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The Past as Future

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The
Ernest S. Bird Library
Dedication Issue

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The Past as Future

by Antje B. Lemke

The library holds not a mere collection of information . . .
but the tissue of understanding that makes experience make
sense.

– Gerard Piel

As soon as man began to record information, he faced two questions: how to find material that was durable enough to preserve his message, and how to find material that was easy to handle, could be drawn on quickly and could be carried with ease. Stone seemed to be the least perishable substance, but while it was ideal for monuments in honor of gods or rulers, it certainly was not practical for business transactions or scholarly pursuits. Thus, from the beginning of writing to our day, those who have been concerned with communication – publishers, librarians and all who write or use books – have been concerned with these two issues: durability and mobility.

Practically all substances on which man can draw or engrave have been used for the recording of messages: pebbles, rocks, clay, the bark and leaves of trees, the marrow of the papyrus plant, animal skins, metals, paper, and today a variety of synthetic products such as cellophane and magnetic tape.

The rulers of ancient Egypt believed (or certainly hoped) that stone would last forever; yet we know that it can be and often has been destroyed in seconds. The Essenes thought that copper would last longer than parchment; while the text of the Dead Sea Scrolls is written on parchment, they put the map that indicated the location of their archives and treasures on a copper scroll. Copper, however, corrodes under certain conditions and can be even less durable than animal skins.

Marcus Claudius Tacitus, a Roman Emperor of the third century, did not believe in the permanence of any material, so he asked his librarians to have ten copies of the most important works re-copied every year. This was supposed to take care of wear and tear. In addition, he distributed books to different locations in the hope that at least some would survive whatever catastrophes might besiege the country. Without resorting to the extreme of copying the same book every year, we know that the principle is sound. Great

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Babylonian clay tablets from approximately 1000 B.C.
Owned by the author.

works like Homer's *Iliad* or Dante's *Divine Comedy* have survived only because they have been copied again and again. And this is what we do today; we copy books when paper becomes brittle, and we distribute copies to protect them against the forces of nature or human folly.

We have developed many aids to prolong the life of books, among them temperature and humidity control, but we still wrestle with the question of preservation, or permanence, and we experiment continuously with all kinds of substances. A striking example of an attempt to use material that was used more than three thousand years ago by the Sumerians and other early civilizations is found in the suggestion of a famous nineteenth century American librarian. In 1853 Everett Jewett, librarian of the Smithsonian Institution, suggested the establishment of a central catalog for the United States, a National Union Catalog – on baked clay tablets! Since the advent of parchment and paper, nobody in Europe or America had thought of reviving the use of one of the materials that served during the early stages of communication. Frederic Poole, another famous librarian, commented on Mr. Jewett's enterprise thirty years later:

(Mr. Jewett's) scheme was to stereotype in separate blocks the titles of books, using a material cheaper than metal, keeping these blocks in stock, and printing from them all the library catalogues of the country. The material he used was a clay from Indiana. Congress made an appropriation for executing the plan! I recollect that the librarians of the country generally favored it, and that I did not. I remember that I spoke of it at the time as "Prof. Jewett's mud catalogue." My views concerning it were based on some practical knowledge of legitimate typography, and from specimens of the work which Prof. Jewett exhibited. . . . (The scheme) failed in this instance from mechanical defects in the process – the shrinking and warping of the blocks in baking, and the intractable nature of the material when baked, which made the exact adjustment of the blocks on the press impossible.¹

If Mr. Jewett had investigated the reasons why the use of clay tablets had been discontinued, he might have found many references to their shortcomings and could have saved much time and government money.

If we look at the overall convenience of any vehicle of communication, including the variety of media from tape recorders to teaching machines, we can agree with Bruno Augenstein, Vice President of the Rand Corporation, who described the book as the most adaptable and simple medium for conveying knowledge. He especially referred to the "portability, the excellent file, random access, and search features; the ability to make manual corrections, the high information – density, and the immediate usability, i.e., no warm-up or programming."² It is, therefore, not surprising that from the second century B.C., when the first codices came into use, to our present day, the book, a set of sheets between two covers, has remained the most expedient container of information and thought.

