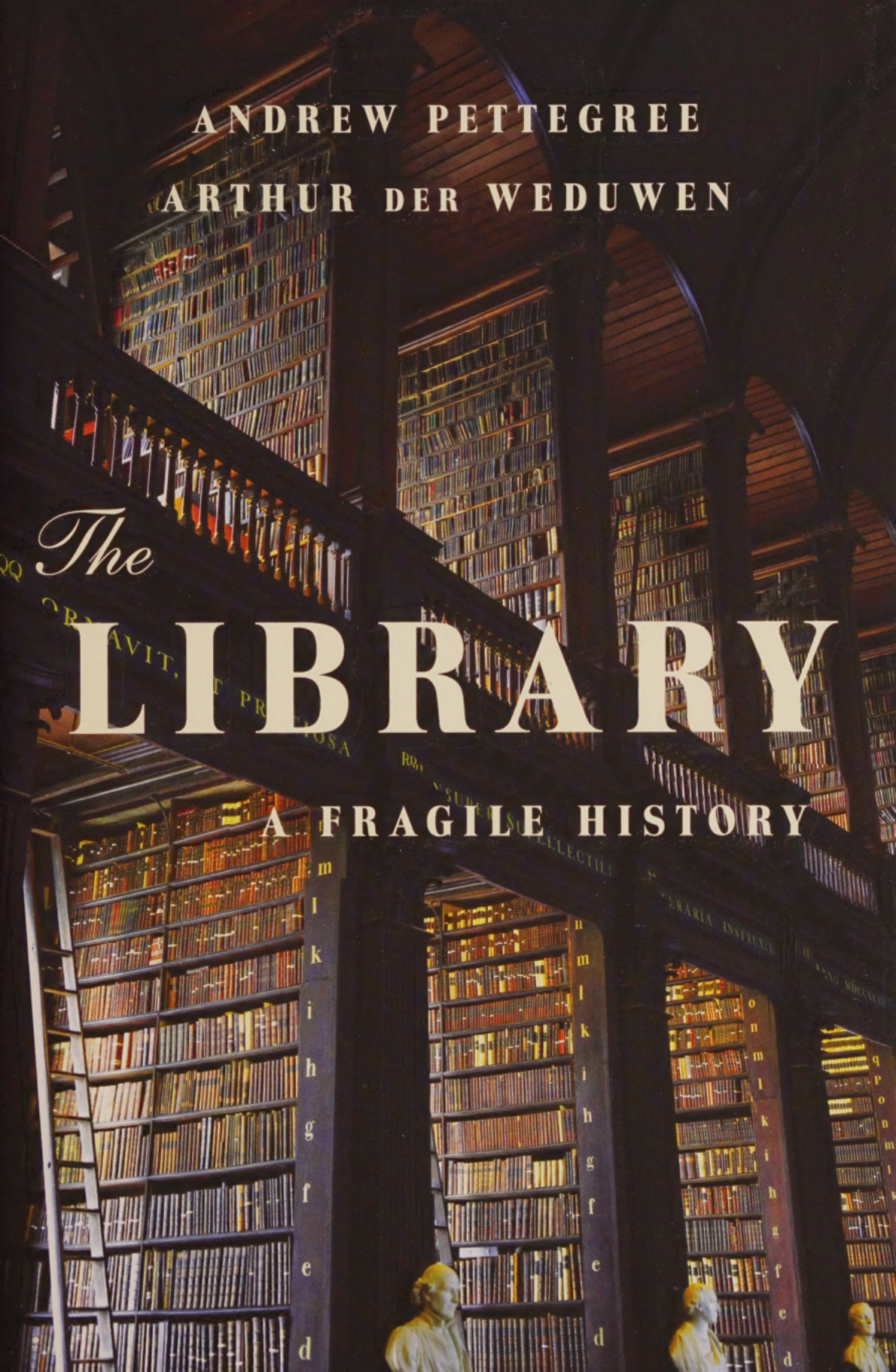




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The

LIBRARY

A FRAGILE HISTORY

CHAPTER TWO

SANCTUARY

In the middle of the fourteenth century, the writer and poet Giovanni Boccaccio paid a visit to the Italian monastery of Monte Cassino. Located on an imposing Apennine hilltop, some 80 miles south-east of Rome, this monastic complex resembled a fortress, commanding strategic views over the Latin valley, one of the chief routes from Rome to Naples. Within the protection of its thick walls, Monte Cassino housed a great treasure: an extraordinary collection of ancient manuscripts. To Boccaccio, a devoted student of the Roman classics, making the formidable ascent to the hill was the stuff of dreams. The humanist scholar Benvenuto da Imola, who heard the story first hand from the poet himself, wrote that upon arriving, Boccaccio 'modestly asked a monk – for he was always most courteous in manners – to open the library, as a favour, for him'.

