

Greek and Roman Libraries between Power, Social Conventions, and Religion

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The articles published here were papers read at an international conference about “Repositories of Learning and Religion? Religious and Non-Religious Aspects of Ancient and Medieval Material and Virtual Libraries” held at the Museo dei Fori Imperiali e Mercati Traianei in Rome in October 2018.

I cordially thank Lucrezia Ungaro, Roberto Meneghini and the Sovrintendente Claudio Parisi Presicce for their hospitality in allowing us to hold this conference in the rooms of the Mercati di Traiano, Museo dei Fori Imperiali in Rome.

The conference was organised by the research unit “Repositories of Knowledge” of the Collaborative Research Centre “Education and Religion in Cultures of the Mediterranean and Its Environment from Ancient to Medieval Times and to Classical Islam” (SFB 1136), funded by the DFG.

The central question of the colloquium was the relationship between education and religion in ancient libraries and collections of knowledge. Further contributions from ancient historians, religious historians and medievalists examined late antique and early medieval collections of knowledge from this perspective.

Unfortunately, it is not possible to publish the studies together across eras, which would have been very attractive. Therefore, the archaeological contributions are now presented here. The remaining contributions given at the colloquium will be published in the “Seraphim” series by Mohr-Siebeck: Libraries, Handbooks and Encyclopaedias (in print).

After this introduction to the topic and its problems in the archaeological record Kerstin Rausch (Göttingen) discusses Roman libraries and their sacred and profane contexts in heuristic comparison pairs. The libraries in the sanctuaries of Asclepius at Epidaurus, Kos and Pergamon show limited sacred association, while libraries at the Agora of Athens, in the public area of Dyrrachium and at the view point of the main street of ancient Ephesus show some or no sacred reference. In this rather diffuse picture, the profane sphere seems to dominate over the sacral sphere in relation to the libraries.

Roberto Meneghini (Rome) reports the latest excavation results and their interpretation of the libraries of the Fori Imperiali between Vespasian and Trajan.

Vespasina created an architectural contest oriented towards the Mouseion of Alexandria in the Templum Pacis. The library, by the exhibition of the spolia from the triumph of Titus, became a place of identification for the Jews in the diaspora. For a short time, the Bibliotheca Pacis, together with the library in the Atrium Libertatis, formed the cultural poles of the forum area as well by their sculpture collections, until the latter had to give way in favor of Trajan's forum. It is worth noting that the ancient authors speak not only of the bibliotheca Ulpia (*Historia Augusta*) but also of the bibliotheca Templi Traiani (Gellius). Recent excavations under the Palazzo Valentini have revealed three auditoria adjoining the area of Trajan's Column where the Bibliotheca Templi Traiani could more plausibly be located than at the sides of Trajan's Column. In any case, the library served primarily as an archive and legal knowledge depot for the courts that worked in the Basilica Ulpia.

Despite the fact that the publication of the 2018 colloquium has been delayed for far too long, the topic is still rather controversial. This is shown by the archaeological texts here, but even more in comparison with the studies devoted to later periods. Therefore, the publication of the original contributions is still worthwhile.

The Ancient Libraries: Memory and Repository of Knowledge for Rulers, Elites and Society and the 'Embedded Religion'¹

Public libraries seem to have existed in Greece since Hellenism. Pergamon and especially Alexandria competed with each other. These libraries were founded at the same time by the local ruling dynasties in pagan sanctuaries. Although the Alexandrian library has not yet been located or excavated, ancient authors report that it was situated in the sanctuary of the Muses,² while that of Pergamon was in the sanctuary of Athena.³ The early public libraries were also at the same time the knowledge repositories of the rulers and they were assigned to the sacred area.

¹ Rausch 2024 (in print) gives the complete bibliography and a profound survey for all libraries under discussion here. Therefore, I can limit the references here to the most important and recent contributions. Some general bibliography for ancient Greek and Roman libraries: Casson 2001; Hoepfner 2002; Strocka 2012; König / Oikonomopoulou / Woolf 2013; Coqueugniot 2013b; Houston 2014; Bätz 2020. See also the contributions of R. Meneghini, K. Rausch in this volume.

² Strabo 17,1,8. Caruso 2016, 280–298; Rausch 2024 (in print) summarizes the discussion and gives the latest literature.

