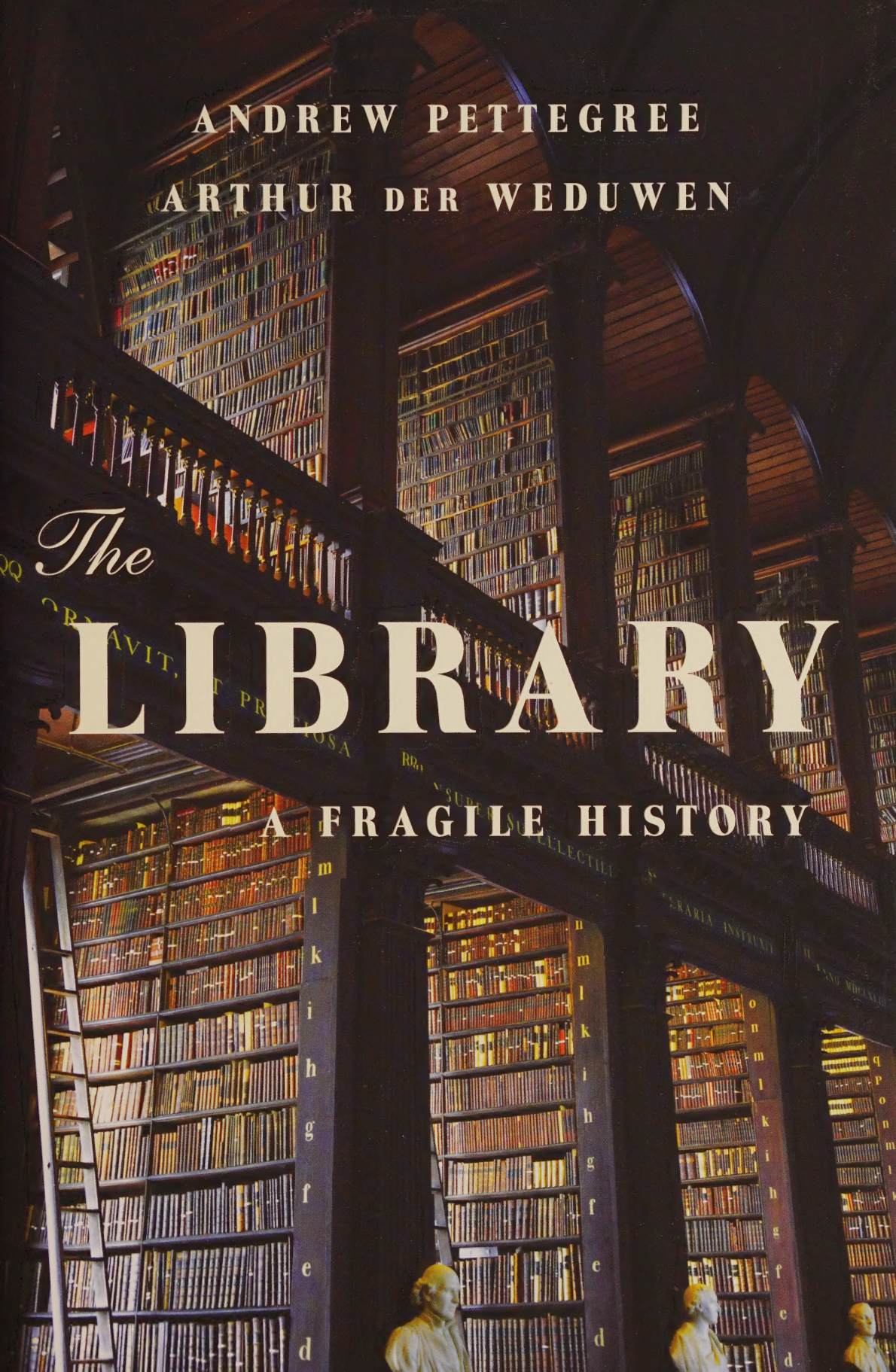




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The

LIBRARY

A FRAGILE HISTORY

Famed across the known world, jealously guarded by private collectors, built up over centuries, destroyed in a single day, ornamented with gold leaf and frescoes, or filled with beanbags and children's drawings—the history of the library is rich, varied, and stuffed full of incident.