What has changed are the form and content of a book: from calligraphy, in which every letter was carefully executed, to print from woodblocks, to mass-produced metal type developed by Johann Gutenberg, and finally to electronic typesetting; from line drawings to photography.

It is interesting to see how the letter reflects the times and area in which it was produced. We can look, for example, at early medieval manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells* or the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, where we see immediately that the illustrations are based on contemporary life. The ornaments reflect patterns from Celtic woodcarving, weaving and jewelry, together with symbolic and stylistic elements from Graeco-Roman, even Coptic, art. This exact reflection of the civilization of England and Ireland in the early Middle Ages demonstrates how local tradition was mixed with the culture introduced by Christian missionaries.

¹ Samuel S. Green, *The Public Library Movement*, 1913, p. 4.

² Bruno W. Augenstein, "Information Features of the Book," *American Bookman*, Aug. 3-10, 1970.

As we look at these richly decorated pages of the sixth and seventh centuries in which individual letters are often hard to read in the profusion of ornamental detail, we must remember that readability was not of primary concern in an age when literacy was an exception. These volumes were meant to *glorify*, not to *clarify*. They were produced primarily for representation, as treasures. Even priests and some of the missionaries were not able to read the Latin text, written so carefully and we assume so lovingly by the scribes in the medieval monastery. In many Bibles, for example in the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, we find that those who used the book for religious services wrote the text in the vernacular under the Latin text, line for line. Herein lies the origin of the phrase, “reading between the lines.” These people literally read between the lines in order to understand the message.

It would be artificial to copy early calligraphy today, except for commemorative purposes. But we can still learn much from the appearance of these volumes, as well as from the finest examples of early printing. In all of them the forms, i.e., type, illustrations and binding, both in themselves and in their relation to each other, reflect the content. There is an inner organizational coherence between medium and message so they form a meaningful entity. This principle should apply to all documentation, whether we have a scroll, a letter, a pamphlet or a book. Who would xerox a love letter?

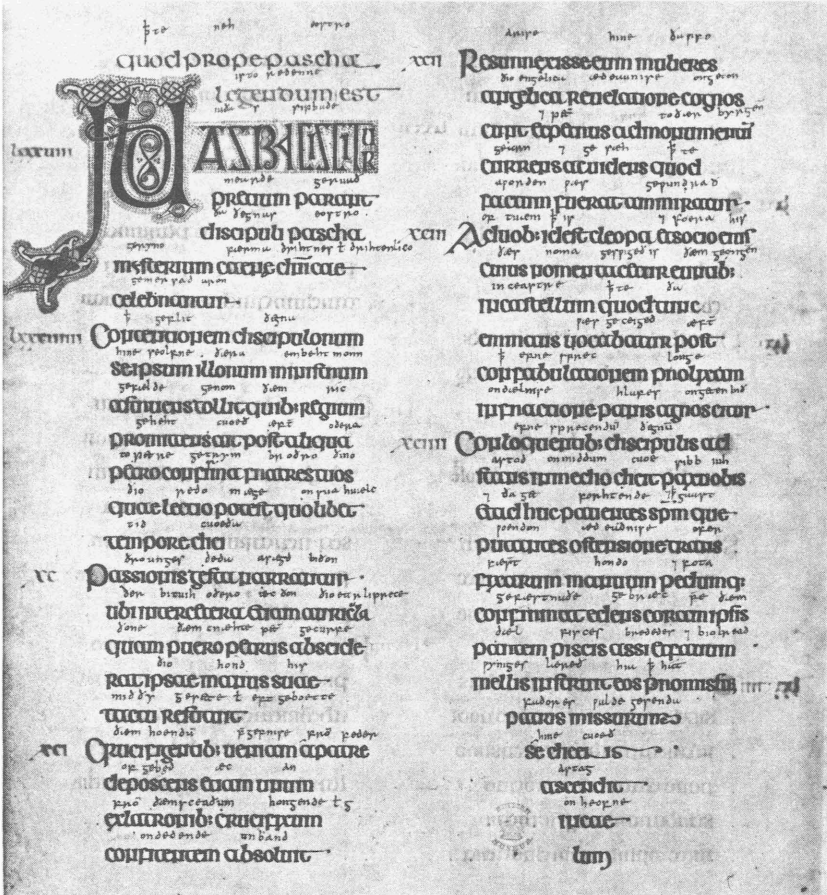
Just as books can be defined as any record of thought in symbols and not just as the kind of book we have on our shelves, a library can be seen in a much larger context than the conventional book collection. The best example of this broad view is found in a book on ancient libraries by Ernest Cushing Richardson, a former librarian of Princeton University (1890-1920). For him, library history begins with the Pre-cosmic libraries; these are followed by Pre-human, Pre-adamite and Adamite libraries. Only after these does he introduce the Sumerian, Babylonian and Egyptian collections. In other words, for him libraries begin with the beginning of life.