³ Strocka 2000, 155–165; Coqueugniot 2013a, 109–123.

In the Middle Ages, the libraries belonged to the monasteries and were therefore part of the sacred world, as places of religious education and research. At the same time, with their scriptoria, they made it possible to transmit at least part of ancient literature. The intellectual interest of the clergy was aimed at religious aspects as well as at the pre-Christian, classical knowledge of antiquity.⁴ Therefore, part of modern research has attempted to construct a tradition between ancient, pre-Christian, and later Christian libraries as places of religious study.⁵ It quickly becomes clear that the ancient, pre-Christian libraries were public institutions set up and run by kings and emperors, or by members of the Roman and provincial upper classes (see below). The early Christian institutions of Origen in Caesarea and Cassiodorus in Scolacium (Squillace, Calabria),⁶ on the other hand, were private institutions. Furthermore, it has been observed that Christian intellectuals followed the habit of pagan philosophers.⁷ However, after a further look at the libraries of Graeco-Roman antiquity, their functions between power, society and religion and the possible lines of tradition cannot confirm the assumption of clear continuity between pagan and Christian libraries.

⁴ Dora/Nievergelt 2021; Cavallo 2012a; Christ 1984.

⁵ Cavallo 2012b, 67–68 compares the attached scriptorium at the library of Origen in Caesarea with the library of Alexandria; Bäbler 2018, 129–151; idem 2020, 439–462 esp. 441 calls the institution Origenes founded in Caesarea “Christian Mouseion”.

⁶ Bäbler 2018–2019, 107–132.

⁷ Leppin ³2021, 172–186. The so-called statue of Hippolytos in the Vatican Library might be a good support for philosophical habit if, as the author suggests, it had actually been part of a sculptural group like that of the Epicurean Philosophers in the early 3rd cent. B.C. But recent research showed, that the identification with Hippolytos is in no way secure. Lots of other identifications have been proposed in recent literature as quoted by Leppin. A recent autopsy in the Biblioteca Vaticana made clear, that only the seat with the buttocks and hips of the figure and some folds of the robe are ancient, while the inscriptions may have been an ancient addition at a later moment. The torso with the head and the legs with the female robe are early modern additions probably of Pirro Ligorio in the 16th century. But even the inscriptions do not prove the identification as Hippolytos or attribution to his circle. Before further publication see: *La statua di “Ippolito”*, in: *Online Window in the Library. “Avvisi della Vaticana”* Nr. 21, Januar – März 2022, p. 6 (<https://www.vaticanlibrary.va/newsletter/202204IT.pdf>. Downloaded 27.03.2023). For pagan philosophers as example for the iconography of Christ see: Zanker 1995.

Greek Libraries and the Symposium of Scholars

In the 3rd century B.C. there was a library in Taormina on Sicily, which was abandoned before the Roman Empire, whose remains were found in two filled cisterns under a later building. Among them were fragments of wall stucco with painted inscriptions (fig. 1). They transmit the names and biographies of authors, so it is a kind of ancient library catalogue, because these '*lemmata*' served to orientate the reader and to locate the scrolls.⁸ Among the remains of the Taormina library, the hinges of the wooden cabinets for the scrolls were also found. In addition, however, there are large quantities of high-quality ceramics, which were mainly used at the ancient banquet, the symposium (fig. 1).



Fig. 1: Taormina: Lemmata of Quintus Fabius Pictor and Philistos of Syrakus. Hinges of the book cabinets and ceramics for drinking and lighting from the context of the hellenistic library.

This surprising result draws attention to the connection between the Greek symposium and the libraries. It is not a question of a religiously motivated feast, but of a scholar's meal, as is already known from the writings of Plato. In today's libraries, strict attention is paid to the fact that no food or drink is consumed. However, it is precisely the symposium that seems to have been linked to intellectual discourse in ancient libraries. The Library of Alexandria is reported to

⁸ For the Tauromenion Library see: Blanck 1997, 241–255; Campagna 2017, 75–87.

have been located in the Sanctuary of the Muses, which was part of the palace complex of the Ptolemaic kings. There was an association of scholars who, in addition to financial means, had dining rooms at their disposal (Strab. 17,1,8). Rooms for the scholars' meal probably also belonged to the library of Pergamon. The findings from the Taormina library were first seen in this context by K. Rausch. Apparently, however, the symposium of the scholars was part of the ancient Greek libraries. However, the symposium was less of a religious and more of a profane, intellectual event.⁹

On the other hand, the location of the libraries in the sanctuaries of Athena in Pergamon and the Muses in Alexandria, where a priest was also available to the community of scholars, is interesting. In Pergamon there was probably even a colossal statue of Athena in the library hall (fig. 2), which was copied after the model of the Athena Parthenos, the cult image by the hand of Phidias in the Parthenon in Athens.