In *The Library*, the first major work of its kind, historians Andrew Pettegree and Arthur der Weduwen trace this extraordinary history, from the famous collections of the ancient world to the embattled public resources we cherish today. Along the way, they introduce us to the antiquarians and philanthropists who shaped the world's great collections, trace the rise and fall of technologies, ideologies, and tastes, and reveal the high crimes and misdemeanors committed in pursuit of rare and valuable manuscripts. Very often, they find, libraries flourish in the hands of their first owner, then waste away as collections that represented the values and interests of one generation fail to speak to the one that follows. Yet while collections themselves fall victim to damp, dust, moths, and

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BASIC BOOKS
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CHAPTER ONE

A CONFUSION OF SCROLLS

On 16 October 2002, an impressive cast of world dignitaries gathered in the Egyptian city of Alexandria for the formal opening of one of the most remarkable cultural initiatives of the modern age: a new waterfront library resurrecting one of the wonders of the ancient world. Thirty years in the making, its genesis dated back to a visit to Egypt by American president Richard Nixon in 1974, during which the ill-starred president asked if he could be shown the site of the fabled library of Alexandria. Embarrassment ensued, since no one knew exactly where it might be: along with the buildings and its multitude of scrolls, even the place on which the ancient library stood had vanished into the sands of time.

Nixon would resign two months later, but local academics sniffed an opportunity. Frustrated by Alexandria's loss of influence to Cairo as a consequence of Gamal Abdel Nasser's Pan-Arabism and anti-colonialism, they saw the chance to revive a cultural icon, and with it Alexandria's place in the intellectual world. The appeal to universal civilising values embodied in the ancient library secured the influential support of UNESCO, leading in 1990 to the portentous Aswan Declaration, which committed the governments of Europe, the United States and the Arab world to building a new library as a monument to the 'quest for universal knowledge'. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States pledged substantial sums, only to be trumped by Saddam Hussein, whose pledge of \$21 million secured for Iraq the place of honour at the 2002 ceremonies.¹

With so much international enthusiasm, it seemed almost impolite to question the wisdom of building a library in a run-down Egyptian port with no discernible need for such a facility. Certainly there would have been other ways to spend a grand total

of \$210 million that would improve the lives of Egyptian citizens. In the twelve-year period between the Aswan Declaration and the library's grand opening it was not difficult to find critics of 'Mubarak's new pyramid', painstakingly erected in a nation with widespread illiteracy and a far from unblemished record with regard to intellectual freedom. Much of the pledged help came in the form of donated books, including half a million in French, many of which were functionally useless and had to be discarded. The decision of Alexandria University to sell much of its own collection in anticipation of these new riches proved woefully premature.

In the twenty years since its opening, the new library of Alexandria has struggled with an insufficient acquisitions budget, disaffected staff and accusations of corruption, not to mention the upheaval of the Arab Spring and its aftermath. But regardless of whether you see the new library of Alexandria as a quixotic monument to the tortured politics of international cultural diplomacy, or the visionary celebration of a unique experiment in the history of human knowledge, it certainly points to the distinguished role of the ancient library of Alexandria in the history of libraries. Part fable, part historical reality, the ancient library of Alexandria has been a powerful symbol of intellectual aspiration throughout the history of book collecting. When the libraries of Rome burned to the ground in the heyday of the Roman Empire, it was to Alexandria that Emperor Domitian sent his scribes to create new copies for his library. When Fernando Colon decided to assemble a library encompassing all the world's knowledge in the sixteenth century, it was Alexandria he claimed as his inspiration.² Renaissance champions of scholarship evoked Alexandria as regularly as have the new barons of the digital age. The progenitors of Amazon, Google and Wikipedia can all, in this sense, lay claim to Alexandria's mantle.

The foundations of western civilisation owe so much to the inspiration and achievements of Greece and Rome that it is no surprise that we look there for models of library building and the roots of our culture of collecting. This expectation is, to an extent, justified. The Greeks required, and devised, the means to capture the intellectual achievements of the age of Aristotle, and

the Romans appropriated this cultural legacy with their customary ruthless efficiency. But even the Romans, with their apparently limitless resources for major infrastructure projects, struggled to resolve the problems that would bedevil the history of book collecting for the next two millennia: the provision of reliable texts and the principles governing who had access to them; the optimum means to store knowledge; and most of all how to establish stable collections that would pass down through the generations. All of this somehow eluded these most gifted architects of civilisation. Later scholars would take from Greece and Rome an inspiring vision of the empowerment of knowledge, and the potentialities of collecting – as well as a lesson in how easily attempts to embody this vision could turn to ashes.

