BCE **Rome's first public library.** The first plans for this library were made by Julius Caesar, but Asinius Pollio brought them to completion after loot wise successful military expedition. The library become model for other Roman public libraries. Any Roman citizen had free access to the books (papyrus scrolls). (Casson, 2001; Britannica, 2001, Pergamum) See **Philosophical Schools of classical Greece**

105 **Invention of paper.** Although there are indications that paper was used at least from the 1st century BCE, improvement of the process developed by Ts'ai Lun (d.121 CE) is recognized as official "birth" of papermaking. Cultural ramification of this invention parallel the development of printing press in Europe. (Tsien, 1962; Britannica, 2002, Papermaking process – Historical development)

- 622 Birth of Islam.** In the heart of Islamic religion is the book – *Koran*. Reading and copying of which is sacred responsibility of every believer. That notion was underpinning of public education, academic research and opening of public libraries. Arabic script is the third most widely used script on the world. (Sacks, 2003; Robinson, 1999) See **Muslim control of Spain**
- 689 Umayyads open first public library in Islamic world.** Learning was a big part of the Islamic civilization. Subsequent Islamic dynasties actively supported academic study and founding of libraries creating "connecting link between the learning of classical Greece and the Renaissance of western Europe". (Johnson, 1965, p.97; Bloom, 2001)
- 710 Muslim control of Spain** (until 1492). The paper technology entered into Europe through the Spain, where European scholars come into the contact with their own Hellenistic roots as well as learning of Islamic scholars. Libraries and translation schools of Cordoba become corner stones in the budding European civilization. (Lerner, 2001; Bloom, 2001) See **European Renaissance**
- 751 Introduction of papermaking in Islamic world.** Ziyad ibn Salih, governor of Samarqand organized first papermaking production in city obtaining the secret of the craft from Chinese prisoners of war. Technology spread rapidly through the Islamic lands, replacing papyrus and parchment as writing surface. (Johnson, 1965, Bloom, 2001) See **Invention of paper, The Silk Road.**
- 771 Japan's first open-access library** (until 828). Founded by Isonokami no Yakatsugu (729-81), a poet and government official. After retirement he converted his residence in a temple and library where books could be freely access by "any who wished". (Kornicki, 2001) See **Free public library.**
- 1100s Islamic waqf libraries.** Charitable endowment - *waqf* - was often used for establishing libraries and public schools (*madrasas*). These institutions were open to public, but were predominantly stacked with religious books. (Lerner, 2001, Bloom, 2001)

- 1154 Introduction of paper to Europe.** The first documented papermaking establishment in Europe is in Fabriano, Italy. Introduction of paper made book production much cheaper books just in time for rise of universities and humanistic movement of renaissance. (Bloom, 2001; Hunter, 1978) See **European Renaissance, Gutenberg's printing press**
- 1200s European Renaissance.** The central idea of the movement - *humanism* - which put the man in the center of the attention of the research. In search of books on classical Greek science, scholars all over the Europe traveled to Spain and Middle East opening the new perspectives on the world. (Britannica, 2001, Renaissance; Lerner 2001) See **Introduction of paper in Europe, Crusaders of loot Constantinople**
- 1204 Crusaders loot Constantinople.** After the collapse of Western Roman Empire, Byzantine libraries were the last depositories of ancient Greek books. The libraries looted by crusaders of 4th crusade find their way to Italy and were "more important than any other single factor in bringing about the Renaissance" (Johnson, 1965, p.87; Jackson 1974) See **European Renaissance**
- 1450 Gutenberg's printing press with movable type.** Johannes Gutenberg was not the first to think out movable type, or invent paper or even screw press, he was the first to put all this technologies together creating probably the most powerful tool of book production and wide dissemination of literacy. (Britannica, 2001, Johannes Gutenberg; Eisenstein, 1983)
- 1500s Reformation movement.** Shattering the intellectual monopoly of Catholic church in intellectual research and education, Reformation enabled the development of modern European civilization. Translations of Bible to vernaculars directly encouraged development and spread of popular literature. (Britannica, 2001, Reformation; Eisenstein, 1983) See **Gutenberg's printing press**
- 1600s Enlightenment.** European intellectual movement celebrating *reason* which empowered man to understand the universe and control his own condition. The

ideal rational man pursued knowledge, freedom and happiness as its primal goal. Public libraries are the children of enlightened perception of the society. (Britannica, 2001, Enlightenment; Eisenstein, 1983)