The monk answered stiffly, pointing to a steep staircase, 'Go up; it is open.' Boccaccio went up gladly; but he found that the place which held so great a treasure, was without door or key. What he found, when he pushed through the open doorway, shocked him to the core. He entered and saw grass sprouting on the windows, and all the books and benches thick with dust. In his astonishment he began to open and turn the leaves of first one tome and then another, and found many and diverse volumes of ancient and foreign works. Some of them had lost several sheets; others were snipped and pared all round the text, and mutilated in various ways. At length, lamenting that the toil and study of so many illustrious men should have passed into the hands of [the] most abandoned

wretches, he departed with tears and sighs. Coming to the cloister, he asked a monk whom he met, why those valuable books had been so disgracefully mangled. He answered that the monks, seeking to gain a few *soldi*, were in the habit of cutting off sheets and making psalters.¹

As with Hugo Blotius's description of his arrival in the Hofbibliothek, we may suspect an element of exaggeration in this account of Boccaccio's visit. Just as the emperor's new librarian was keen to play up his own great achievement in reordering the library, so too the humanist scholars of the Renaissance were eager to contrast their own bold new intellectual agenda with the obscurantism of the established medieval institutions. This somewhat mean-spirited account, written during the 1370s, does little credit to the fortitude of the monks of Monte Cassino, whose home had recently been devastated by an earthquake. Many of the monks had been expelled, replaced by a garrison of soldiers fulfilling their part in the political game of chess played by the Pope and the crowns of France and Aragon for control of southern Italy. Some of the choicest pieces in the library, including presumed lost manuscripts of works by Tacitus and Apuleius, had already been removed in the preceding decades by other illustrious visitors, and found their way to the private libraries of abbots, diplomats and scholars.

We can learn much from the turbulent history of the monastery at Monte Cassino. It was founded in the third decade of the sixth century by Benedict of Nursia (later St Benedict), as one of the first of many monastic communities to emerge from the ruins of the Roman Empire. Within fifty years, the monastery was razed to the ground by invading Lombards; resurrected, it was destroyed again by Saracens at the end of the ninth century. A period of renewal between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries saw the monastery amass immense riches as a pilgrimage site and centre of feverish literary production. In 1239, Emperor Frederick II expelled the monks, after which followed a series of unfortunate events that culminated in the reduction of the monastery to the decaying shell that Boccaccio encountered a hundred years later.²

Through all vicissitudes, the monks of Monte Cassino had

accumulated and lost, several times over, an unrivalled library of manuscript books. In the centuries that followed the collapse of the Roman Empire, book production and book collecting took place largely within the domain of monastic communities, established throughout Europe by missionaries of Jesus Christ; through their careful curation of the written word they played a vital role in the survival of the western world's heritage of books. By establishing small and often isolated bastions of spiritual contemplation, these evangelists provided a safe haven where scripture was copied, over and over, as an act of pious devotion. Many monasteries also played an important role in salvaging the remains of Roman culture by copying manuscripts containing the works of classical authors; indeed, this is how virtually all classical texts have come down to us today.

As the safe harbours of books, monasteries were also responsible for the survival of the library. This, as the case of Monte Cassino shows, was a story of triumph as much as heartbreak. In the millennium between 400 and 1400, periods of prosperity interspaced by spasms of political instability ensured that monasteries were rich targets for the next round of invaders, whether they were Saracens, Danes, Saxons or Magyars.³ Yet the virtues instilled in monastic communities required a steadfast devotion, even in the face of the greatest adversity. If one monastery fell, it would be replaced elsewhere; and when books were torn, burned or abandoned, they could be made anew. So Monte Cassino would also rise from its fourteenth-century ruins, surviving intact until its destruction during the Second World War. Even that calamity was not terminal; the monastery of Monte Cassino lives on, a beacon for pilgrims and booklovers still.

Behold the Codex

Despite their role as protectors of the classical inheritance, the Christian orders were far from innocent in the cycles of violence that often led to the destruction of libraries. Benedict and his followers established the monastery at Monte Cassino within the remains of a temple dedicated to Apollo, the altar of which they

had smashed. As pagan temples crumbled throughout the twilight days of the Roman Empire, so Christian churches and convents replaced them. In this process the young zealots of the Christian Church trampled underfoot many books, as Roman temples also functioned as libraries. The final great persecution of Christians, which took place between 303 and 312, had specifically targeted Christian books and libraries, along with their owners; now the Christian God would be honoured in a purified space.

Libraries played an important part in the lives of the earliest Christian believers. The apostles and their followers, many of whom led itinerant lives, had small travelling book collections: Paul asked Timothy to 'bring the books' which he had left at Troas.⁴ These were by all accounts practical libraries, made up predominantly of the books of the Old Testament and of the writings which were later to be canonised as the New Testament.⁵ The copying of scripture, old and new, was undertaken by believers throughout the Roman Empire, as essential tools for preaching and evangelising. Making copies of revered texts was also an act of prayer: as believers sought to live by scripture, they internalised the holy books through a form of meditation achieved through a constant recitation of the texts. In some of the earliest Christian monasteries, founded in the Egyptian desert during the dying days of the Roman Empire, the process of copying scripture was a commonplace meditative activity.⁶

The production of books gathered pace with the foundation of monastic institutions across the Mediterranean basin. John Cassian, founder of a monastery near Marseille around 415, included the manual copying of books among the useful labours to be undertaken by monks in order to focus spiritual contemplation: because 'a monk who works is troubled by only one devil, while an idle monk is troubled by many'.⁷ The rise of institutionalised monasticism, which enshrined the duties of an austere life devoted to prayer, called for discipline. As Cassian was writing, the young church was riven by doctrinal divisions; there was an ever-present danger that the monasteries could descend into hotbeds of heresy if the monks were allowed to waste away their leisure time with theological debate.