Behold Alexandria

The Greeks were not the first to create libraries. The rulers of the Assyrian Empire of Mesopotamia (present-day Iraq) gathered considerable quantities of documents, all carefully inscribed in their distinctive cuneiform script on to clay tablets. These baked clay tablets survive remarkably well, since they are virtually impervious to damp or fire; but they were enormously bulky to store and too ponderous to move around easily. These cuneiform libraries were located in royal palaces or temples, and intended exclusively for the use of scholarly staff and royal owners. They were not open to the public, as was made clear by this inscription at the end of one such text: ‘One who is competent (or knowledgeable) should show this only to one who is also competent, but may not show it to the uninitiated.’³ In any case, in societies where literacy was confined to the ruling class, and their officials and spiritual guides, few would have aspired to access these early monuments of written culture.

Some of these elite libraries were quite considerable. Collections of 700 or 800 items have been excavated, and the royal libraries of Nineveh stored 35,000 tablets. All of these libraries were destroyed when the Assyrian Empire was conquered by the Babylonians in 614–612 BC. The Babylonian libraries faded from

view more gradually, rendered redundant by more functional alphabetical writing systems, and new media more convenient than clay tablets: parchment and papyrus. The discovery of the papyrus plant, and its excellence as a writing medium, was an essential requirement for the translation of the emerging Greek culture from an oral to a written form: papyrus grew abundantly in the Nile delta, and the techniques of splitting the reed stalks and weaving them together as writing sheets were easily mastered. Papyrus became the pre-eminent writing medium of the ancient world, exported from Egypt to Greece and later Rome, and made possible the extraordinary experiment in knowledge acquisition that became the library at Alexandria.

By the fourth century BC, Greece was a highly literate society, at least at the elite level.⁴ A flourishing commercial book trade ensured that the milestones of literature and texts taught at schools were fairly freely available, and those with an occupational need for books (always in this period papyrus scrolls) could find them easily enough. Aristophanes mocked Euripides as a journeyman writer who 'squeezed [his plays] out of books'.⁵ By 338 BC, Athens was sufficiently concerned about the poor copies of plays in circulation that they established an official archive of authoritative texts. The philosopher Aristotle, who tutored the young Alexander the Great and deserves credit for infusing the young warrior with a similar love of book learning, assembled a personal collection of considerable size. His books would eventually make their way to Rome, removed in 84 BC from the conquered city of Athens by the victorious general Sulla, though not before this remarkable personal library had helped inspire the organisation of the new institution in Alexandria.

The planting of a Greek city on the northern coast of Egypt played a key role in the expansive imperial vision of Alexander the Great, though he did not live to see the creation of the great seaport or its library. This was the achievement of the first two Ptolemaic kings, the dynasty born of Ptolemy the First, who secured Egypt when Alexander's empire was carved up among his leading generals. The library of Alexandria was first and foremost a scholarly academy: the rapidly developing collection of texts was essentially

their research archive. Scholars who agreed to join the community in Egypt received benefits few academics could even dream of: a lifetime appointment, with a handsome salary, exemption from tax and free food and lodging. Among those tempted by these blandishments were the scientists Euclid, Strabo and Archimedes. From these names we can judge that the Ptolemies furnished their library not only with the classics of literature, but serious texts in the fields of mathematics, geography, physics and medicine. The pace of acquisitions was dazzling. Agents travelled throughout the Greek territories purchasing books on an industrial scale. Less creditably, scrolls were forcibly removed for copying from any ship entering the port. Many ships' captains would have needed to continue their journey before the originals were returned.⁶

