



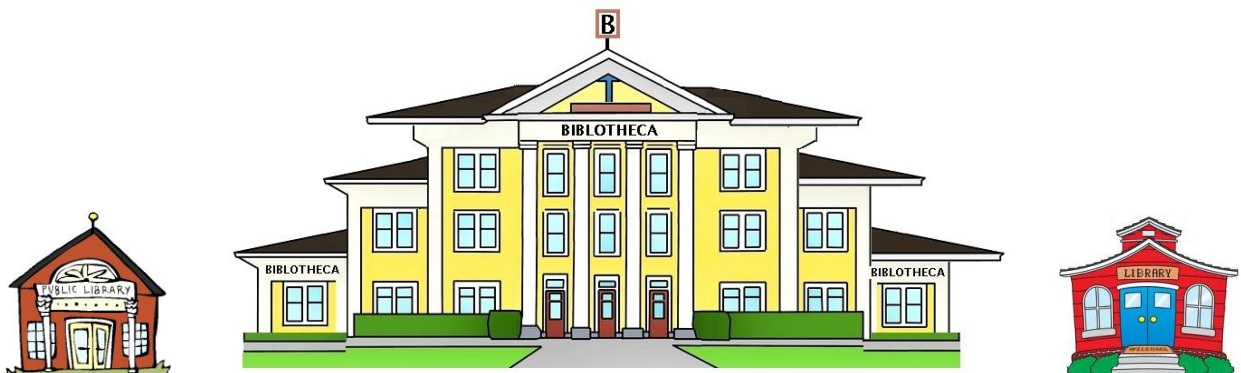
Bernd Rohrmann

Essay about libraries
History ~ Eminence ~ Demise



March 2016

~ *biblioteca* ~ βιβλιοthηκη ~ *biblioteque* ~

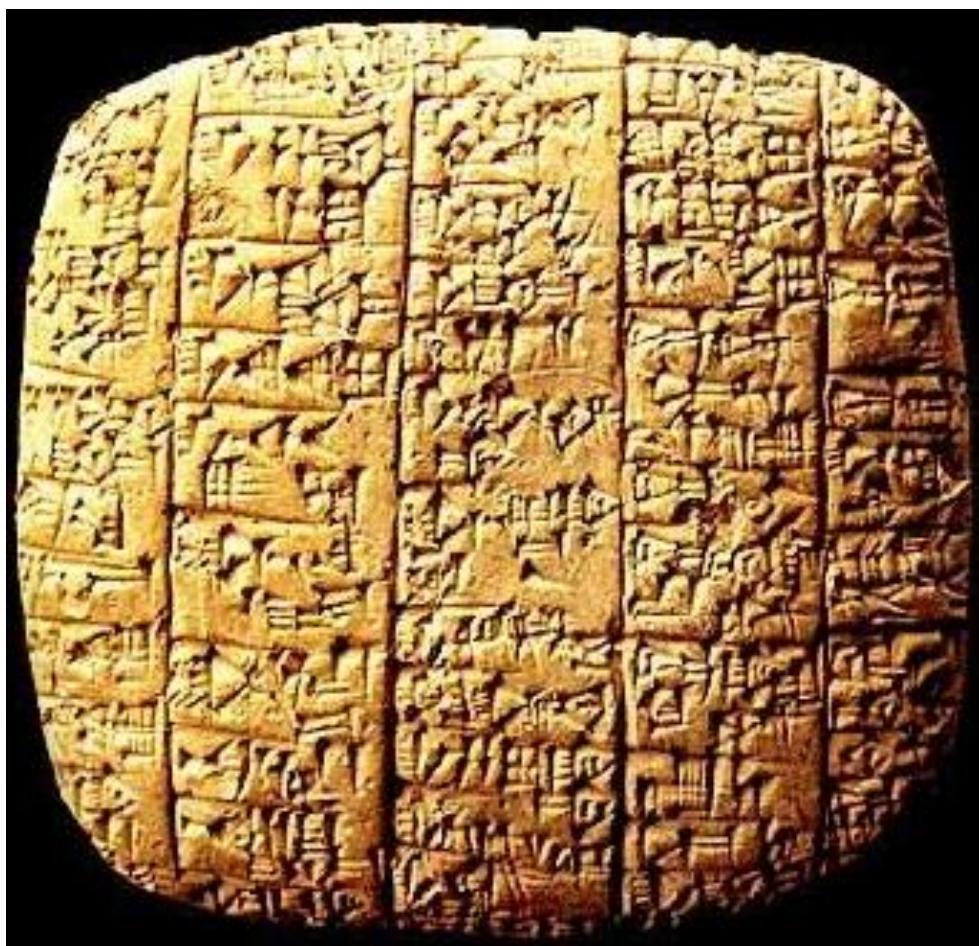
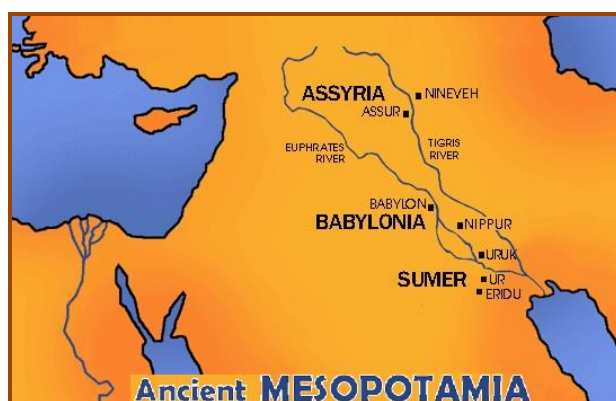