2. A miniature depicting St Benedict of Nursia handing down his Rule to his followers, in a copy of the Rule written around 1130. Although libraries were not mentioned in the Rule, the emphasis placed on individual reading ensured that western monasteries were active producers and collectors of books.

Cassian's talent for organisation and discipline inspired others to emulate him, including Benedict of Nursia. At Monte Cassino, Benedict composed his famous Rule, dictating how monks in Benedictine houses should order their day and regulate their lives. The Rule of Benedict, which would be used as the basic model of organisation for monastic orders throughout the medieval era, set aside ample time for reading, under the rubric of 'daily manual labour'. Every day the brothers were to read from scripture, communally and in private, for several hours. On Sundays, even more time was given over to reading, but 'if somebody is so careless or lazy that he is unwilling or unable to meditate or read, let him be given some work to do so he will not be idle'.⁸ Although Benedict's Rule never mentions writing, it implicitly encouraged the copying

of books as a virtuous and valuable activity, for the monks required many books; to share over evening readings as well as to take to their individual cells for study.

One contemporary of Benedict, a Roman nobleman named Cassiodorus, was more explicit in his encouragement of book production. Around 538, Cassiodorus retired from service as secretary to the Ostrogothic King Theodoric, and founded a monastery in southern Italy, the Vivarium. Cassiodorus instilled in his brethren the importance of the meticulous copying of books, urging scribes to pay particular attention to accuracy. Although the central purpose of his monastery was the faithful multiplication of Christian literature, the monks of the Vivarium also copied classical works. In this Cassiodorus was different from some of his contemporaries. Isidore of Seville, the encyclopaedic scholar, would warn: 'Let the monk beware of reading the books of gentiles and heretics. It is better for him to be ignorant of their pernicious doctrines than through making acquaintance with them to be enmeshed in error.'⁹

The Vivarium collapsed after the death of Cassiodorus, but its principles were passed on to others. Even Christians who, like Isidore, found themselves hostile to pagan literature, were caught in a dilemma.¹⁰ Christians in the remnants of the western Roman Empire could not sever the connection with their *lingua franca*, the Latin language. The monasteries had to follow the model of classical education, since there was no plausible alternative. Abbots, scholars and monks might be distrustful of the polytheistic religion, loose morals and flowery oratory of the classical authors, but they required the Roman rhetoricians, philosophers and historians to teach their brothers to read and write. The style of ancient Rome also infused the writings of the great Church Fathers, like Ambrose and Augustine, who relied heavily on the classical rhetoric of Cicero.

The debate on the copying and collecting of pagan literature unrolled in tandem with another crucial development of the period between the third and sixth centuries AD. The transition from the papyrus scroll, the preferred medium of ancient writing, to the parchment codex, with separate pages sewn together (a book), would transform the library. Parchment was not a new invention.

The treatment of animal skins to make sheets for writing was a long-established practice. The name derived from the Greek city of Pergamum, which is credited with having developed the technique of soaking, scraping and stretching skins to create a surface for writing. Yet parchment was not widely used in the ancient world, relied upon only during shortages of papyrus. In an era of abundant and cheap papyrus, this is understandable: parchment took longer to prepare and was far more expensive: a substantial parchment book would require the skins of more than a hundred calves, goats or sheep. But it did have two advantages: it was durable and would not degrade in climates colder than that of the Egyptian Nile delta, and one could write on both sides of the sheet, instead of the single side of papyrus.

It seems that the fall of the Roman Empire disrupted significantly the supply of papyrus throughout the Mediterranean world; parchment became the standard replacement. As the material of the book changed, so did the form. The codex, sheets or tablets laid on top of one another and sewn or stitched together at one edge, was also an older medium. Codices were available in ancient Rome but used almost exclusively as notebooks or as exercise boards in schools. At some time in the third century, codices began to replace scrolls as the normative way to preserve a body of text; it was clear that this transformation was tied up with the Christian movement, whose early texts were almost universally produced as codices. By the sixth century, the codex was triumphant and remained the standard form of the book until the present day.

The advantages of the codex over the scroll are profound: a codex can be opened at any point of the text with ease, whereas the scroll requires a serious effort, with both hands, to find one's place. Codices could also accommodate more material: a parchment codex could carry the entire text of the Old and New Testament, whereas a scroll would usually hold only a single book from the Bible. Storage was also an issue. Stacking large numbers of scrolls in a way that enabled an individual text to be easily identified was always difficult. The codex, especially when bound between wooden or leather covers, had a sturdy individuality, though it would be a considerable time before owners fixed upon what

we think of the natural way of displaying books, standing them upright in serried ranks on shelves. For the millennium after the collapse of the Roman Empire, books were mostly laid on tables, or stored in chests.