We will never really know how many texts were accumulated by this library: scholars have spoken of 200,000 or even half a million scrolls. Whatever figure we choose, this was a library of a size that would never again be achieved until the nineteenth century. A collection of this magnitude necessarily required careful organisation. Scrolls were stored in recessed alcoves, where they could be stacked in organised groups. The sheer size of the Alexandrian library demanded far more systematic cataloguing, with books split between many different chambers. The texts were stored alphabetically, though presumably also organised by genre, the leading principle of classification in every institutional library thereafter. A feature of the Alexandrian library was the high quality of the scholars recruited as librarians. One, Callimachus of Cyrene, completed the first ever bibliographical dictionary of authors. Like so much connected with Alexandria, this has not survived. The scholars of Alexandria also took advantage of the inevitable presence of many duplicates to attempt to establish authoritative editions of the major texts, a quest that would be resumed in the Renaissance with the exhumation of classical texts from monastic libraries.⁷ In Alexandria, as also in the Renaissance, this endeavour inevitably spawned another critical genre, the scholarly commentary.

When Rome seized leadership of the ancient world, the Alexandrian Academy would recede in importance. What became of

the contents of the library is one of the great mysteries in the long history of libraries. In Plutarch's *Life of Caesar*, the destruction of the library is presented as a tragic by-product of the campaign of Julius Caesar to secure Egypt for his lover, Cleopatra. When Caesar ordered the burning of the Egyptian navy in the harbour, the fire spread to a dockside warehouse, consuming many books. These were likely to have been new acquisitions awaiting cataloguing, rather than the main library: as we have already seen, Emperor Domitian relied on Alexandria to restock Roman libraries lost in the fire of AD 79. A more plausible explanation sees the destruction of the library as a consequence of the Egyptian campaign of Emperor Aurelian in AD 272, when the palace quarter of Alexandria was laid waste. The polemical contribution of the relentlessly anticlerical eighteenth-century English author Edward Gibbon, who blamed the loss of the library on the campaign against pagan structures waged by the Christian Emperor Theodosius in AD 391, can largely be disregarded; likewise the suggestion that the books were destroyed on the orders of Caliph Omar after the Arab conquest of Egypt in the seventh century.⁸

The truth is that none of these explanations need be true. The major disadvantage of papyrus, otherwise an excellent medium for information storage, is its susceptibility to damp. Even in a well-curated collection, texts need to be recopied after a generation or two. The sheer size of the Alexandrian library militated against its survival. As with so many of the libraries we will meet in this book, neglect was a much more potent enemy than war or malice.

Rome

The contribution of Rome to the foundation of western civilisation – roads, aqueducts, the postal service, a host of administrative systems and legal codes – is so profound, that it is natural to expect a major contribution also to the development of the institutional library. In fact, in this respect at least, Rome fell short. The government of a large empire certainly generated an enormous amount of wealth and required considerable development in the bureaucratisation of administration. A vibrant commercial book market

facilitated the accumulation of significant collections of books. Statesmen, authors and philosophers all gathered great libraries, often in each of their several residences. But for all that, Rome boasted nothing that we would recognise as a public library.

By far the most prominent and visible libraries in Rome were those established by the emperors, beginning with Augustus. This built on a scheme first conceived by Julius Caesar, thwarted by his assassination, to include libraries in his plan for 'adorning and building up' the city of Rome, a phrase which hints at the true purpose of these collections. Emperor Augustus placed libraries in the Temple of Apollo, establishing a widely imitated practice of dividing the Greek and Latin texts into separate collections. Most imperial libraries, like those of Augustus, were situated in a palace or temple. Libraries were seldom, if ever, housed in a separate building.

The establishment of such libraries greatly excited Rome's poets, who heaped praise on Asinius Pollio, the friend of Julius Caesar who would bring his plan for a library to fulfilment. According to Pliny the Elder, Asinius was 'the first to make the genius of man public property', a phrase echoed by Suetonius when he described the library as 'open to the public'.⁹ We have to be careful with these phrases: authors in Rome, from Cicero to Pliny, were almost by definition members of the elite, and the public they had in mind was composed of people like themselves. When Pliny the Younger capped a successful public career by establishing a library in his home town of Comum, the opening was not accompanied by celebratory games or gladiatorial contests of the sort likely to engage the local population. Pliny's speech at the dedication of the library was given to a far more select audience in the council building. Here the library was primarily a monument to its founder. The role of the townspeople was largely to admire the library as they walked past, and thus recall the brilliant career of their most prominent local son. As we will see, this was not so very different from the motivation of many generous philanthropists in the nineteenth-century United States when they gave their home town a public library (often adorned by classical colonnades in the Roman style).¹⁰