◆ Very early quasi-libraries

Long long time ago the first quasi-libraries were created in Mesopotamia, namely, large amounts of the clay tablets in cuneiform script were stored in temple rooms. These archives consisted mostly of inventories or of records of trade activities.

Some are dating back to 2600 BC. The oldest finding was at the Sumerian city of Nippur; the largest one in Nineveh, the former capital of the Akkadian/Assyrian empire.





Much more than business issues were found, including Mesopotamian literary and religious issues. and administrative work. Famous findings are the "Enuma Elish", known as the Babylonian epic of creation, and especially the "Epic of Gilgamesh".

At about the same time, 2600 BC, it began in Ancient Egypt that documents written on papyrus were stored in governmental and temple record spaces.





Core cities, with countless temples, palaces and graves, were Giza, Karnak/Luxor and Aswan. The largest library was found at the temple in Edfu (south of Luxor).



This documentation style was maintained for thousands of years, and over time any kind of issue was covered in messages on papyrus.

However, neither the Mesopotamian nor the Egypt quasi-libraries were public facilities - they were under the control of kingdom or priesthood institutions.

◆ The famous Biblioteka Alexandrina

In the 3rd century BC, the Macedonia king Alexander embarked on one of the largest military ventures ever conducted, and step by step included Hellas and the Persian kingdom and Egypt and even Babylonia into his own empire.

After each victory and conquest of significant cities, he inspected the palaces of his defeated enemies, including the libraries! Neither Athens nor Persepolis had large ones, it was Babylon which impressed him most. And then he outlined his wish to create an enormous library himself.



Because of his death in Babylon, 323 BC, he could not realize this. It was Alexandria in Egypt where it happened. This city had been founded by Alexander himself in 331, and it was meant to eventually become the capital of the Empire of Alexander the Great.

The library was created from 288 BC onwards by Ptolemy I Soter, who was a Macedonian general and one of the successors of Alexander.

At that time Alexandria had become a large and flourishing place, soon dominating Egypt. (Much later Cairo became Egypt's capital, yet Alexandria is still thriving, and the largest harbour city anyway).

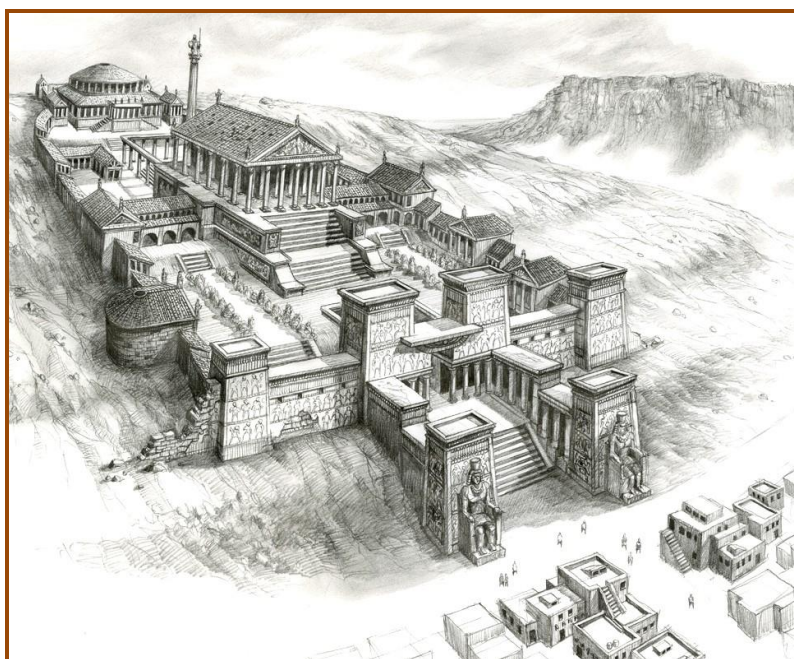


At the seaside of the main harbour, the famous very large lighthouse, the Pharos, was erected around 250 BC.