The abandonment of papyrus and the replacement of the scroll undoubtedly involved a considerable measure of loss of the inherited cultural tradition. All literature had to be recopied from rolls to codices, a process that took place largely in the Christian monasteries. Here the hierarchy of importance, what should be copied and what should be left to rot, depended on the character of the abbot in charge. Even if a text was marked for preservation, it would not necessarily be safe for long. The period between the sixth and the eighth centuries was the great age of the palimpsest: a parchment manuscript where the original text had been scraped or washed off, in order to free up valuable writing material.¹¹ The obliteration of classical texts was not necessarily an act of hostility to the august literature of Rome: many more Christian than pagan texts were destroyed in this manner. Parchment was too precious to carry an obsolete text; and in an era when the very act of writing was a pious activity, even the reuse of a Christian book was of no concern, only a necessary task to fulfil the spiritual needs of a community working towards salvation.

Scriptorium

The first generations of monasteries were not particularly wealthy institutions. Founded by a handful of monks, most monasteries developed out of little more than what the monks themselves could build and cultivate. Their lives were hard, their diets spartan. The monastic life was devoted to prayer and spiritual contemplation, but this was undertaken concurrently with back-breaking labour. The *Dialogues* of Pope Gregory I (c.540–604), which mention valuable labours that can be undertaken by monks, include an extensive list of manual works: building, baking, cleaning, gardening, and, of course, tilling the land.¹² Literary production may have been revered as a pious activity, but in practice it was a task that could, in the first years of the monastery, be reserved for the infirm.

Over the course of the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries, changes were set in motion that would alter the status of the monasteries from isolated retreats to centres of religious, pedagogical and cultural authority. The first factor that prompted this transformation was the feverish missionary activity undertaken by monks to convert those areas of Europe that were not incorporated into the Christian Church. This was a process that was sometimes undertaken from Rome, as when Gregory I sent Augustine to England to Christianise the Anglo-Saxon King Aethelberht of Kent, but the main impetus came from Ireland and western Scotland. From around 600 onwards, Celtic missionaries fanned out across Britain, France, Germany, Switzerland and Italy. They converted local rulers, extracted promises of land, and founded small communities of learning before moving on. One of the accomplishments of this strategy was the emergence of networks of religious houses, united by a shared founder and culture, and bonded through the fraternal exchange of news, resources and books. Some monasteries, like St Gallen in Switzerland, on the south-west shore of Lake Constance, became central nodes in this expanding network, frequented by monks and other travellers.¹³

The sprawling network of monasteries that emerged during the seventh and eighth centuries was underpinned by the circulation and production of books. St Boniface, an English monk who proselytised in Germany and the Low Countries, travelled with a substantial library. When he was murdered in Frisia, his assailants stole several chests of books from Boniface's party, which they then destroyed. The missionaries' need for literature, not least to establish the liturgical order, was initially met by their former communities in Ireland, Scotland and England; once they had grown in size, the new institutions founded on the continent could also play a role in circulating the stock of Bibles, missals and prayer books. Some monasteries, like Lindisfarne and Jarrow in England, Murbach in Alsace, Fulda in Hessen and St Gallen in Switzerland, would turn into important centres of book production.

The fortunes of the flourishing new monasteries were heavily dependent on political support. The missionaries who travelled through the realms of Merovingian France found local rulers who

welcomed their endeavours, not only out of Christian piety.¹⁴ Noble power brokers often reserved the right to appoint abbots at the monastery which they sanctioned; while the donation of land to the monasteries would create a loophole to exempt them from taxes demanded by the sovereign. Monasteries and convents became the favoured destination for surplus sons and daughters who might threaten the integrity of the family inheritance, and at the same time provided a means to extend a family's influence within the growing ecclesiastical power structure.

It was under the patronage of Charlemagne (742–814) that the monasteries assumed greater political importance and took on a more active role as book producers. Over the course of his long reign, Charlemagne unified much of western and central Europe. This was a military as much as an administrative endeavour. The great ambition of Charlemagne, the first emperor in the West since the fall of Rome, was to reform the disparate territories and peoples under his Christian rule, uniting them in administration, law and faith.¹⁵ This extraordinary undertaking required a ruler with the administrative talent and vision of Charlemagne, yet it could not have been achieved without the ecclesiastical network of monasteries.

The Christian Church was the common denominator in Charlemagne's empire, and Latin was the only tongue that could unite it. One of Charlemagne's primary concerns was the accuracy of language and its proper usage by his clergy, administrators and subjects. This was not the pedantic hobby of a linguist: the emphasis on correctness was of vital importance for church dogma and the precise performance of ecclesiastical rituals that underpinned Christian worship. Efficient governance also relied on effective communication; in Charlemagne's vast empire, communication became increasingly written, which prompted demand for a standardised language.¹⁶ In 784, Charlemagne wrote to all monasteries and bishops in his realm, stating that he 'deemed it useful that the bishoprics and monasteries should devote their efforts to the study of literature and to the teaching of it'. He praised the zeal of the monasteries but noted that letters which he received from them often revealed their poor command of Latin. In a decree issued five

years later, Charlemagne specifically addressed the need for proper schools, where boys could learn to read, and the need for monasteries to prepare better books, 'because often some desire to pray to God properly, but they pray badly because of the incorrect books'.¹⁷

The proliferation of such 'incorrect books', in Charlemagne's eyes, provided the impetus for an intense period of book production and circulation, unlike anything that Europe had seen since the days of the Roman Empire. The focus of this heightened activity was, given the intentions of the movement, largely focused on Christian texts, ranging from works by the patristic authors to a large body of corrected liturgical handbooks, lives of the saints, sermons and parts of the Bible. The copying of some pedagogical, moralistic and historical works from classical Rome and Greece was also seen as a beneficial activity, though some writers, like Virgil, Cicero and Aristotle, were favoured over their contemporaries.¹⁸ Most popular of all were the school books of late Roman authors like Aelius Donatus and Martianus Capella, which dominated the curriculum of Carolingian education.