The imperial libraries were, nevertheless, important public institutions. They served as venues for gatherings of prominent citizens who would frequently be treated to poetic declamations. They also played a role, by their choice of texts, in establishing a canon of admired authors. The most distinguished would sometimes be honoured by a bust in the library; those overlooked fretted about how their masterworks could be insinuated into the collection. Emperors were also not slow to intervene in banning the circulation of disapproved texts, or works thought to be personally embarrassing, as Augustus did in the case of three pieces of juvenilia written by his ancestor Julius Caesar. In one particularly egregious case, Emperor Domitian ordered not only the execution of the author and bookseller of an offensive text but also the crucifixion of the unfortunate enslaved scribes responsible for producing the actual copies.¹¹

A far larger number of people would have attended events in the imperial libraries than the much more restricted circle who needed access to the texts. Active users would have been limited to a small number of imperial officials, favoured poets and members of the Roman legal establishment and ruling classes. The library, like access to the imperial households, was an important part of the nexus of patronage, and the example set by the emperors in this regard was imitated by statesmen and generals such as Sulla, who returned from campaigns bearing valuable collections of books. The great library of Lucullus, booty from the Mithridatic War, became a magnet for Greek scholars in Rome. Even Cicero, who had significant collections of books at all of his residences, found it opportune to consult in the library of Lucullus texts that he did not own himself.¹² By opening their collections to visitors, ambitious public figures could simultaneously consolidate their reputations as men of letters while building a personal following. In the case of statesmen and generals, this did not necessarily involve an intimate acquaintance with their own books. Seneca considered a library a necessary part of a stylish home – but he also complained of the overabundance of unread books that this collecting generated. According to the waspish Lucian of Samosata, in the second century many politicians acquired a library

purely to win the favour of Marcus Aurelius, a notably bookish emperor.¹³

The Avoidance of Grief

Books served many purposes in Rome, not always having much to do with reading. For all that, the accumulating wealth of learning made its way through radiating circles of readers on to the shelves of many private libraries. We see this not only in the libraries of distinguished scholars like Cicero, Pliny, or the great Greco-Roman medical authority Galen, but in the extraordinarily rich library excavated from the ruins of a private house in Herculaneum entombed after the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. In this expansive villa, archaeologists discovered a small storeroom containing 1,700 scrolls. These were not administrative or estate records, but a collection of Epicurean philosophy.¹⁴ From circumstantial evidence it has been established that this collection belonged originally to Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, father-in-law of Julius Caesar, who was the patron of Philodemus of Gadara, the philosophical writer whose works were so generously represented in this collection. Most of the writings were over a hundred years old when the villa was buried in the eruption. The room in which they were stored would have been too small for reading: doubtless they were brought to a well-lit chamber elsewhere in the house by the enslaved worker charged with curating the collection.

Creating and maintaining a library of this size would have been an expensive undertaking. While texts were easily accessible in the markets of Rome, concerns about their accuracy impelled serious collectors to employ their own scribes to make copies of trusted texts on their behalf. Access to texts required the mobilisation of well-placed friends; Cicero relied on the library of Atticus, a well-connected patrician deeply engaged in the Roman publishing industry. Even if a friend could be prevailed upon to furnish the text, copying was expensive, since a slave trained as a scribe was hard to find. One could buy a small library for the price of an enslaved scribe capable of writing both Greek and Latin.¹⁵ For this reason, if we set aside the show collections of retired generals

and the main imperial libraries, the more serious collections were usually those assembled by professional men such as Galen, the lawyer Cicero, or men who combined a career in public life with philosophical enquiry, such as the Elder and Younger Pliny.¹⁶ In these lives, books played an indispensable part. Galen's library is known to us through his plaintive treatise written after the fire in the Temple of Peace in AD 192 where much of his collection was stored.¹⁷ This work, the evocatively titled *On the Avoidance of Grief*, painfully recreates the process by which Galen had built his collection: consulting texts in numerous Roman libraries, sometimes making copies, sometimes epitomes and compilations of texts. The flexibility of the compilation, the ability to create bespoke texts from segments of other works, was one of the key features distinguishing the manuscript book world from the age of print, where the order and nature of texts was established before they came into the hands of the purchaser. This loss of autonomy in the creation of books would be one of the major sources of regret among established collectors in the transition from manuscript to print in the fifteenth century.¹⁸

