

Libraries are almost as old as literature itself. In the ancient Near East, where writing was invented, the first libraries were housed in temples and consisted primarily of religious poems and hymns. Since many such compositions existed, the temple libraries acquired quite large collections and, like modern libraries, needed a catalogue to keep track of them. A catalogue of Sumerian religious literature, compiled during the Third Dynasty of Ur (2160-2055 B.C.), notes that one of the listed works cannot be found - the first recorded example of a lost library book! A hint as to how such items might disappear is provided by a notice in a bilingual Sumerian-Akkadian dictionary from the Ishtar temple at Uruk, dating to the mid-first millennium B.C.: "The reader who does not abscond with this volume but puts it back on the shelf, may Ishtar smile upon him! He who removes it from the temple, may Ishtar angrily denounce him!"

These libraries, originally intended for the use of the priests and scribes of the temple, might also contain information of use to the king. An Egyptian stela of the eighteenth century B.C. records the visit of Pharaoh Neferhotep to the library of the temple of Osiris, looking for directions on the proper way to make a cult statue of the god. The most enlightened of the Assyrian kings, Ashurbanipal (668-627 B.C.), had been trained in science and literature and claimed the rare ability to read and write. From all over the Assyrian empire he collected literary works of every genre and housed them in a central library in his palace. This library, discovered by the pioneering archaeologist Austen Henry Layard in 1849, comprises 25,000 clay tablets and fragments, which are now in the British Museum.

Reports of Ashurbanipal's great library may even have reached the Aegean, to judge from the imitative behaviour of the sixth-century Greek tyrants. For instance, Polycrates of Samos amassed a collection of his own, while Pisistratus, patron of arts and literature, is said to have opened a public library at Athens. But by far the most famous library in the Greek world was that of Alexandria, founded by Alexander the Great's successor, Ptolemy I, about 300 B.C., and including the private collection of Aristotle. All ships entering the harbour of Alexandria were obliged to surrender any

manuscripts they were carrying. By 47 B.C., when part of the library was accidentally burned during Julius Caesar's capture of the city, the Library of Alexandria held 700,000 volumes. This great library became the model for numerous others. Pergamon had a library of 200,000 books, which Marc Antony consigned to Cleopatra in compensation for the damage at Alexandria. Carthage also had a large library, which was eventually seized by the Romans and handed over to the kings of Numidia.

Roman libraries were relative late-comers. In 168 B.C. Aemilius Paullus captured the royal library of Macedonia and brought it to Rome as his private collection. Lucullus, who similarly seized the library of the kings of Pontus during his campaign against Mithridates (73-68 B.C.), was in the habit of lending books to his literary friends. Before his death, Julius Caesar was planning a public library, and commissioned the eminent scholar Varro to gather books for it. Varro also wrote a book on libraries, of which only a fragment survives. Rome's first public library was finally opened in 39 B.C. by the literary patron Asinius Pollio (a friend of Vergil), funded by booty from his Illyrian campaign. It was located on the Palatine hill in the Atrium of Liberty (the meeting-place of the censors). Not to be outdone, Augustus founded two larger libraries, including both Greek and Latin books. One was situated on the Palatine and survived, despite a couple of fires, until A.D. 363; the other, in the Portico of Octavia (part of which still stands), was lost in the fire of A.D. 80. Naturally the Augustan libraries were careful to exclude works which might offend the emperor: thus we find Ovid complaining that the Palatine library won't accept one of his books. The emperor Trajan later opened a library, the Biblioteca Ulpia, in his new forum. It contained Greek and Latin books in two separate buildings, with Trajan's Column (a pictorial history of the Dacian wars) in between. By the mid-fourth century there were 28 public libraries at Rome, as well as libraries in various other cities.

A few Roman libraries have actually been discovered. At Herculaneum, buried with Pompeii in the eruption of Vesuvius, was found a library of 1800 charred papyrus rolls. At Ephesus in Turkey stand the remains of a three-storey library built by the family of C. Julius Celsus, a rich local citizen who became consul in A.D. 92. Somewhat eerily, the body of Celsus himself was kept in a mausoleum beneath the library apse. Since Roman "books" were scrolls and could not stand upright, there was no shelving but rather thirty large cupboards. Another well-known library, much of it still intact, is the Library of Hadrian at Athens, whose tall facade of white marble columns cannot fail to impress the visitor. Within, a large courtyard was surrounded by a portico with 100 columns, and the

interior walls of the portico and library were faced in richly coloured marble. To either side of the library were reading rooms and lecture halls. On the east wall of the library can still be seen the stone niches in which books were stored.