It is known where the library was located, on the south-eastern side of the main harbour - yet there is no solid knowledge about the design of this, certainly very large, facility. Obviously it was not a separate building, it was part of the "Musaeum of Alexandria". Below is a model of how the whole place may have looked like.

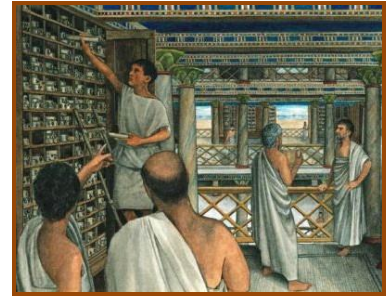
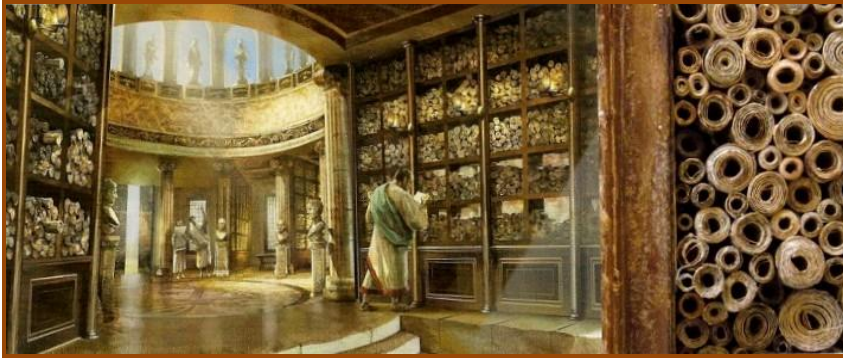


This research centre dealt with mathematics, astronomy, physics, geometry, engineering, geography, medicine and physiology.

The information about the nature and the size of the "Royal Library of Alexandria" is incoherent and confusing - however, there is no doubt that it was by far the largest and the most important library in those times.

Some historians claim that it had nearly half a million papyrus scrolls, while the lowest estimate is 40000 scrolls. Whatever is true, the library's collection certainly required vast storage space.

The following paintings by historians give an idea of the setup of the venue and how visiting scientists were meeting and working there.



Yes, this library was eminent and almost legendary - yet it did not last forever, in fact, it eventually collapsed. Neither when nor why this happened has been fully clarified, and the interpretations differ widely.

The most common view is that the library was set to fire and burned down, yet that's not fully proven, and the time of such a disaster is foggy.



Other theories assume either that Rome's militaristic actions (e.g. 270 AD) or religious battles against traditional temples (e.g. 390 AD) lead to the end of the library.

In 642 AD, an muslim army took Alexandria, which then became part of the arabic empire. Thus it is assumed that the library's destruction occurred as part of that - a conjecture which is not sufficiently substantiated.

[illegible]

Construction work began in 1995, and in 2002 the new Biblioteca Alexandrina was officially inaugurated. The costs were immense, more than 200 US\$.



The complex consists of the library itself, a linked conference center, and objects referring to history. It shows very modern architecture, which nevertheless includes multiple testimonials to the past.