- 1653 Free public library in UK.** Humphrey Chetham, Esq. (1580-1653), from Manchester, willed up the funds for establishing and stocking of the library "for scholars and others well effected" (Davies, 1974, p.1) It exist at its original site and is it still the full functioning, free of charge public library. (Chetham's Library 2005, Home Page)
- 1700s *Kashinon'ya* – commercial lending libraries.** A the beginning part of the bookseller trade but during later centuries *kashinon'ya* become independent enterprise. This was how popular literature was disseminated among the general population. The system was so popular that persisted well into the 19th century. (Kornicki, 2001) See **Itinerating libraries**
- 1725 Circulating library.** Established by poet Allan Ramsay (1686-1758) in Edinburgh it was the first of its kind in UK. Although accused by many for spoiling the minds of lower classes, Ramsey was part of wider movement of Scottish enlightenment. (Young, 1965; Herman, 2001) See **Carnegie Libraries**
- 1731 Library Company of Philadelphia.** Evolving from the *Junto* club it was "the mother of all the North American subscription libraries." according to his creator Benjamin Franklin (1726-1752). It still exist as non-profit independent research library and archive. (Lerner, 2001; LCP 2005, Home page)
- 1789 Declaration of the rights of man.** This, more than any other document, opened the society to all people regardless to their origin, race or religion. The notion of free citizenry which are involved in matters of state became the important intellectual base in establishing and founding of public libraries. (Britannica 2001, Declaration of the rights of man; Lerner 2001)
- 1800 Library of Congress.** One of the largest National depository libraries on the world. The biggest impact on the USA public libraries was in devising the LC

- card system and coordinating the development of unified MARC electronic encoding system for electronic exchange of catalog records among libraries. (Britannica 2001, Library of Congress; Meadow, 2000)
- 1823 Liverpool Female Apprentices' Library.** Established the same year as its male counterpart it was dedicated to professional and scholarly books. It must be observed that many member withdrew its subscription upon finding that there are no novels in library funds. It was a library with exclusively female membership. (Davies, 1974; <http://www.r-alston.co.uk/subname.htm>)
- 1850 Tax-supported public libraries.** The English Parliament passed the bill in both houses that permitted boroughs in England and Wales to levy "a half-penny in the pound tax" for construction and operation of public libraries. However, enacting on legislation was left to a initiative of individual towns. (Davies, 1974; Lerner, 2001)
- 1852 Public library service.** The Trustees of the Boston Public Library published their *Report* which formulated the function of libraries as essential part of free public education. Based on the ideas of Enlightenment and French Revolution educated public was seen as foundation of democracy. (Harris, 1999; Rubin, 2000)
- 1873 Dewey Decimal System.** The one of two of most widely used American public library classification systems. It was devised by Melvil Dewey (1851-1931) who advocated "free school and free public library" as the most important tools for social improvement. (Rubin, 2000; Lerner 2001)
- 1886-1919 Carnegie Libraries.** Andrew Carnegie (1835-1919) donated founds for 2,509 library buildings in English speaking countries. The town which wished to receive founds for the library building must promise that it will pass the tax ordinance which income would support stacking and maintaining the library. (Davies, 1974; Bobinski, 1969)
- 1887 The Pomona Public Library and Floral Association.** The founded by group of women the library occupied room in an office building and had twenty members.

