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Towards a Comparative Study of Libraries in the Manuscript Age

In a general sense, the word 'library' denotes a 'place set apart to contain books for reading, study or reference', and, by extension, the 'books contained in a "library"'.[1] Collecting and storing books in a 'place set apart', whether a shelf or a niche in a wall, may have started soon after the first books were produced. However, evidence for such places only dates back to the middle of the third millennium BCE, when the archaeological record shows first traces of them both in Egypt and Mesopotamia, for the latter in close relationship to scribal archives.[2] Even if their relationship to archives (literary 'books' vs. administrative 'documents') is not as straightforward as today's institutions make believe,[3] there is little doubt that the history of libraries covers more than four millennia.

Libraries were established and maintained by individuals, such as rulers, priests, scribes and scholars, or by institutions, such as states, temples, monasteries and families. Access was more often limited than not; the public libraries of ancient Greek or Roman cities seem to constitute the exception to the rule prior to modern times. Depending on the size and purpose of collections, various tools for using them were created, ranging from the spatial arrangement of the items to inventories and eventually catalogues listing them, often according to an order based on size, content or other factors. In many cases, these catalogues are the only remains of what once had been impressive collections.

The Chinese case may serve as an example: smaller collections, both official and private, certainly existed long before 26 BCE when the imperial book collection was enlarged by an official call for submitting writings to the Han court. This collection was then examined and edited, resulting in a catalogue. Eighty percent of what it lists has been lost, much of it probably already during the burning of the imperial palace in 23 CE.[4] In 583, an influential friend and high official of the first Emperor of the Sui (r. 581–604) advised him to follow the Han precedent by collecting books and creating a great imperial library in his new capital Luoyang. He mentioned

1 Oxford English Dictionary online <https://www.oed.com> (accessed on 5 November 2022).
2 See the contributions in Ryholt and Barjamovic 2019; see also Clancier 2009; Haikal 2008.
3 For Greco-Roman Egypt, see Fournet 2018, 194–195.
4 Fölster 2016.

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four more 'book catastrophes' in addition to the fire of 23 CE,[5] but probably did not imagine that in 622, most of the new collection would sink in the Yellow River on the ships transporting it to Chang'an, the capital of the Tang (618–907). Its catalogue was damaged and had to be complemented by earlier ones. Both catalogues, transmitted in revised versions in the official histories of the Han and the Sui, have become major sources for reconstructing literary production and the history of textual transmission, not much different to traditions in other regions. In addition, we know about large private libraries which have been dispersed or destroyed, but left traces in literary sources. Complete inventories and catalogues of such libraries in China are extant from the twelfth century on.[6]

Although many libraries may originally have served rather practical purposes, such as divination, medicine or the art of war, once teaching extended beyond mere acquisition of the art of reading and writing and included literary texts, schools would build small collections as well. When erudition and scholarship came to be valued as domains of knowledge in their own right, libraries became the major habitat for scholarly activities, whether official or private. The library of Alexandria is certainly the best-known and most studied among the book collections of the ancient world: established in the third century BCE by the first Ptolemies as a universal library, it was meant to contain a copy of every book in the world. Its head librarians were philologists creating tools and methods for editing, cataloguing and textual criticism, which survived in Byzantium well into the early modern period.[7] It is perhaps no accident that two centuries later, the examination of the Chinese imperial book collection also led to the development of tools and methods for establishing texts.[8] Therefore, what has been said about the nature of libraries in the Ancient Mediterranean may also apply to those in the Far East:

> Ancient libraries were created by political and military power, and there is no sign that they powered the development of any kind of intellectual activity independent of it. The librarians of Alexandria and Rome alike were royal or imperial appointments. Most of those we know to have used these libraries were drawn from the ruling elites of the Empire.[9]

5 Dudbridge 2000.

6 See McDermott 2006, 51.

7 There exists a huge body of literature on this library; in addition to the classic by Luciano Canfora 1990, see Bagnall 2002 for a critical review of sources, and Rico and Dan 2017 for a recent attempt to complement previous scholarship.

8 For a comparison of both libraries, see Nylan 2018.

9 Woolf 2013, 6–7.

According to archaeological evidence, the palace libraries of Assurbanipal (669–*c.* 630 BCE) at Niniveh held about 5,000 scholarly clay tablets; the library of Alexandria may have housed 40,000 scrolls at the time of Caesar,[10] and the imperial book collection of the Han had a little more than 13,000 scrolls a few decades later.[11] It was, thus, similar in size to the library of Celsus in Ephesus, that was built to store 12,000 scrolls in 117–120 CE.[12] The latter was the private collection of a high-ranking official, held about 4,000 scrolls at the end of the second century and was probably one of the largest of its kind. Since the length of scrolls, whether papyrus or bamboo and silk, and the quantity of content may vary to a significant degree and is certainly different to the number of characters written on clay tablets, we do not have enough evidence for comparing the numbers of characters or words they contained. Concerning the physical task of storing such quantities of written artefacts, however, the challenges may have been similar.