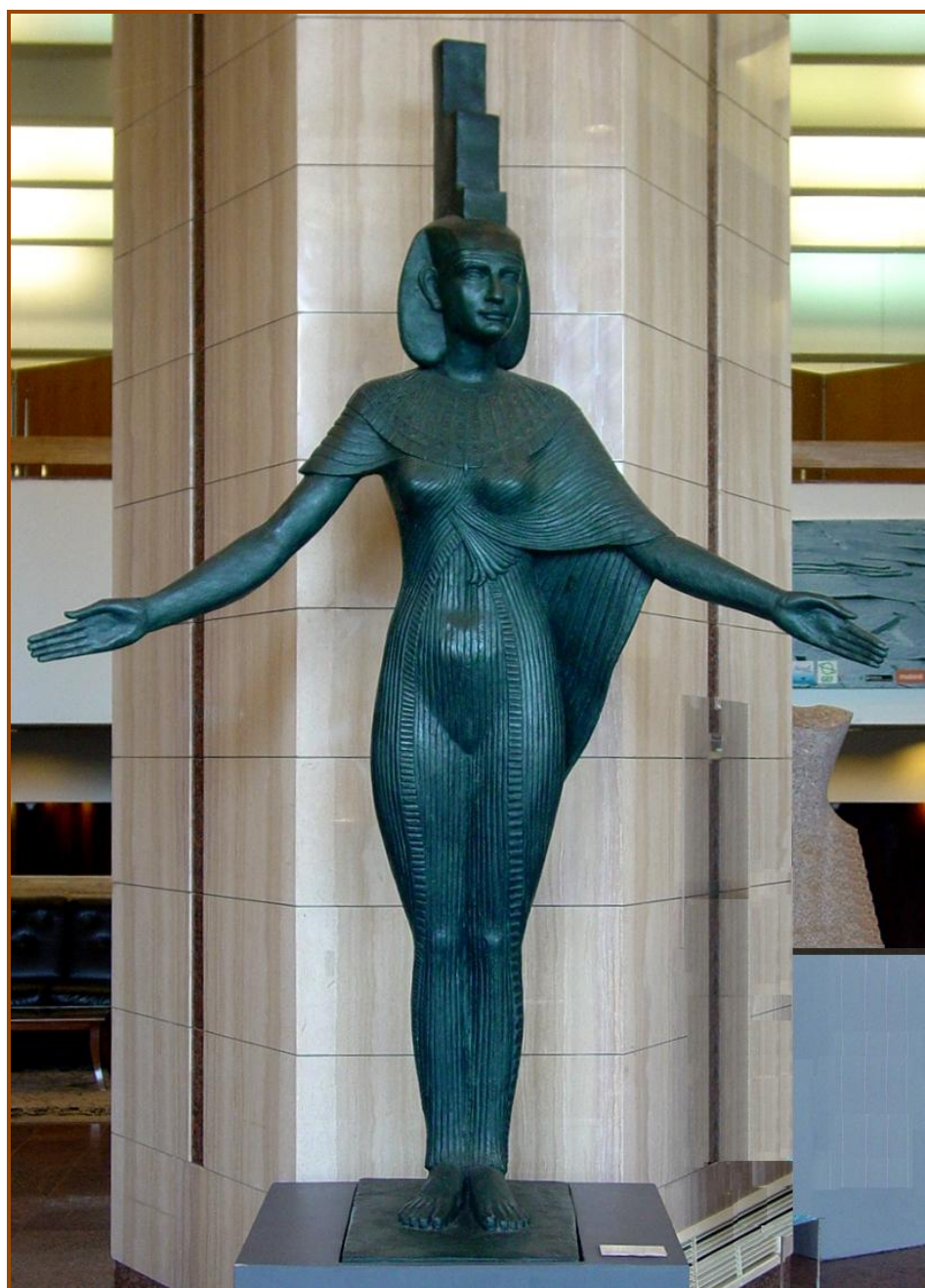
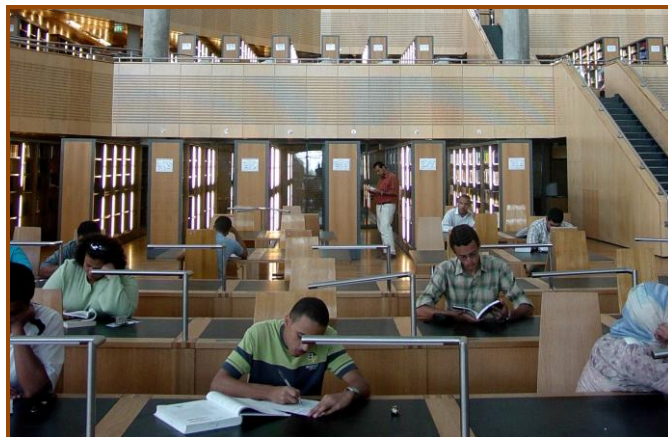
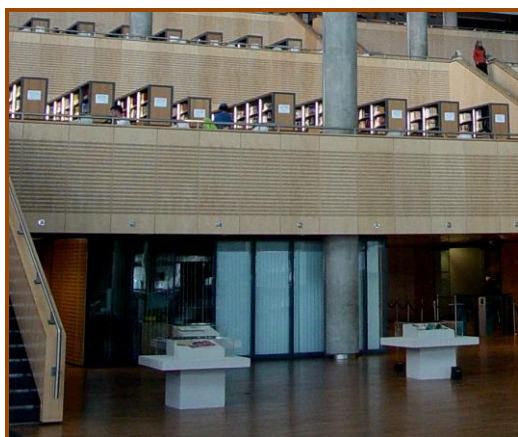






The outside walls of the central building are covered with letters, descending from very many countries - to symbolize the multi-cultural meaning of a library.







Inside the library are quite a few modern art pieces - yet some of them actually represent a god or a goddess from the ancient Egypt empire.



◆ Roman libraries

Except of the historic Biblioteca Alexandrina, the Roman empire did not have many large-scale libraries. Examples are the Imperial library in Constantinople (today Istanbul/Turkey), Pergamum (Turkey), and Timgad (Algeria). There were also some small libraries in the center of Rom, the forum.

The best-known one is Celsus (located within the city of Ephesus in n Turkey.) This library was built by the Greek citizen Tiberius Julius Celsus Polemaeanus, who was for many years a consul of the Roman Empire and gained high appreciation. It was completed in 120 AD.