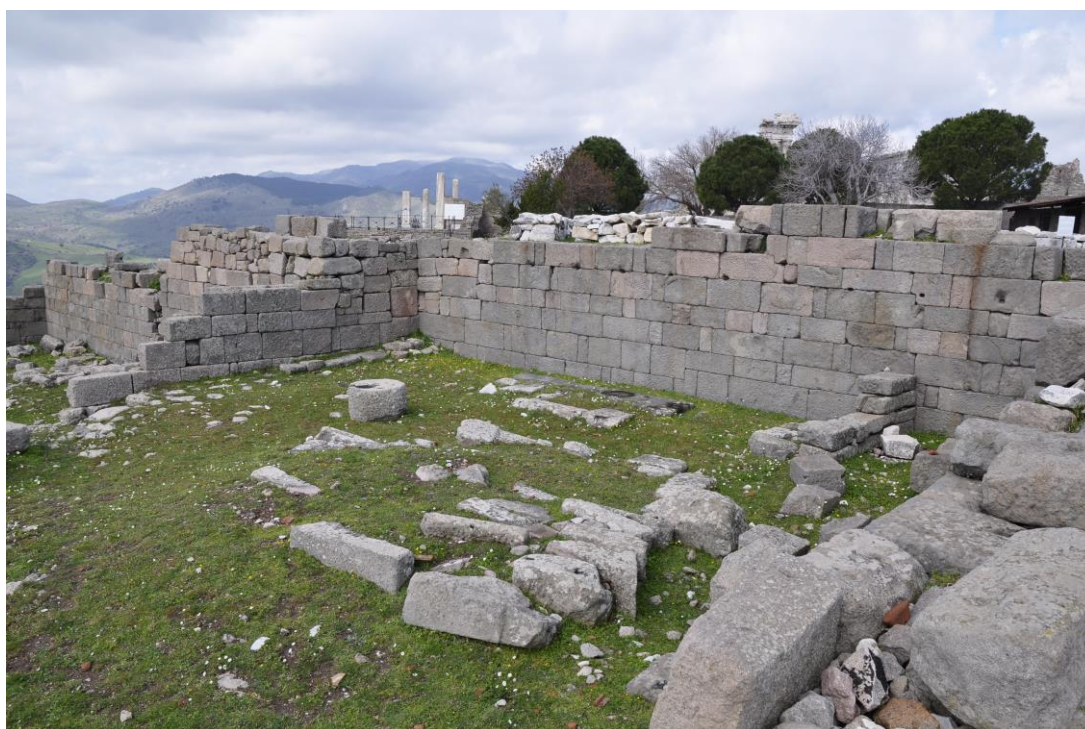


Fig. 2: Pergamon: Probable library in the sanctuary of Athena.

In the library, however, it was hardly worshiped as a cult image, since an altar is missing in front of the statue. Rather, it refers to the close relationship between the Pergamene kings and Athens. The kings of Pergamum tried to conceal their mediocre origins – their ancestor had embezzled the treasury of the Seleucid

⁹ On the Symposium in the Tauromenion library see in detail: Rausch 2024 (in print).

kings – through numerous building foundations in Athens, on the Agora and the Acropolis. Also, in Pergamon itself the Pergamene kings presented themselves as a great cultural power in the tradition of classical Athens.¹⁰

The location of the Pergamene library in the sanctuary of Athena and the Alexandrian library in the sanctuary of the muses does not indicate a deeper connection to religion. Rather, the religious embedding of the Pergamene library primarily served the political publicity of the kings.

On the other hand, the affiliation of the muse sanctuary with the library to the area of the royal palace of Alexandria shows how much this repository of knowledge was related to the king. The library of Pergamon was also not far from the rather simply designed palaces on the acropolis. One can almost speak of *'Herrschaftswissen'* that was collected in these libraries. The Hellenistic libraries were thus stores of knowledge and as such served the interests of these Hellenistic rulers.