It was appropriate that Charlemagne, who busied himself so greatly with the correctness of literature, should also come into the possession of a rich collection of books. Some of these were made for him by monasteries or by talented scribes at court, and included sumptuous books: the *Godescalc Evangelistary*, a liturgical work made for Charlemagne's court chapel, was written on purple-dyed parchment using gold and silver ink.¹⁹ Many other similarly magnificent books, which had their bindings decorated with jewels, gold and silver plate, were made for the emperor to present to loyal dignitaries, much as they would offer him gifts of jewellery, horses or land.²⁰

The beauty of these books and the impressive care that was lavished on their illumination, binding and decoration, was not representative of most books produced during the Carolingian renaissance. The average monastic book was a functional object, destined for intensive use. These unassuming works were the staples of the monasteries, and they would remain so after the Carolingian empire was divided, and ultimately crumbled. It was to his credit that Charlemagne did not concentrate book production

around his own court but allowed it to remain common practice in the monasteries, ensuring that the habit of scholarship and scribal activity would outlast the period of political instability that followed Charlemagne's death.

The organisation of monasteries and nunneries into separate orders, with houses spread out across the continent, provided a natural network for the circulation of texts. Indeed, the lending of books from one monastery to another was one of the principal means by which books could be acquired.²¹ A book would be borrowed and copied; or a monastery could send one of their members to another house to copy the work in situ. Sometimes monasteries could agree to exchange a significant selection of their books for copying. One can understand that this last option was least desirable in an era of frequently disrupted and uncertain travel. To ensure their safe return, some monasteries put their volumes under anathema, threatening unfaithful borrowers with excommunication. The secretary of the Cistercian abbot Bernard of Clairvaux (1090–1153) worked under the shrewd principle that if he loaned a book from his collection, he would require the borrower to return the original as well as one copy; this extra copy he could then barter for other books.²²

The importance of books for the monastic life was symbolised by the introduction of a new term in the history of the book: the scriptorium or writing room. This inevitably calls to mind a large room filled with silent, hushed monks, bent over enormous tomes: certainly no medieval monastery in film or fiction is without such a place. There were indeed monasteries which had separate, dedicated rooms for the production of books: at one time in Fulda, some forty monks were employed at the scriptorium. Yet in many monasteries, scribes would be working in general workrooms, or, indeed, in individual cells. In the twelfth century, the fifth prior of the Grande Chartreuse, the head of the Carthusians, specifically enumerated writing materials as an indispensable tool for a monk to have in his cell.²³ Some scribes would be employed full time, writing up to six hours each day, and it is from such monks that we often find annotations or marginalia on medieval manuscripts that betray the physical demands of the work: 'St Patrick of Armagh,

deliver me from writing', or 'O that a glass of good old wine were by my side'.²⁴ Working on a substantial commission on the orders of the abbot, one can perhaps understand such sentiments; yet many monks would be copying books for their own needs, for their brethren or for family members outside the institution.

In many institutions, writing and book copying became a normal part of the daily round, and for some, the core of their religious life. We know of over 400 women scribes active in medieval German convents, some of whom were experts, much in demand for significant projects, and others who might in their lifetime produce only one or two works, mostly for their own spiritual needs.²⁵ The production of books could be intensely personal, yet also collaborative and communal. It might take a scribe a year to write a book; a team of scribes, working on different quires, could take much less. Some works, like chronicles, or institutional histories, would be augmented and expanded every year.²⁶ Outside the largest institutions, where the number of scribes would allow for some to acquire specialist skills, it became common to hire in illuminators to decorate a particularly sumptuous work.

Most of all, monasteries produced books to fulfil their needs: those of the community as a whole and those of individual members. This naturally circumscribed the size of many monastic libraries, and, together with the sheer cost of parchment, helps explain why few medieval monasteries had libraries larger than 500 or 600 volumes. St Gallen possessed around 400 books in the late ninth century; Cluny, one of the richest monasteries in Europe around the twelfth century, had some 570 volumes. Before the thirteenth century, the norm for most monastic libraries was probably not much larger than around 100 or 200 books. Some monastic library collections were so small that the monks had no need to produce a catalogue of the books in their possession: books are sometimes found only in inventories as valuable possessions, along with furniture, goblets and silver plate.