Richardson’s chapter on pre-cosmic collections begins, “The oldest of all alleged libraries are the libraries of the Gods,” and after enumerating some of these – the libraries of Brahma, Odin and Thoth for example – he states that by many all creation was looked on as a library!

To the ancient Babylonians the stars of heaven were themselves books in which could be read the secrets of heaven and earth, and the destiny of mankind. The whole firmament was thus a library of celestial tablets.³

These are beautiful thoughts and Richardson’s imagination stimulates us to see the library not only as an institution but as a concept. This view becomes especially interesting in connection with our contemporary efforts to extend

³Ernest C. Richardson, *The Beginnings of Libraries*, 1914, p. 28.



A page from the *Lindisfarne Gospels*. From a facsimile edition in the Rare Book Department of the Library.

the library's functions beyond traditional services into those of broader information centers.

Richardson introduces another thought in his chapter on pre-human libraries, the libraries of plants and animals, that is of striking actuality today. In 1914, before the emergence of cybernetics and biochemistry or biophysics, he wrote,

It is a little figurative to say that a tree which carries in itself a hundred annual records of its growth is a library in the sense of a public record office. . . . There is, however, a certain analogy which the discussion of natural records and object writing suggests. This may even have some slight germ of scientific interest. . . . Where there is memory, there may be

groups of memorized records, which would be collections of very rudimentary books.⁴

In 1967 Robert Sinsheimer in his essay, *The Book of Life*, referred to the nature of the universal molecular language in which genetic biological information is inscribed, conserved, and transmitted from cell to daughter cell and from generation to generation. He compared a Mayan codex, which can not yet be deciphered, with a set of human chromosomes, which he calls an encyclopedia, a book that includes “instructions in a curious, and wonderful code, for making a human being.”⁵

To my knowledge, Richardson is the only historian of his time who saw libraries in this universal setting. He recognized the conventional library, the library of records or documents, as *one of many* communication systems of man, to be seen in the context of life as such.

If we now take a look at the ancient book collections as the predecessors of our library, we are justified in skipping the libraries of the Sumerians, Assyrians, Babylonians and Egyptians. Through excavations like those at Nineveh and Nippur, executed around the turn of the century, we know that huge archives of government records, laws, and various branches of literature existed in the Mesopotamian area around 3000 B.C., but their use was relatively limited and we do not know much about their organization.

The first great library system, based on the Greek concept of Paideia yet far surpassing the small collections of Athenian scholars, was that of Alexandria. Under the Ptolemies in the third century B.C., scholars, artisans, merchants, scientists – and without doubt public relations experts – came to Alexandria, the newly founded city in the Nile delta which soon became the center of Hellenistic civilization. The Ptolemies were eager to propagate Greek ideals and in their empire, during the last three centuries before Christianity, we find one of the most colorful civilizations. Greeks, Romans, Jews and Egyptians, Persians, Syrians, Africans and Indians created the cosmopolitan atmosphere in which many languages were spoken, in which many religious and social customs tried to coexist. It is no wonder that libraries in this capital had more in common with today’s New York Public Library than the medieval libraries, or even the libraries of the European capitals such as London and Paris far into the twentieth century.