After the Civil War women's clubs often founded and staffed public libraries. (Davies, 1974; Rubin, 2000)

1939 Library Bill of Rights in USA. Acting on the pressure to control contents of books available in libraries ALA formulated 6 articles which proclaim right to books, intellectual freedom, free access and use of library facilities for public meetings. In 1967. Several other countries adopted similar library policies. (Lerner, 2001; Rubin, 2000)

1977 Apple II. Computers have their roots in encoding technology of WWII but the Computer Age come with the small mass-produced pre-assembled computers of Apple Company started in suburban garage. As with the printing press and invention of paper, consequence of this invention are global. (Britannica 2001, Personal Computer; CyberStreet.com, 2001, apple2.htm)

1991 Creation of World Wide Web. After development of the alphabetical scripts, WWW is the most revolutionary way of dealing with storage and access, and general exchange of information. It could be seen as the ultimate public library. (Meadow, 2000; Lerner 2001)

2000s Closing of "digital divide". It seems that everything changed with arrival of WWW and digitalization of information. But the main purpose of public libraries is as same as ever: providing affordable access to general public thus empowering them to make responsible decisions for themselves and society as the whole. (Gates Foundation, 2005, Global Libraries; Lerner 2001)

Reference

- Bloom, J. M. (2001). *Paper before print: The history and impact of paper in the Islamic world*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Bobinski, G.S. (1969). *Carnegie libraries: Their history and impact on American public library development*. Chicago: American Library Association.
- Buchan, J. (2003). *Crowded with genius: The Scottish enlightenment : Edinburgh's moment of the mind*. New York: HarperCollinsPublishers.
- Casson, L. (2001). *Libraries in the ancient world*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- Chetham's Library. (Last update: February 7, 2005). *Home Page*. Retrieved February 10, 2005, from: <http://www.chethams.org.uk/>
- CyberStreet.com, I. (2001). *The Apple II the first mass market microcomputer*. Retrieved February 10, 2005, from: <http://www.cyberstreet.com/hcs/museum/apple2.htm>
- Davies, D.W. (1974). *Public libraries as culture and social centers: The origin of the concept*. Metuchen: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Eisenstein, E. L. (1983). *The printing revolution in early modern Europe*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Encyclopedia Britannica*. (1994-2001). [CD-ROM] also from: www.britanica.com
- Gates Foundation, M. and B. (2005). *Global libraries*. Retrieved February 10, 2005, from: <http://www.gatesfoundation.org/Libraries/>
- Harris, M. H. (1999). *History of libraries in the western world* (5th ed.). Lanham and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Herman, A. (2001). *How the Scots invented the modern world* (Paperback ed.). New York: Three Rivers Press.
- HQ Papermaker Ltd, (2005) *All About Paper*. Retrieved February 10, 2005, from <http://www.hqpapermaker.com/paper.htm>
- Hunter, D. (1978). *Papermaking: The history and technique of an ancient craft*. New York: Dover Publications, Inc.
- Jackson, S. L. (1974). *Libraries and librarianship in the west: A brief history*: McGraw-Hill, Inc.

- Johnson, E. D. (1965). *A History of libraries in the western world* (1st ed.). New York and London: The Scarecrow Press, Inc.
- Kornicki, P. (2001). *The book in Japan: A cultural history from the beginnings to the nineteenth century* (Paperback ed.). Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
- Library Company of Philadelphia, (2005). *Home page*. Retrieved February 10, 2005, from: <http://www.librarycompany.org/>
- Meadow, Charles T., Boyce, Bert R., and Kraft, Donald H. (2000). *Text information retrieval systems*. San Diego: Academic Press
- Robinson, A. (1999). *The story of writing* (Paperback ed.). New York: Thames & Hudson, Inc.
- Rubin, R.E. (2000). *Foundations of library and information science*. New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers.
- Sacks, D. (2004). *Letter perfect: The marvelous history of our alphabet from A to Z* (paperback ed.) Random House: Broadway Books.
- Sagan, C. (1980). *Cosmos*. New York: Random House, Inc.
- Tolzman, D. H.; Hessel A. and Peiss R.. (2001). *The memory of mankind: The story of libraries since the dawn of history*. New Castle, DE: Oak Knoll Press.
- Tsien, T.-H. (1962). *Written on bamboo and silk: The beginnings of Chinese books and inscriptions*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Young, D. (1965). *Edinburgh in the age of Sir Walter Scot*. University of Oklahoma press: Norman.