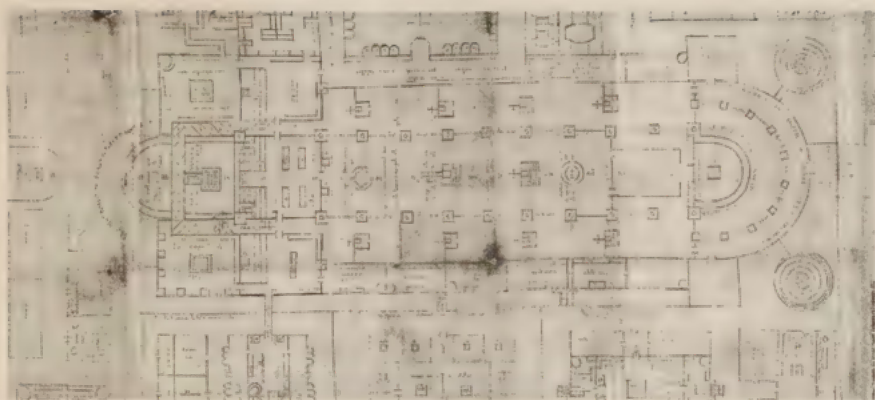
The size of libraries would, of course, fluctuate. Monastic book collections were practical resources, intended for intensive use: worn-out books would need replacing on a regular basis. Other, more malign forces could also shape the fortunes of libraries. In

the ninth century, St Gallen suffered plunder from Hungarian invaders, and was struck by fire, another ever-present danger. A visit from a political patron, like Emperor Otto the Great, could lead to a generous donation, or disaster: the ruler might be so impressed by the monastic books that he requisitioned them for his own pleasure.²⁷ The English monasteries, which had provided so much copy for continental houses, were plundered repeatedly during the ninth century by Vikings; so too were many monasteries in France. In all these cases, the destruction of a library might take a day, but its replenishment and slow recovery would occupy the better part of a century.

Niche, Chest and Chain

The development of the library as a monastic space was a gradual process. In many monasteries, a separate library room never came into being. From the earliest times, monasteries made generous use of wall niches for storing books.²⁸ These would be insulated from stone walls by a wooden lining to preserve the books from damp; the great enemy of books, particularly in unheated stone buildings. This was a practical arrangement, to befit a community constantly engaged with books. The reality of monastic book collections was that they were spread out throughout the complex, depending on the function of the books.²⁹ The most regularly used items, the mainstay of every monastery, were located in the sacristy or chapel: the liturgical books, missals, gospels, graduals, antiphons and psalters. These would generally include the largest and most lavishly illuminated works owned by the community, those that celebrated God's glory through their aesthetic magnificence in the central act of communal worship. We have to bear this in mind when humanist visitors expressed their disappointment at the books in the library: by its nature, it would have been a reference collection of books no longer in regular use.

The chapter house was often the location for books used as communal reading material. This was the place where the community gathered for formal meetings, so typical books found here included monastic rules, martyrologies and lives of the saints.



3. An early ninth-century plan of the monastery of St Gallen, which envisions (in the bottom left of the image) a library room above a scriptorium. Although the plan was not realised, the inclusion of the scriptorium and library suggests that both were emerging as distinct spaces within monastic buildings.

Some sermons or patristic texts might also be kept in the refectory, where they were easy to hand out during mealtimes. This was a time usually reserved for communal reading. The cloister, where supervised private reading might take place, could hold a chest or cabinet of books, the *armarium*, the keys to which were in the possession of the librarian. In Dominican convents the librarian was instructed to house these books in a wooden cabinet, divided by several compartments so that the books could be classified according to subject.³⁰ Such cabinets would generally hold books of common use to all members of the monastery. Bernard of Clairvaux determined that in his Cistercian monasteries, 'the book for Holy Mass, the Gospels and Acts of the Apostles, the Prayer Book, the Antiphonary, the Psalter, the Rule and the Calendar' would be freely at the disposal of all monks.³¹

In Tegernsee Abbey in Bavaria, monks had the pleasure of reading in a communal heated chamber in the evenings.³² More commonly, monks and nuns would do much of their reading in individual cells, and it was here that they took books from the communal *armaria*. They would also be allowed to keep books that they made themselves, that they received as gifts, or that they brought with them when they entered the monastery. These

personal libraries might, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, comprise ten or twenty volumes. All these books would, on the death of the owner, be donated to the monastery, thus enlarging the communal collection.

It is clear that the storage strategies adopted by monasteries were primarily concerned with ease of access. It was only those monasteries with a substantial collection of books beyond those required for the immediate spiritual needs of the monks that had to concern themselves with a separate library. This would typically be the destination for books on history, philosophy, medicine or science that would not be suitable for the eyes of every monk. Housing these books in a closed-off room, under the supervision of a librarian, was a natural solution. A library room of this sort was often located above the sacristy or the scriptorium; the earliest reference to this arrangement comes from ninth-century St Gallen; others can be dated from the twelfth century onwards. In this library room, the books would still generally be kept in locked cabinets or chests.

The most progressive experiments in creating designated library space took place outside the monasteries. From the twelfth century onwards, the monasteries gradually lost their hegemony over the production, circulation and collecting of books.³³ A serious challenge emerged from new institutions: cathedral chapters, schools and universities, established in the expanding towns of Italy, France, Germany and England.³⁴ The increasing concentration of clergymen, nobles and merchants in urban communities transformed the landscape of learning in medieval Europe. The cathedral chapters and their colleges, which grew into the first universities, benefited greatly from donations, from former students as much as local lay folk, anxious for their future salvation. At the same time that cathedrals and their schools attracted ever more ecclesiastical and secular patronage, the accumulation of wealth in the monasteries came under criticism from within the church itself, leading to the foundation of new mendicant orders dedicated to the original vision of monastic poverty. This movement too siphoned off resources from the monasteries and their scriptoria.