The main library of Alexandria was part of the Museum, the temple of the Muses, located in the palace district. The Museum was a kind of research foundation, academy and cultural center under royal patronage, consisting of a group of buildings similar to a cultural center or a campus today. They were equipped for various scientific, scholarly and artistic purposes and included observatories, a library and various collections,

⁴*Ibid*, p. 37.

⁵Robert L. Sinsheimer, *The Book of Life*, 1967.

surrounded by botanical and zoological gardens. The structure and the atmosphere might be seen as a combination of the Princeton Institute of Advanced Studies and the Lincoln Center in New York City. A gap between the sciences and the humanities did not exist. The director of the Museum was appointed by the Ptolemies and later by Roman emperors. They selected outstanding scholars who in turn invited young men to work and study with them individually or in small seminars. There were no formal classes, no examinations, credits or degrees; the fellows succeeded on the basis of their contributions and recommendations.

Great scholars like Euclid, Eratosthenes and Callimachus spent most of their adult lives at the Museum and the intellectual climate must have been most attractive. It is especially interesting that the Museum was entirely government-supported, yet there was apparently complete intellectual freedom and scholars could pursue their aims without religious or political pressures.

The library was an essential part of this institution and it was divided into faculties or subject departments corresponding to the departments of the Museum. We have here, existing more than 2000 years ago, a model of the principles we try to realize in our national libraries, in academic libraries, and to some extent in public and school libraries today. In Alexandria the library was not a service annex to provide materials for those who requested them now and then; it was an integral part of the overall program of the institution.

Like many libraries today, the Alexandrian library started out by acquiring existing collections, from the Peripatetic School in Athens, from wealthy collectors, and by robbing incoming ships. In addition, current literature had to be acquired. This could be done only through the establishment of a workshop, a scriptorium, in which manuscripts were copied. Everything relating to book production was actually the librarian's responsibility, from the procurement of papyrus or parchment and ink to the employment of copyists, editing, and translating the text. He also was responsible for organizing the collection, which included the production of catalogs and/or bibliographies.

It is hard to tell how many volumes the Museum library and its daughter library, the Serapeum, actually held. Figures vary from two hundred thousand to seventy thousand, depending on whether physical or bibliographical units were counted and upon the accuracy or exaggeration of the accounts, which often were designed to glorify the library. Whatever the true number, this was the largest collection not only in classical antiquity but until our own day! Through the Middle Ages libraries had eighty or a hundred, sometimes three hundred, books. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries a library with a few thousand volumes was considered outstanding.

With a collection in the hundred thousands and a program that went far beyond the "collection and preservation" policy which we usually attribute to ancient libraries, two services were essential in order to fulfill the functions



Interior of the Alexandrian library from Hellenistic descriptions.
The scribe's inscription reads "the medicine chest of the soul."
Courtesy of the Bettmann Archive, New York City.

of an international research library: 1) the material that came to the library, which frequently was in poor condition through mistakes, omissions, etc., had to be carefully selected and edited, and 2) a comprehensive descriptive bibliography had to be compiled.

In the process of text comparison and editing much excellent work was produced at the Alexandrian library. Zenodotus, one of the first librarians, contributed the first carefully prepared edition of Homer. He arranged the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* into the twenty-four books with which we are familiar today. Aristotle of Byzantium edited Pindar in seventeen books. The translation of the Septuagint, the authentic edition of the Old Testament, was the teamwork of Jewish scholars at the Alexandrian library. (That the Septuagint was produced in seventy days may be apocryphal.) These scholar librarians contributed greatly to grammar, text criticism and methods of comparative literature study.

The second contribution was the production of a bibliography and the resulting development and formulation of bibliographic method and form. Callimachus of Cyrene, a scholar librarian, was charged with this task. The original bibliography is no longer extant, but references and quotations from the *Pinakes* give us a good picture of the original.