Some books had to be purchased, and others arrived as gifts; some works came to Galen in exchange for his own voluminous works (these on their own were enough to fill 700 scrolls). This pattern of collecting could also describe the experience of professional men eager to build a library at any point between the sixteenth and the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Exploring every avenue to obtain books, perhaps even strategically forgetting to return books loaned by friends, helps explain why so many doctors, lawyers, ministers or professors in this later era of book collecting could build very considerable libraries, often with only a fraction of the financial resources on which a man like Galen could draw.

The literary output of the Roman Empire, along with the inherited culture of Greece, would shape western civilisation; if, that is, it could be preserved. None of the imperial libraries, and certainly none of these personal collections would survive the ravages of time, except for the library of Herculaneum, preserved by the calamity that destroyed both this coastal resort and the neighbouring Pompeii. But even with this imperfect historical record, and

recognising how little we know about how Romans read or stored their books, this early period of library formation lays bare many of the dilemmas of collecting that would shape the library world in the succeeding two millennia.²⁰ What was a library: were books for display or working tools? Should collectors aim to emulate the universalist library of Alexandria, or the more focused collections of Galen or Cicero?

What, crucially, was the public for a public library? Was the key motivation for building a library accessibility, or the demonstration of elite power? Should the library be a place of sociability or silence, a meeting place or a place of study? In Roman libraries, it seems quite frequently to have been the case that the scrolls were stored separately before consultation in a study or a more public gallery. Certainly, on the few occasions when contemporary accounts give us a glimpse of the workings of the imperial libraries, there is little sign of space set aside for quiet perusal of the library's riches. The Romans promoted important innovations in indexing and cataloguing; they sold books at auction, a practice which, when reinvented in the seventeenth century, completely transformed the process of building a library. They also faced the problem, common to all ages of collecting, of what to do with redundant texts; should they be stored for future generations as memorials of previous historical eras, or cast out to make room for new books? In the age of the papyrus this was a particularly urgent question, since neglect would eventually imply extinction. With papyrus, one did not have the luxury of the age of paper or parchment, of allowing books to slumber unread on the shelves for centuries without the need for further curation. Even when one welcomed a flourishing book market, how should the circulation of information be controlled? We have seen that the Romans would take decisive and sometimes cruel steps to remove seditious or embarrassing literature from the market-place: it did not need the invention of printing to convince authorities of the potential dangers of unfettered access to texts.

The Romans faced all these issues and more. Despite the glamour of the imperial libraries, the Roman Empire points to private collections as the natural locus of the library, and principal

vectors of public discourse; largely because the public admitted to allegedly public libraries was so shallow and narrow, as it would continue to be, right through until the end of the nineteenth century. Collectively, the libraries assembled in villas and town houses in Rome and scattered through the empire offer a more promising road map to the future of book collecting than the imperial libraries or, it must be said, the semi-mythical beast that was the library of Alexandria.

Finally, we must pay tribute to two unsung heroes of the Roman book world: the enslaved scribes who ensured that texts would be preserved through their copying, and the Christian Church, initially reviled, but ultimately the salvation of Roman culture. In the first centuries after the birth of Christianity, Romans became accustomed to the spectacle of watching Christians being torn apart by wild animals in the Colosseum; many others died a less theatrical but equally painful death. So it is a neat irony that ultimately the fruits of Roman learning would depend on the resilience of the Christian faith for their survival. For while the Vandals, Goths and Ostrogoths feasted on the wreckage of Roman civilisation, its culture would find its ultimate refuge in that quintessentially Christian institution, the monastery. Here, the works of Cicero and Seneca would nestle peacefully among Christian texts, temporarily safe from the ravages of time and plunder, to take their place as cornerstones of library culture after their rediscovery in the Renaissance. This was but one of many examples we will see of the operation of a whimsical lottery that ensured that some texts would survive, poked away in some Bavarian monastery, while others would be lost for ever. That was the fate that awaited the intellectual harvest of this most remarkable civilisation as the tides of history swept away the glories of Rome.