The victory of Christianity in Western Europe put an end to the large public libraries in Greek and Roman cities, founded by rich citizens, such as Celsus. For almost a millennium, churches and monasteries were the only places for storing books, in most cases not more than a few dozen of the new codex book form, which could be kept in a box. While there is nothing known about the size of Sasanian and early ʿAbbāsid 'Houses of Wisdom',[13] we do again have figures for China: a late source reports that the Liang court collections comprised 140,000 scrolls, and those of the Sui 370,000 scrolls. The part of the Sui Imperial Library shipped on the Yellow River in 622 amounted to almost 90,000 scrolls. Under the Tang (618–907), the Academy of Assembled Worthies alone is said to have held a similar number of scrolls in 731, surpassing that of the Imperial Library by some tens of thousands.[14] The biggest private library of the late eight century held 20,000 scrolls.[15] Buddhist monasteries in the capital housed various versions of the Buddhist canon with up to 5,000 scrolls.[16]

Islamic libraries figure somewhere in between the small collections in the West and the huge libraries in the East. While legendary figures, reaching two million books, are reported for the universal libraries of the caliphs of Baghdad, Cordoba and Cairo, the first comprehensive list of Arabic book titles, the *Fihrist*, compiled from various collections in the tenth century, lists about 10,000 works

10 For Niniveh, see Finkel, 2019, 369, quoting Weidner 1953; for Alexandria, see Bagnall 2002, 351–356.
11 See Fölster 2016, 72.
12 See Grünbart 2018, 321.
13 See Gutas 1998, 53–60.
14 See McDermott 2006, 49–53, 213–214, n. 16.
15 See McDermott 2006, 50–51, 214, n. 25.
16 See Wang Xiang 2014; for Japan up to 1600, see Kornicki 1998, 362–412.

of about 2,000 authors.[17] However, it does not provide numbers of codicological units. The famous Fatimid palace library was sold by Saladin at auctions, with a considerable part going to al-Qāḍī al-Fāḍil, head of the Fatimid chancery and later Saladin's vizier. In 1184–1185, the bibliophile vizier endowed parts of his collection to a madrasa he had founded in Cairo, and others went to his heirs. In the early thirteenth century, 68,000 volumes are said to have been confiscated from them, in order to fill the newly established palace library. After checking them, 11,800 were returned to the heirs, probably because they were duplicates. Other high officials of the Ayyubids are reported to have owned libraries consisting of 10,000 or 20,000 volumes.[18] Under Mamluk rule, Syrian and Egyptian cities experienced the development of a tight network of local libraries only in the thirteenth century. These libraries were not only part of madrasas and mosques, but also of other institutions, such as hospitals, the different types of Ṣūfī convents and mausoleums.[19] The larger of these endowed and private libraries held some thousand volumes and, in exceptional cases, up to 7,000.[20] Most of the libraries in the Ottoman empire had collections of fewer than 500 books up to the middle of the seventeenth century. After the accidental founding of a library independent of religious institutions in 1678, libraries grew in size but apparently never exceeded those of the Mamluks before the reforms of the nineteenth century.[21]

In 1594, after Moroccan troops of the Saadian ruler Aḥmad al-Manṣūr had pillaged Timbuktu and brought their booty, including scholars and books, to their capital Marrakech, the famous scholar Aḥmad Bābā (1556–1627) reportedly complained: 'I had the smallest library of any of my kin, and they seized 1,600 volumes'.[22] Contrary to the situation in other parts of the Islamic world, there were no endowed libraries in Northern Nigeria, but only private and family collections, the most famous ones being those of Timbuktu.[23]

In the early seventeenth century, a royal library was established in Thanjavur by Ragunātha, the last ruler of the Nāyakara (r. 1600–1623).[24] It is described by a contemporary as a huge hall where the employees and accountants of the palace

17 See Behrens-Abouseif 2019, 5; see Hirschler 2020, 10–12 on different purposes of *fihrists*.

18 See Behrens-Abouseif 2019, 7–14.

19 Quoted from Hirschler 2016, 135; during the Ayyubid and Mamluk periods, there were more than seventy mausoleum libraries, see Hirschler 2016, 141.