In the building 12000 scrolls were stored. Furthermore, a mausoleum for Celsus was erected as part of the construction.

The large façade - in style similar to a theatre - originally contained substantial statues of Greek gods. See image below.

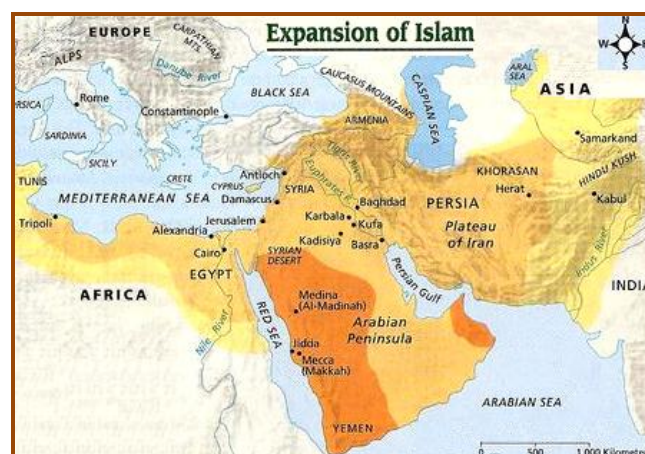


Hardly 100 years later the library was destroyed by an earthquake, and then a further earthquake, supposedly about 1000 years later, trashed it completely.

From 1970 onwards, the façade was rebuilt, using pieces from the ruin as far as feasible, and it can now be visited.

◆ Libraries in the Arabic/ Islamic empire

During the 6th and 7th century, the Arabic empire grew quickly, and soon included today's Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Iran, Egypt and Libya.





In all these regions islamic religion and culture was introduced. Yet in the capital cities, such as Baghdad, Damascus and Cairo, step by step science facilities were established as well. And this always included libraries.

By far the most renowned one was the "House of Wisdom" in Baghdad (9th-13th century). It was founded by the famous Caliph Harun al-Rashid (who reigned 786-809) and later extended under his son al-Ma'mun.



An arabic translation institute was an essential feature, and literature from the Roman realm, Greek Egypt and Persia was made available for the arabic scholars.



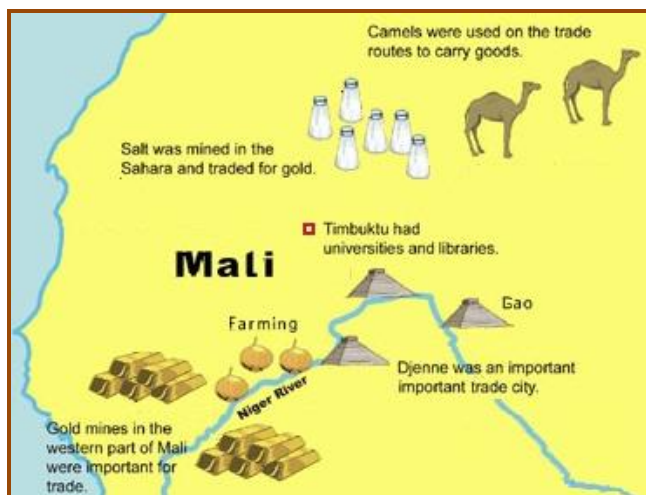
Over time the House of Wisdom became an unrivalled center for research including mathematics, astronomy, medicine, zoology, geography and cartography. The scholars accumulated a great collection of world knowledge, and built on it through their own discoveries. By the middle of the ninth century, the House of Wisdom had the largest selection of books in the world.

Yet in 1258 it was destroyed by an Mongol army, which, after a siege of two weeks, entered Baghdad and annihilated all libraries.



◆ The library in Mali -- Timbuktu

Mali is located in western Africa, south of the Sahara desert. In medieval times, from about 1340 to about 1600, Mali was an influential realm, larger than today's Mali.



For many centuries, Timbuktu, founded by Tuaregs circa 1100, an islamic city, flourished from the trade in salt and gold, and became the cultural centre of the historic Mali empire.

Its largest mosque, the mosques of Sankoré, developed into some kind of a muslim university, a "Madrasah". Timbuktu was also a centre of book trade in Africa. This, and the thousands of students buying and reading them, lead to an amazing volume of books.



However, Timbuktu never had a formal library. Most books were actually stored in private households. These were texts about medicine, philosophy, science and art, and of course many copies of the Quran. Nearly all of the manuscripts were written in Arabic. Altogether the number of books in various collections is estimated as half a million.