While many monastic book collections stagnated, the new

institutions flourished. Within fifty years of the establishment of a library for the cathedral of Salisbury in 1075, this collection boasted over a hundred volumes, many made at its own scriptorium.³⁵ By the fourteenth century, the best university libraries were outclassing those of the monasteries. The College of the Sorbonne in Paris acquired over 2,000 volumes between its foundation in 1257 and 1338. In the early fifteenth century, the university college at Erfurt received over 600 manuscripts in one donation, which put it on an equal footing with some of the greatest monastic collections.³⁶ The colleges founded at Oxford were generally endowed with substantial libraries by their benefactors; indeed, founders of colleges were virtually obliged to make adequate provision for a library.³⁷ Around 1350, Merton College had some 500 books. Some fifty years later, seven large donations enriched the collections of several Oxford colleges by another 2,000 volumes. Colleges also acquired books as unredeemed securities when they loaned money to indebted scholars.

Although the university colleges were rapidly becoming richer and intellectually more influential than the monasteries, their scholars continued to honour core principles of monastic book collecting. Some Oxford colleges had two book collections: one which was confined in a room for use by the fellows, and the other which was distributed among the fellows for periods of a year or longer. Generally, the books destined for distribution were texts of canon or civil law, the works of Aristotle or editions of the Church Fathers. The founder of All Souls College had provided 101 volumes of nine key textbooks, eighty-three of which were for distribution, and the other eighteen for the main library.³⁸

In the separate library rooms of the colleges, a profound shift took place: the scholars abandoned the sturdy storage of the monastic chest and moved towards libraries where scholars could work with the books. The new norm became a series of lecterns with benches for seating, placed in a row in the body of the room. The most sophisticated lecterns were those which combined a reading platform and additional horizontal shelves above or below to store books. The college library of the Sorbonne had twenty-eight lectern desks of this sort. The room in which they were placed was

lit by nineteen windows, of vital importance to the working scholars, who were not permitted to bring candles into the library.³⁹ This was a critical development: books were now displayed openly rather than safely locked away in chests or cabinets. Readers could consult many texts in a short space of time, essential for the sort of textual work we associate with the advance of learning. But it also meant books could go missing with greater ease: by 1338, over 300 of the 2,000 volumes in the possession of the College of the Sorbonne had already disappeared.

Monasteries, as closed communities, could control access to their libraries relatively easily; the monks in the community would be known, and seldom left the confines of the monastery. Yet in the urban institutions, the city chapters of the religious houses, cathedrals and churches, and especially the new universities and colleges, visitors would be more frequent and less familiar. The solution, expensive but regarded as increasingly necessary in the institutions with larger libraries, was to put the books under restraint. Books were fitted with iron chains, anchoring them to their lecterns or shelves. The first general use of chained books seems to date from the thirteenth century, at the Sorbonne. Gerard of Abbeville, who in 1271 donated 300 volumes to the college, asked that they be carefully preserved and chained.

Chains had obvious disadvantages: what if one wanted to consult multiple texts that were not chained to the same lectern? As libraries grew in size and complexity, many institutions avoided chaining their books, and private owners seldom contemplated such a grandiose form of security. Still, the chained library proved remarkably enduring in cathedral, church and college collections.⁴⁰ Fresh chains were still being purchased in some libraries as late as the middle of the eighteenth century. Merton College, Oxford, did not unchain its books until 1792. When they were first attached to the lecterns in Oxford and Paris in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the chains seemed a reasonable precaution, and a proper recognition of the value of the books as an intellectual resource. Readers could now enter a library with reasonable assurance that the desired text would not have been removed; they would find it there, available on a desk, whenever they wanted. To the scholars



4. Books chained to a lectern at the library of Hereford Cathedral. As libraries outgrew chests, this was seen as an adequately secure replacement. This arrangement was less convenient for users, while the most dedicated thieves still found ways to cut chains and disappear with the volumes.

of the new academe, this ease of access was in marked contrast to the closed doors of the monasteries, where one had to rely on the whims of the abbot in charge. While the two worlds may not have been so different in practice, in the busy urban centres of Europe intellectual resentment of the monasteries, those seemingly ancient and declining custodians of learning, was on the rise.

A Better Class of Thief

As money flowed into the cities, many monastic orders followed; by the fifteenth century, there would be more urban than rural monastic houses. This movement only exacerbated the plight of the formerly great houses, which were now less attractive as a focus for pious giving and even more vulnerable to the opportunistic greed of bishops or sovereign rulers. The deterioration was so pronounced that in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, some of the great Carolingian monasteries like St Gallen and Murbach had

few monks left who were able to write; all books produced at their monasteries were made by hired lay scribes. A sixteenth-century catalogue of the library of Fulda reveals that almost no books were added to the collection between the tenth and the sixteenth centuries.⁴¹

Many monasteries lost considerable quantities of books, with those in or close to urban centres suffering the worst damage. By 1400, the Capitular library of Verona had lost more than three-quarters of the manuscripts which had been present in its collection four centuries earlier.⁴² Indeed, it was on the Italian peninsula that the book collections of the monasteries were devastated first, for here the monks had to contend with the emergence of a rapacious new breed of book collector, represented by the likes of Giovanni Boccaccio. From the late thirteenth century onwards, the Italian city-states became home to the first generations of humanist scholars. Humanism was first and foremost a literary activity, based on the study and imitation of classical literature. It was, in its first iteration, an activity dominated by men associated with government and the legal professions: diplomats, secretaries and notaries, to whom command of oratory and an elegant script were essential requirements for a flourishing career.