20 See Behrens-Abouseif 2019, 46–50.

21 See Erünsal 2008, 45–47, 77.

22 Hunwick 1999, 315.

23 See Last 2011, 197–199; and the other contributions in Krätli and Lydon 2011 for other parts of West Africa.

24 For this library, see Wujastyk 2007.

carry out their duties. Although we do not have figures, this library is the only one from that time in South India which has survived until today and is still active, albeit as a public library. The number of its manuscripts has grown considerably in the course of the twentieth century by adding books from the families of pandits. In 2005, the Sanskrit books numbered:

Palm-leaf manuscripts:	18,877
Paper manuscripts:	21,068
Prints:	14,186

We know next to nothing about libraries in the subcontinent from earlier times, let alone their size.[25]

This random survey of the size of libraries in the pre-industrial age is far from complete and represents mainly collections of the ruling elites, since we do not have sufficient data for other social groups. Even if some of the figures may not be wholly reliable and the relationship between codicological and textual units is not always clear,[26] the results point to a threshold of thirty or forty thousand units for a large library, which is rarely exceeded, and if so, only in imperial or royal collections usually consisting of more than one repository. This number did not change substantially even after the advent of print and the spread of the hall library in Western Europe: the Herzog August Bibliothek in Wolfenbüttel housed 36,000 volumes at the end of the seventeenth century, most of them prints.[27]

With very few exceptions, such as the reconstructed façade of the library of Celsus in Ephesus, the buildings housing the book collections of the ancient world have perished completely, including their contents. While book collections from later centuries have sometimes survived more or less complete, the buildings containing them today are usually no older than Renaissance times in the Latin West, such as the one of the Abbey Library of St Gall. Addressing monastic libraries in the Latin West, a publication from 2011 claims:

> While the history of textual transmission and the history of libraries as book collections seem to have been studied to a useful degree, the state of research on the history of libraries as spaces or buildings for housing books can only be called miserable.[28]

25 See Delhey 2015 for manuscripts surviving from a twelfth-century Buddhist monastery and Cort 2013 on later Jain libraries.

26 For the cultural meaning of binding booklets into composite volumes see Hirschler 2020, 115–145.

27 See Eisen 2011, 284

28 Wischermann 2011, 93.

This statement about the lack of research on the spaces where books are collected probably holds true for most cultures before the industrial age.[29] However, there are noteworthy exceptions including the Mamluk libraries[30] and the Southern Song Imperial Library.[31]

The state-of-the-art of studying 'the library' in West European languages is, albeit unintentionally, nicely illustrated by the introduction to a thousand-page volume titled *Die Bibliothek – The Library – La Bibliothèque*. Thirty-nine articles deal mainly with the medieval and early modern periods in the Latin West and its afterlife, including 'virtual libraries'. The introductory article 'Die Bibliothek – Denkräume und Wissensordnungen' discloses the limits of this enterprise only at its very end:

> That the volume has its limitations is obvious, but not surprising if one assumes an understanding of a science by human standards, given the subject matter. This is most evident in the primarily occidental view of the library. We are aware of this. However, the fact that there are not more insights into libraries of other languages and cultures is not least due to their size. You cannot enter all the rooms of a library at the same time! However, the doors are open.[32]

The 'primarily occidental view of the library' and the regret of not providing 'more insights into libraries of other languages and cultures' are euphemisms, especially when combined with the excuse that this neglect owes much to their extent. This remark is the last paragraph of the introduction of ten and a half pages. There is only one very technical article on an Arabic anthology and one on colonial libraries in South America in the volume, but – 'the doors are open'.

Research on libraries, thus, corresponds to that on other domains of history. In Western languages, there is a plethora of studies on 'the Ancient World' and Latin Western Europe,[33] followed by those on Byzantium[34] and, in growing numbers, on the Islamic world, but little on Orthodox Eastern Europe, Sub-Saharan Africa, the Indic world, East Asia and South-east Asia. Scholarship has focused mainly on the history of scholarship, namely, individual collections and their contents, and on the history of libraries in a certain region or during a particular period. On the other hand, research on East Asian libraries has been

29 There are exceptions, of course, even for the Latin West; see, for example, Coqueugniot 2013, 43–55; Lehmann 1996; the contributions in Nerdinger 2011; and Staikos 2017; for the Ancient Nr East, see Ryholt and Barjamovic 2019, 44–50.