Roman Libraries as a Phenomenon of Emperors and Elites

In Roman society, libraries took on a new meaning. For the collection of books, new building types were created that could architecturally serve the functionality as repositories of knowledge.

The Roman emperors got involved by building and maintaining libraries. Augustus had a library built in the sanctuary of Apollo on the Palatine in Rome. The Library of Augustus was under the protection of Apollo, who is said to have held his hand protectively over the first emperor in the battle of Actium (31 BC). And he even gave up parts of his private house in favor of the new sanctuary.¹¹ Vespasian built a library in the area of the *Templum Pacis*.¹² The 'embedding' of the libraries in the sacred sphere continued in Roman times.¹³

But there were also new aspects. Trajan had libraries built in the complex of his magnificent imperial forum in Rome. There was a library near the entrance to the huge square (fig. 3), and at the same time near the emperor's tomb in the

¹⁰ Schalles 1985.

¹¹ Iacopi / Tedone 2006, 351–378; Balensiefen 2024.

¹² Meneghini 2014, 287. 296–298 fig. 1; Tucci 2017, 101–115; Meneghini, this volume p. 1 ss.

¹³ Neudecker 2013, 312–331; Balensiefen 2024.

base of his column. The relief band of the column showed the history of the emperor's two wars in Dacia, Hence Trajan related the library to his grave and his posthumous fame.¹⁴



Fig. 3: Rome, Forum of Trajan: Library beside Trajan's column and tomb with niches for the book cabinets and architectural elements.

Because the principate in the early and high imperial period did not know absolute prerogatives of the emperor over the highest elites, especially the group of senators, this imperial example was emulated by extremely wealthy, non-imperial people. The library of the senator Tiberius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus in Ephesus is particularly well preserved, and its reconstruction is an eye-catcher in the center of this important ancient city, both in antiquity and today. The founder had served as governor of the province of Asia, whose capital was Ephesus. After his death he was granted a tomb in the center of the city, which was extremely unusual. Actually only the founding heroes of ancient cities were entitled to receive such an honor, albeit on condition that the library be donated. It was directly above his grave (fig. 4). Its magnificent façade praised and glorified the dead donor, Celsus, with an elaborate pictorial program including equestrian statues and personifications of his virtues. All this happened under the reign of the Emperor Hadrian, who succeeded Trajan, shortly after Trajan had placed his

¹⁴ Meneghini 2015, 81-82. 91-93. Meneghini, this volume p. 12 ss. with a different new identification of the library.

tomb in Rome in the context of his libraries. It is clear, that Celsus in Ephesus adopted the imperial model of Trajan in Rome. Celsus also donated a capital stock from which, according to the preserved inscriptions, the staff costs of the library and the purchase of books were to be financed.¹⁵



Fig. 4: Ephesos, library of Celsus: Interior with niches for the book cabinets. Celsus tomb is under the apse on the left.

A little later, in Nysa on the Meander, not far from Ephesus a member of the local elite, whose name we do not know, donated a library. As Celsus the donor allowed to be buried under his library in the city center (fig. 5).¹⁶

Even without a grave, it was attractive for members of the extremely wealthy elite to donate libraries. In Athens, under the Emperor Trajan, a certain Titus Flavius Pantainos, who was a priest of the Muses, founded a public library near the Greek Agora and dedicated it together with his children to the city goddess Athena and the Emperor Trajan. In connection with the reference to the cult of the muses, an 'embedded' religious character is again indicated.¹⁷ The founder's father seems to have been the head of a philosophical school. For the first time

¹⁵ Strocka 2009, 247–259; Houston 2014, 189–193.

¹⁶ Strocka 2012.

¹⁷ Beard/North/Price, *Religions of Rome*, vol. I (Cambridge 1998) 43, vol. II p. X; Price 1999, 89; Rüpke 2001, 13; Critical to the concept see: Nongbri 2008, 440–460.

there was a public library in Athens from which, as an inscription states, no books were allowed to be taken out.¹⁸



Fig. 5: Nysa: The tomb of the founder was under the porch beside the entrance.