The rediscovery of the classics by this class of scholars would play a major role in the blossoming of the Renaissance. Classical literature would profoundly shape tastes in art and architecture, as well as exercising considerable influence over developments in engineering, science, politics and warfare. The heart of the humanist movement would, however, remain literary. The collation of manuscripts in the search for the most authentic and complete copy of an individual work was the lifeblood of the humanist scholar. This was an activity that required deep familiarity with a common corpus of widely diffused works, but also knowledge of where the gaps were: which texts known from other sources remained lost or incomplete. Among their other many services to the revival of classical learning, these scholars provided the expert guidance which would allow the creation of the first great personal libraries that would alert Europe's princes, dukes and rulers to the possibilities of serious book collecting.⁴³

The first luminaries of the Renaissance, including Petrarch, Dante and Boccaccio, knew that the monasteries provided a rich source of classical material. When the book hunters began a systematic search of these libraries, they invariably railed against the conditions they found in the decaying monastic houses. They expressed little gratitude that these communities had provided sanctuary to classical texts for almost a millennium. The most successful book hunter of the period was a brilliant papal secretary, Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459), who took his explorations for manuscripts beyond the Alps into the monastic heartlands of France, Germany and Switzerland. Here Bracciolini was responsible for the rediscovery of lost works of Lucretius, Cicero, Vitruvius, Quintilian and many other authors. He corresponded extensively with his friends about his discoveries, most diligently with Niccolò de' Niccoli, an avid Florentine book collector. Their surviving letters provide invaluable insights into the mind-set of these deeply learned but acquisitive scholars.⁴⁴

In 1416, Bracciolini found his greatest haul, the one that cemented his reputation, when he and his two friends, Cincius de Rusticis and Bartholomeus de Montepolitiano, were at the Council of Constance. They visited the nearby monastery of St Gallen, where, in the words of de Rusticis, they found 'countless books ... kept like captives', and a library 'neglected and infested with dust, worms, soot and all the things associated with the destruction of books'. The visiting scholars (or so they claimed) burst into tears and could scarcely conceal their anger. 'There were in that monastery an abbot and monks totally devoid of any knowledge of literature. What barbarous hostility to the Latin tongue! What damned dregs of humanity!'⁴⁵ Such rhetoric permeated the circle of the book hunters. A friend of Bracciolini, who had received a copy of the complete text of Quintilian that Bracciolini had acquired at St Gallen, lauded him for freeing the work 'from a lengthy and cruel prison sentence among the barbarians.'⁴⁶

The complete Quintilian was the greatest treasure from a substantial haul: Bracciolini and his friends also retrieved works by a dozen other classical writers. The foray at St Gallen would be the first of many for Bracciolini, as he talked his way into monasteries

and copied or bought books from their libraries. He, like other Italian humanists, took advantage of the natural generosity of monks sharing their treasures with erudite visitors, often in ways that were unscrupulous or downright dishonest. Bracciolini did not always leave with armfuls of books; his sojourn in England in particular was a great disappointment. On 13 June 1420 he reported to Niccoli that 'I have obtained the catalogues of several monasteries which are considered famous and old. There is nothing of value in any of them.' Five months later Bracciolini once again despaired of the English 'barbarians, trained rather in trifling debates and in quibbling than in real learning'. 'There were a few volumes of ancient writings' that he had seen, but 'we have [them] in better versions at home'.⁴⁷

Although the monks north of the Alps were, in the minds of the book hunters, the most offensive of a disdained breed, they also heaped opprobrium upon their Italian compatriots, who dishonoured the traditions of Rome by their ignorance. When Bracciolini learned that a humanist collector had bequeathed his library of Greek books to a monastery, he derided him for giving such prized items to 'those two-legged donkeys who do not even know a word of Latin'.⁴⁸ He also complained about the 'barbarians' at Monte Cassino, who according to him were only interested in money rather than in providing him access to their text of Julius Frontinus. Even those monks who themselves had an interest in classical writings were not worthy of Bracciolini's attention, unless they were like the monk from Cluny, who was helping Bracciolini acquire a copy of Tertullian from his monastery and therefore did 'not seem in the least bad'. However, he was still a monk.⁴⁹

It is clear that Renaissance book hunters were not kind about their medieval predecessors – especially if the monks would not be bullied into handing over their choicest manuscripts. For this ardent, impatient new type of collector, the monastic library was a symbol of all they were not, and all they did not want to be. But these fastnesses of written culture left behind several principles of lasting importance for the development of the library: the library as a sanctuary and storehouse of culture; the fixity of stock; the role of the Christian Church in the recovery of the

antique; the library as a place of work and silent contemplation. All this was distinctly uncongenial to the Young Turks of the early Renaissance, impatient and urbane, looking for personal advancement in the glittering new courts of the Italian city-states and the emerging monarchies. But these sober medieval principles, though temporarily unfashionable, would continue to play a large and underappreciated role in the history of the library.