30 See Hirschler 2016, 60–101; Behrens-Abouseif 2019, 52–70.

31 See Winkelmann 1974, 15–18.

32 Speer 2020, XXV.

33 See Staikos 2004–2013 for a six-volume history of the library in Western Civilization.

34 For recent scholarship on Byzantine libraries, see Grünbart 2018, 320–321.

done mostly in the region and published in the region's languages.[35] A linguistic barrier, therefore, keeps different cultural and scholarly traditions separated, complicating exchange, comparison and knowledge about 'the library'.

Comparative studies of libraries are rare. There are promising attempts for the ancient world,[36] and volumes on the 'power' of libraries, their relationship to knowledge and political power.[37] In some cases, studies devoted to only one region also include comparative aspects.[38] An attempt has been made to collect terms for manuscript collections used in different cultures,[39] and a systematic approach to describe such collections has been suggested.[40]

Topics for future cross-cultural enquiry seem obvious:[41]

- Typology of collections, relationship to archives; more specialised collections: tomb libraries (Egypt, China); libraries attached to mausoleums (Celsus, Islamic world), etc.
- Intended purposes of collecting
- Legal status of collections
- Spatial and material dimensions
- Organisation of collections: staff, tools and routines
- Classifying and cataloguing
- Acquisition, selection, censorship
- Access to collections: to whom? For which purpose: reading, copying, lending?
- Environment of institutions and practices
- Loss and decay
- Concepts of time, memory, or history that are implied

Similar to the 'medieval period' or 'Middle Ages', the 'manuscript age' is not a well-defined term either in scope or time. It serves to distinguish the 'Gutenberg galaxy', with its hallmark of typographically and mass-produced printed 'books', from an earlier, supposedly imperfect stage of knowledge production and trans-

35 For China, see the three-volume history of libraries of Ren Jiyu 2001.

36 See König, Oikonomopoulou and Woolf 2013; Ryholt and Barjamovic 2019; also see Too 2010 for a more theoretical approach.

37 See Baratin and Jacob 1996; Lehmann 2018; also the section on libraries and databases in Jacob 2007, 605–704.

38 For China, see McDermott 2006, 118–126; Nylan 2018; Stackmann 1990.

39 See Delhey, Lorusso et al. 2015.

40 Fölster, Karolewski et al. 2015.

41 The following list is partially inspired by Friedrich 2018, 430–439.

mission by 'manuscripts'.[42] This approach is influenced by the Western European experience and still prevails in the field of book history. However, as soon as other traditions are taken into account, the picture looks rather different. Print only started playing a decisive role in the course of the nineteenth century in large parts of the Islamic world, in many cases, giving preference to lithography and offset over moveable type. Manuscript production in West Africa continued well into the twentieth century,[43] and it is still active in Laos today.[44] On the other hand, printing with wooden blocks may have been invented as early as 700 CE in China and had spread there increasingly since the tenth century. This did not, however, mean that manuscripts ceased to be produced, on the contrary, only up to ten percent of the holdings of the large libraries in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries mentioned above were printed. Printed books were still expensive, and scholars continued copying texts for their personal collections, until technological advancement in the sixteenth century led to greater affordability.[45] In the twelfth century, manuscripts and prints were housed separately in the building complex of the Imperial Library of the Southern Song (1127–1279) because handwritten books were still held in higher esteem than printed ones.[46] Although printing with moveable type had already been described in the eleventh century, it apparently did not play a major role until much later.[47]

Against this backdrop, the clear-cut line between a 'manuscript age' and a 'print age' becomes blurred, even if one ignores the technological differences between printing with wood blocks or stones and with moveable type. It does not make sense to define the first appearance of printed books as borderline, since this would exaggerate the role they had. It has been observed that manuscripts continued to be produced and used, even in Western Europe, long after the first printing presses had been established.[48] In the present volume, therefore, the 'manuscript age' is used in a heuristic manner for the period when manuscripts were still the dominant medium, ranging from the tenth century for China to the twentieth century for West Africa.[49]

42 The concept of the 'manuscript age' was used by Franz Rosenthal (1947, passim) in a seminal publication to specifically define the manuscript transmission of knowledge in the Islamic world.

43 See the contributions in Reese 2022.

44 See Grabowsky 2019 for contemporary libraries.

45 McDermott 2006, 54, 25–39; see McDermott 2011 for precise figures on large private libraries in the province Jiangxi under the Song.