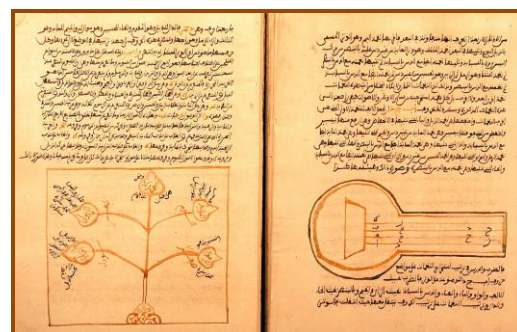
The care regarding the storage of books varied widely. Timbuktu was and still is a windy and sandy place, and occasionally it could be hit by floods. Within some institutions, such as the Sankoré Madrasah, books and manuscripts were kept 'ad hoc', often in a casual and not well-protected setting.



Yet many families had well-made boxes for them, which were maintained over centuries.



The collections in Timbuktu contain exceptionally beautiful arabic books, which finally became well-known and included in library documentations.



At the end of the Mali realm, Timbuktu entered a long period of decline, and today it's not a mighty town anymore, in spite of its fame. Yet 1988 it became a World Heritage site. And since 2005 several universities run projects to investigate, conserve and utilize the books.

Yet in 2013 a very sad event happened: The militant Islamist group "Ansar Dine" attacked historic buildings and destroyed a main library as well. The losses are immense.



◆ *Medieval & renaissance & baroque libraries in Europe*

Europe, after the end of the Roman Empire and a long phase of migrations, was for some time somewhat 'uncultured' - yet eventually cultivated king courts developed, many churches built up their own culture, and monasteries and cloisters were founded.

Most of them included a library, in fact, to install a 'high-class' library was almost a "must". On the following pages some well-regarded examples are shown, all representing a new epoch of significant libraries. Some have World Heritage status!



Wolfenbuettel in Germany



Dublin in Ireland



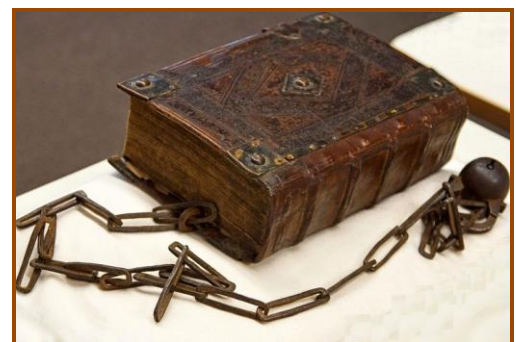
Melk Abbey in Austria



Strahov Library in Prague



Library in Vatican City



In early times libraries worried that valuable books got stolen - to avoid this, each book was chained!



Tripitaka library, South Korea

The Tripitaka library, installed in the 13th century, is extremely unusual: It contains Buddhist texts carved into thousands of wood blocks, sized 70 cm in width and 24 cm in length.

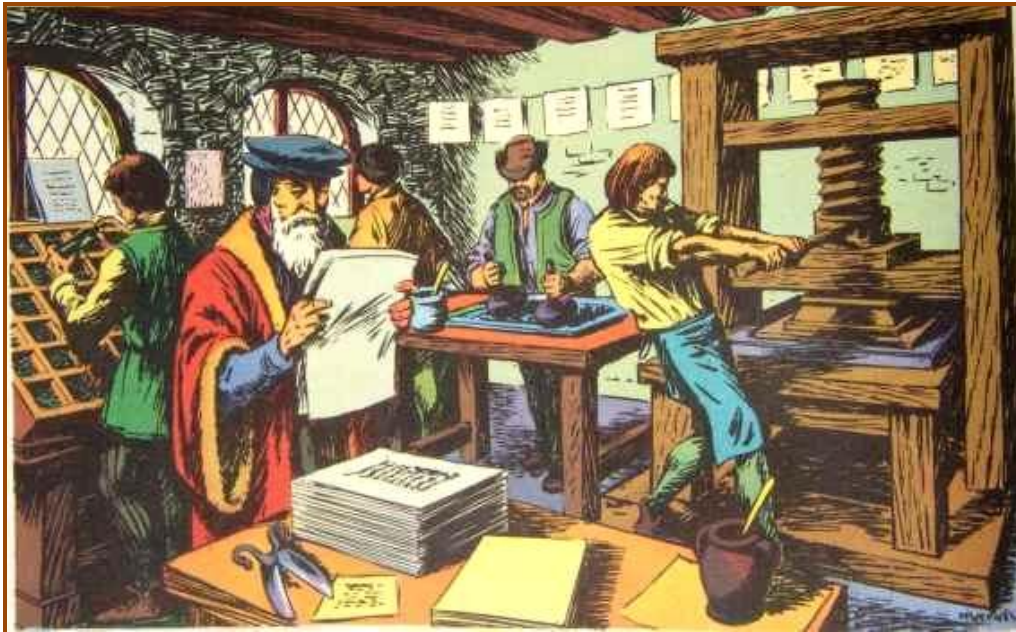
◆ The largest libraries

The most crucial event in the history of libraries was Johannes Gutenberg's invention of printing books, using a printing press with movable types. This began in 1439, and in 1450 this revolutionary technique was fully developed.