The libraries donated by members of the Roman elite belong in the context of their *munificentia*. Public buildings in the cities of Italy and in the provinces were regularly donated by members of the elite. In doing so, they followed an unwritten set of rules. Libraries became part of this system of *munificentia*.¹⁹

Finally, in Pergamon, not far from the foot of the Hellenistic Acropolis, in the sanctuary of Asclepius, a woman, Flavia Melitine, in the hadrianic period donated a library. Despite its location in a sanctuary, this library apparently served hardly any religious function. Nor did it contain the tomb of the donor, but at the center of the library a statue of emperor, Hadrian, was set up²⁰. This again materializes the close relationship between the libraries and the emperor. Hadrian's library in Athens is another example of this. It is not situated in a sanctuary but in a public amusement complex with porticos, flower beds and water basins. On

¹⁸ Coqueugniot 2013b, 21–25; Rausch, this volume p. 6.

¹⁹ Zuiderhoek 2009.

²⁰ Strocka 2012, 188f.; Rausch, this volume p. 9.

its sides there were two lecture halls, emphasizing the public and educational character of the whole facility (fig. 6).²¹



Fig. 6: Athens, library of Hadrian: Library room with niches in the centre, lecture halls on both sides.

None of the Greek and Roman libraries survived the end of antiquity. The Library of Alexandria burned down perhaps as early as Caesar's time, or later. Hadrian's Library in Athens was damaged as early as the 3rd century AD when the Herulians threatened Athens. A triconch was not built on the same site until much later, when the library probably no longer existed, and it is far from certain that it followed a religious function.²² Even the library at the Templum Pacis in Rome was destroyed in late antiquity, at least before the 6th century AD.²³ The institutions of the ancient libraries did not survive the end of the ancient world. Rather, the transmission of the ancient literature that has survived took a different route, namely the new monastery libraries and scriptoria of the Middle Ages.

²¹ Tigginaka 1999, 285–326; Bergemann 2010, 453–462.

²² Travlos 1971, 244 s.v. Hadriansbibliothek.

²³ Coarelli 1999, 68; Corsaro 2014, 260–261.

Ancient Libraries: Kings, Emperors, *munificentia* and ‘Embedded Religion’

Public libraries in Greece were first built in the Hellenistic age as royal repositories of knowledge. Here rulership knowledge (*‘Herrschaftswissen’*) was collected. For this purpose, scholars were invited to the library in Alexandria. In the imperial period, libraries became objects of generous donations by the rulers and the high political and social elites. At least in the city of Rome, the libraries seem to have served the jurists in particular as archives for judgements, laws and legal literature.

Of course, late antique Christian culture was largely based on its pagan predecessors. This is shown nicely by the textual collections of knowledge discussed in this volume. The combination of the library and the scriptorium in late antiquity and the Middle Ages certainly had its roots in the pagan libraries.

Although the ancient libraries were often located in sanctuaries of the Muses, Athena or Apollon, the deities acted primarily as their protectors. Religion was certainly a subject of the writings in the ancient libraries, along with all other subjects, philosophy as well as historiography and natural sciences, but not the only one. Religion was just as present here as it was in the sporting competitions, e.g. in Olympia, or in the theater performances in the sanctuary of Dionysus in Athens.²⁴ Religion was omnipresent in the ancient world. On the other hand, the ancient libraries became part of the system of *munificentia* of the emperors and the members of the elite. Roman libraries were not designed as places of religious education or even for the training of clerics. Instead on the Forum of Trajan in Rome they served as administrative and legal archives. And unlike the early Christian libraries, the ancient libraries were public libraries.

In this respect, antiquity remains the *“Nächste Fremde”* (U. Hölscher) for us, also with regard to the history of its libraries. For antiquity, libraries were places of universal knowledge, held by endowments of kings, emperors, and the wealthiest members of society. The specific relation of the libraries to religion seems to be a later development thanks to the Christian word religion.²⁵ The establishment of public libraries and their assignment to educational institutions, and especially universities in the early modern period, in the ancient tradition much later led them back into the center of society.

²⁴ Dubbini 2010a, 157–181; Dubbini 2010b, 119–140; Nielsen 2002; Lonsdale 1993.

²⁵ Cavallo 2014, 208 speaks about “discontinuity” and “una forte discontinuità con il passato” between pre-Christian and Christian libraries.

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