46 Winkelmann 1974, 34–35.

47 See Heijdra 2004, 101–102; McDermott 2006, 13.

48 See Bouza 2001.

49 For China, see Drège 1991; for West Africa see Last 2011.

The aim of this volume, *Libraries in the Manuscript Age*, is to present and examine, through a dozen studies, the nature and functions of various libraries in the Islamic World, East and South Asia, Byzantium and Western Europe, from the third until the eighteenth century.[50] The different papers show convergences, although they deal with very different cultural areas. The association of libraries with places of power stands out clearly (de Castilla, Drège, Kopp, Pérez Martín, Seyller, Smits), more so than that which links them to religious institutions (Colas, Drège, Pérez Martín, Smits). Under these conditions, knowledge often remained confidential, since imperial, royal or princely libraries were not open to the majority of the population. Was access easier in other cases? This question is undoubtedly more difficult to study due to the lack of documents; nevertheless, Pérez Martín concludes that monastery libraries were not accessible, and the texts analysed by Déroche and Tahali show a very clear desire to restrict access to the books to members of the same family. Verger, on the other hand, proposes a broader vision of medieval Europe that made access to books a key to the emergence of a new form of knowledge.

Power and knowledge are also associated in another way, that of the control that the former exercised over the content of the latter. Smits, thus, questions which works were selected and which were kept aside, while Bossina evokes an imperial project of an ideal library marked strongly by symbolic considerations. As we read on, we discover the extent to which our knowledge depends not on the books themselves but on crucial but peripheral information: catalogues (Drège, Smits, Verger), loan lists (Pérez Martín, Kopp) or lists of librarians (Seyller), inscriptions and buildings (Colas). It is, therefore, through a strategy of circumvention that we can reconstruct manuscript libraries which were established to protect the books that were deposited there, but did not fulfil the wishes of their founders, since their holdings have not been preserved. Conversely, the contributions of de Castilla and Déroche and Tahali stand out for the place reserved for

50 The idea of the conference that gave rise to this volume arose from the problems posed by the typological diversity within a comparable chronological horizon and the same society that the members of the ERC project 670628 SICLE (Saadian Intellectual and Cultural Life), devoted largely to the study of Moroccan libraries during the Saadian period (sixteenth to early seventeenth century), had identified: the Sultanian library of Mūlāy Zaydān (r. 1603–1623) in Marrakech, now preserved in San Lorenzo de El Escorial (Déroche, de Castilla, and Tahali 2022); that which the sultan's father, Aḥmad al-Manṣūr (r. 1578–1603), had endowed the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez (Déroche and Tahali 2022); and finally a library of scholars, the Bannānī, of slightly later creation (Déroche and Tahali in this volume). Faced with the methodological questions raised, the members of the project wanted to open up the reflection and move away from a geographical and cultural compartmentalized approach in order to reflect on the nature and challenges of libraries in different areas.

manuscripts that have been preserved to the present day, even though the libraries of which they were originally part have disappeared.

The formation of the library often involves, as has been pointed out earlier, the copying of earlier works (Bossina, Déroche and Tahali) and, once constituted, they represent a source for the transmission of texts, as Nebbiai shows for Western Europe in her contribution of this volume. This case can be brought closer to the famous example of Ibn Khaldūn, who had deposited a fine copy of his *Kitāb al-ʿIbār* in the library of the Qarawiyyin mosque in Fez to serve as an exemplar for those who wished to make a copy.[51] This aspect was, therefore, not ignored by the authors, who saw it as part of a publication process.

The fact remains that libraries and books were still exposed to disappearances and displacements. The very real human experience of the fragility of books – mainly manuscripts – no doubt explains why, despite the precautions taken and in particular the creation of libraries to house them, a certain pessimism may have taken hold.

In this volume, the juxtaposition of case studies that are distant from each other in time and space brings out contrasts but also suggestive similarities. Thus, even before the word became popular, encyclopaedic ambitions were present in the design of some libraries. Several of them, not by chance, were the result of a prince's project: they were mirrors of the world through the accumulation of knowledge or the selection of works representative of universal knowledge; in all cases, the latter belonged to the prince who made it a symbolic manifestation of his power. In contrast to these prestigious libraries (or libraries of prestige?), modest collections played a decisive role in the transmission of texts and the spread of knowledge. Limited by the means available to their owners, they reflect the interests of an era or a category of readers through the choices they made. For their part, the answers given to the question of access to these different collections are very mixed, but it emerges that consulting their books was not an easy task. The approach that we had chosen has, therefore, borne fruit and the articles gathered here seem to us to show its fruitfulness to the reader.

51 Ibn Khaldūn, *Kitāb al-ʿIbār*, manuscript Fez, Qarawiyyin Library, 1266; Lévi-Provençal 1923, 161–168.

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