For both, the development of science and the education of the public, it had immeasurable impact that any kind of book could now be printed repeatedly. His prints could contain both text and images.

An important part of his work was that he also printed the bible.



The other essential factor regarding big libraries was that eventually all countries decided to have their own official library. This is the case for about 30 countries - however, because of the impacts of wars some of these are not in full might anymore.

The British Library of the United Kingdom ~ Great Britain always was and still is the largest one, housing about 170 million books.

Almost as large is the Library of Congress in Washington/USA (see below), stating 160 mio books. It is assumed that it will soon become the richest one.





The Russian Federation has two very large state libraries, one in St Petersburg (the former capital city) and one in Moscow (see below). There are many more libraries in Russia. This is in line with the observation that reading books always had a high significance in this country.



Below is the State library of China, located in Beijing.





◆ Libraries of unique design

When looking at architecture and history together, then -- in my view -- no library is more unique than the new Biblioteca Alexandrina (presented above).



Nevertheless, quite a few are exceptional in their shape and appearance as well, and below I will show at least some of these libraries - especially those I have visited myself.



State Library St Petersburg



Library at BTU Cottbus/Germany



Library of UNAM in Mexico City



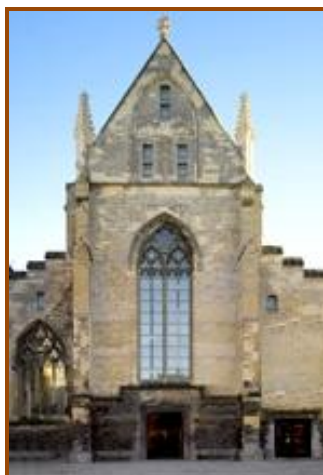
Centre Pompidou in Paris/France, containing exhibition areas and a library



Bishan Public Library in Singapore

Of all these libraries, the one in Mexico City has impressed me most, because the richness and the originality of this art is truly spectacular.

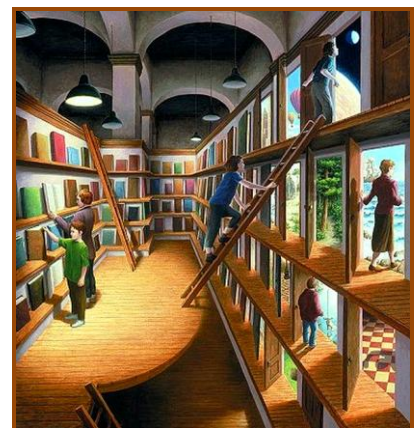
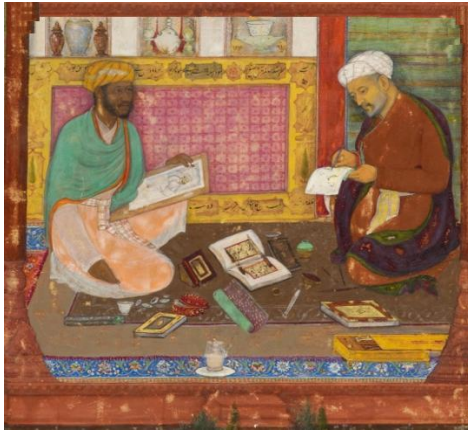
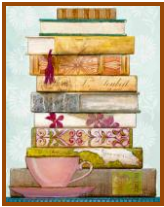
The final view is not really a library - it is the most unusual bookstore I have ever seen, built into a (former) church in Maastricht/Netherlands.





◆ Libraries in paintings

Books, and people who are reading them, have been painted by artists for hundreds of years, ranging from traditional 'classic' perspectives to all sorts of modern styles. Here are some examples:





The most ingenious painting about books I have ever seen is by the outstanding artist Arcimboldo, named "The librarian" - here it is.





◆ Libraries for me

First of all, a few minutes from my house is the Carlton Library of Yarra City. I am a customer there as long as I live in Melbourne/Australia.



As this library is linked to many other libraries, they get hold of almost every book I want to read. And there are no fees! So I am a very happy client.

Secondly, the state of Victoria has an official library. This very large library opened in 1856, just 30 years after the founding of Melbourne. It holds over 2 million books, 16000 serials, and various historic documents. And It actually claims to be one of the first free public libraries in the world.

The entry to the library is through a grand façade in classical style with 8 tall columns. And there are various statues in front of the building and inside.



The most-known feature of this library is the large octagonal "domed" reading room, which was opened in 1913. It has places for several hundred readers, and at the walls up to 1 mio books can be stored.



The dome is 35 m in both diameter and height. At the time of its installation, it was the largest of its type in the world on completion.