The term *Pinakes* (tablets) for the title seems to indicate that this bibliography or catalog was based on a shelf list engraved on tablets. The first section of the one hundred and twenty volumes had the subtitle, "Table and register of dramatic poets, chronologically arranged from the earliest times." Subsequent sections dealt with non-dramatic poetry, law, philosophy, history, oratory and miscellaneous subjects. The entries gave much bibliographical and biographical detail including the author's name, incipit (the opening words), and number of lines. The latter served to check completeness of the work and to pay the copyist. Callimachus supposedly recorded about ninety thousand titles and his successors continued his work on the *Pinakes*. He organized and supervised the work; the technical task was carried out by slaves. One of the extant fragments of Callimachus' work includes the useful adage, "I sing nothing unattested, nothing that is not checked and authenticated."

The Alexandrian libraries survived into the Roman period and gradually disintegrated during the civil wars. The Serapeum was closed officially in 391 under the Patriarch Theophilus. It would be interesting to trace the links from Alexandrian scholarship, especially text criticism, encyclopedic and bibliographic study, through Arabian and Byzantine libraries to the universities of Paris and Oxford. In a recent J. Wesley Smith cartoon, we see a man with five rolls under his arm, facing a librarian who says, "Not here at Alexandria! If you got them at our Babylon branch, return them at our Babylon branch."

Naturally, the Alexandrian library did not provide for all of the services we have today. It did, however, include the basic functions of preservation

and organization and provided some important services which have been lost over the centuries but are of special interest to us today:

1. Libraries were community-oriented research and information centers, integrated with other cultural services of the city and state.
2. Librarians were instrumental in the production of books, making their selections *before* books were produced in multiple copies.

The first concept of a stronger integration of libraries with community needs is just emerging on the horizon of contemporary library planning, and will, no doubt, be one of the major library concerns in the future. The second concept is usually rejected by librarians who fear that involvement in publication might be viewed as censorship. At best they select their acquisitions, yet frequently they issue blanket orders for everything certain publishers produce. Thus more and more material — books, microforms, tapes, and other new media — accumulate and librarians become administrators of giant storehouses.⁶ In 1934 Ortega y Gasset in his prophetic lecture, “The Mission of the Librarian,” stated the truism, “There are too many books. Many of them are useless and stupid, their existence and their conservation is a dead weight upon humanity which is already bent low under other loads.” Librarians, he suggested, rather than trying to catch up with quantity, should concern themselves with two things: *selection* and *bibliography*.⁷

These issues, once the concern of the greatest library in classical times, have become the main issues of most contemporary libraries. New technology and management theories help us with the problems of bibliographic organization and access to information. The number of computer-produced indexes increases constantly; we have machine readable catalogs and access to central data banks from remote terminals. However, we have not solved the crucial question of selection, i.e., how to decide *what* to put into the data banks. Jesse Shera of Case Western Reserve University suggests “birth control” for publications. Kenneth Boulding asks for “active rather than passive librarians, who will condense and filter information” in this age of “information overload,”⁸ and J.D. Licklider refers to “neoliberalies” as “procognitive systems which will extend into the process of generating, organizing, and using knowledge.”⁹

⁶The association of quantity with status among research libraries may have added to the phenomenon of rapid growth. In the 1960s, to reach the million mark often seemed more desirable than satisfactory service to library clientele.

⁷Jose Ortega y Gasset, *The Mission of the Librarian*, 1961. Translation of an address delivered at the International Congress of Bibliographers and Librarians in Paris, 1934.

⁸Kenneth Boulding, “The Specialist with an Universal Mind,” *Management Science*, Vol. 14, No. 12, Aug. 1968, p. 651.

⁹J.D.R. Licklider, *Libraries of the Future*, 1965, p. 6.

It is too early to predict how we will wrestle with the problem of direct involvement in production and selection, but there is little doubt that this function must be added once again to the universal library tasks of preservation and dissemination of information.