A critical note: Because of the complex structure of the library sections, the very large number of users, and the insufficient information system for customers it can get stressy to use it.

In front of the library is an unusual and very thoughtful peace of art.





Finally - yes, I have a library myself! It's only a little one, hardly 2000 books. Main topics are: Countries, travels, art, architecture, humour, and 'arty' books, like foldable ones. Plus, lots & lots of crime novels.



A few years ago my library suffered from flooding (because of a leak in the roof), but most of the watered books could be rescued!

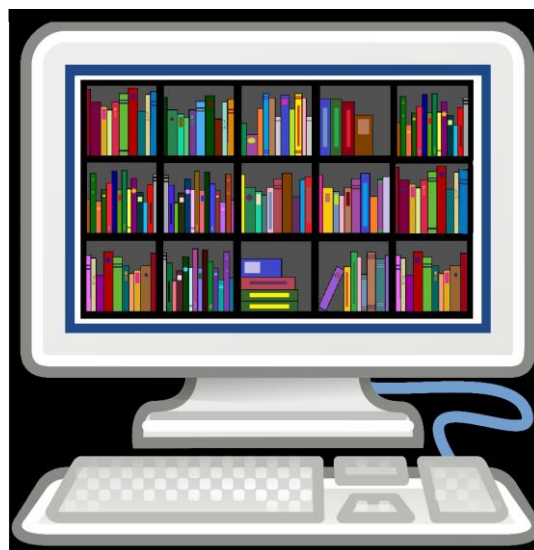
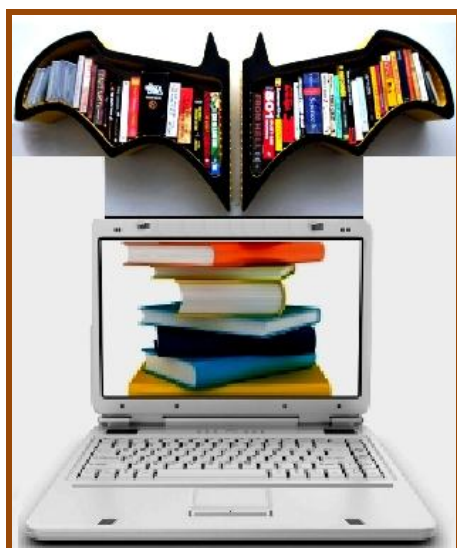


◆ The future of libraries

For more than 4000 years libraries were truly essential for the society. Will this continue??

May be not? There is increasing doubt. Here are some pessimism viewpoints:

- ☠ Many young people don't read books anymore, they are focussed on messages which they receive via smartphones. Within this lifestyle things have to be compact and short, yet that's not what books are like.
- ☠ Many bookstores have closed down, mostly because of Amazon. Some people think this will increase the use of libraries; others assume that this will reduce the interests in books generally.
- ☠ To run libraries, and to keep them up with new literature, cost a lot of money. One could introduce a loan fee, but then customers may abandon libraries and not come anymore.
- ☠ An increasing number of books is now available on the internet, so one doesn't need a library. The so-called e-books are actually designed for this.



Fortunately there are also some optimism viewpoints:

- ☞ Older and unique books, which are not traded anymore, may only be available in a good library.
- ☞ Large-format books with full-page colour images can not be enjoyed on smartphone or tablet screens - only the actual book is visually exciting.
- ☞ A well-run local (!) library, which adds social issues to its agenda (as my library does), can become a social meeting place.
- ☞ May be old-style books with history - of which there are many in libraries - will become fashionable?



Doubting about libraries seems especially indicated for "modern" western countries, such as Australia - in Eastern Europe and more so in Asia reading books is not unfashionable, and thus libraries have a good standing. In China there are 3000 public libraries!

There is a pleasing new concept: The "Travelling Library". The two librarians below, in India, are an exciting example - they are on the road for 2 years now, carrying 4000 books!



In Germany, many libraries were destroyed in World-War II, and a third of books were lost. After the war rebuilding was intense. Given that very modern concepts were applied, quite a few libraries are designed as Internet-based resources; conventional access to the books themselves may be restricted.

All in all, my own view is neither optimism nor pessimism, it's -- realism.

I guess that, in the longer run, libraries will only survive in special environments, like schools or universities or hospitals or prisons, yet not survive as a service to the general public. Some libraries may endure as a museum!



<i> Valuable info sources re libraries

- [A] There are many books about libraries; the most valuable one is:
The library - A world history. By J. Campbell & W. Pryce. Thames & Hudson 2015.
- [B] The internet provides information about almost every library; I used webpages in English and in German language.
- [C] About many issues are valuable articles in Wikipedia.
- [D] Even how to deal with libraries is outlined in books! An enjoyable one:
The library book. By (multiple authors). Profile Books 2012.

