The sanctuary of thought

ISTVÁN MONOK

A site of knowledge and a seat of power – in that it perpetuates memories of a king or a state − the library was also conceived as a space for sharing culture. In this way, it constitutes 'a material history of European thought'.

The Europeans developed two establishments for the preservation and management of written heritage: libraries and archives. These house the entirety of our written legacy. The origins of writing are closely linked to the need to perpetuate memory (that of prevailing powers and governments). Writing added a new, unprecedented possibility to the oral and pictorial tradition: reading. Promoted by Greek and Roman cultures, and also by (Western) Christian communities, this new means of transmission eclipsed the culture of images during certain periods in history. As had already been the case with the renowned library of Nineveh in the seventh century BCE, the documents representing written heritage were mainly connected with practices (economic, legal and administrative). For the primary purpose of libraries is to collect, systematize and present written heritage.

LIBRARIES OF POWER

At Nineveh, King Ashurbanipal (668–631/629 BCE) created a library for political elites and custodians of religion. Although we know little about how it functioned, the great libraries of Alexandria (the Mouseion and the Serapeum), on the other hand, hold no secrets for us. These two collections, founded in the third century BCE, comprised Egyptian, Greek and Middle Eastern works that had been brought together for the reigning Ptolemaic dynasty. Libraries fulfilled several functions; they were studios where manuscripts were copied, schools and research centres. Educated individuals, well versed in philology, translated works in different languages into Greek – the *lingua franca* of the time. It is to them that we owe the *Septuagint*a – the Septuagint − the Greek translation of the Old Testament. The Mouseion caught fire on a number of occasions (48–47 BCE, and then again in 262, 272 and 296–7); the Serapeum, however, was destroyed in the anti-pagan campaigns pursued by the Christian community in Alexandria. Indeed, each era adopted a new stance with regard to the heritage of its predecessor. In this way, the Roman Empire, characterized by Horace's famous comment *Graecia capta ferum victorem cepit* ('once conquered, Greece has conquered her conqueror') incorporated the Greek

heritage into its libraries, thereby reinventing it, while at the same time giving ample space to the applied sciences. Huge private collections were created, the sign of a boundless curiosity described in unfavourable terms by the Stoic philosopher Seneca in his treatise *Of the Tranquility of the Mind* and in his *Moral Letters to Lucilius*:

> '[...] this reading of many authors and books of every sort may tend to make you discursive and unsteady. You must linger among a limited number of master-thinkers, and digest their works, if you would derive ideas which shall win firm hold in your mind. Everywhere means nowhere.[1]

Introduced by the Christian Church at the Council of Nicaea, the practice of canonizing texts led to the classification and hierarchization of works according to theological criteria (theology, law and medicine). These were preserved and transmitted by the religious orders and the secular clergy. Unlike the nightmarish library in Umberto Eco's *The Name of the Rose* (1980), monastic libraries were never reserved exclusively for monks, although access to them was limited. In the fifteenth century, erudite humanists established libraries for shared usage that were open to their friends and the middle-class inhabitants of their cities. This shared practice of reading – combined with the growth of vernacular literature and boosted by the dissemination of printed material – played a major role in the development of the Reformation. The aim was to make Christianity's foundational texts and the humanist heritage accessible to all.

NATIONAL LIBRARIES

The idea of preserving all written material dates back to the sixteenth century. A series of ordinances established the legal deposit obligation and motivated the practice of collecting and systematically classifying all the works published in a kingdom. The decrees issued by François I date from 1539 and were connected with the establishment of northern French, used at court, as the language of administration. This gave rise to the birth of 'national' libraries, fostering emulation among sovereigns, learned societies and high-ranking prelates; the Church also participated in this movement, as was the case in Central Europe. With the collapse of the *Ancien Régime* and the political ascension of the Third Estate, the public library established its presence everywhere. Although this was a Europe-wide phenomenon, regional distinctions prevailed, with access by catalogue, as in Prussia, or a system of open access as in English libraries.

In theory, the internet is the most open library of all, but this will not genuinely be the case until Europe's cultural heritage is accessible there in its entirety – this involves making complex political choices and determining a financial model. Libraries are democratic institutions and are therefore connected with fundamental European values. Since the nineteenth century, however, they have also been engaged in a national conservation mission encompassing the entire cultural heritage of a given linguistic community. In this way, it is not uncommon to see conflicts between communities leading to the destruction or deliberate appropriation of libraries, the hearts of collective identities and memories. There is nothing new in the idea of

destroying or burning books with the aim of annihilating the cultural memories of one's foes. This is illustrated by the example of the Serapeum Library in Alexandria, destroyed by the Christian community in order to prevent the dissemination of non-Christian writings. A similar example, at least according to certain hypotheses, is that of the Mouseion Library, said to have suffered a comparable fate during the Muslim conquests (640–2 CE). Instances of wilful destruction are legion, from the Nazi book burnings and the 'cleansing' of libraries by the communist governments of Eastern Europe to the systematic acts that have been described as 'memoricide' carried out during the wars in Yugoslavia; these led to the deliberate decimation of the National Library of Bosnia by the Serb army and the destruction of the Bosnian archives by Serb and Croat forces.

There are many cases of entire libraries being seized by foreign hands, as with the Soviet and American armies during the Second World War, for example. During the Partitions of Poland in the eighteenth century, the book collections amassed by Polish aristocrats were transported to Saint Petersburg. Under the Ceaușescu regime, Transylvania's collections of Hungarian and Saxon literature were transported to Bucharest in order to 'Westernize' the image of the Romanian capital. On each occasion, the underlying presupposition is that a given national community should be the sole legitimate owner of a given cultural archive collection – a highly problematic simplification. For instance, the traces of written material originating from the Carpathian Basin, which unquestionably constitute the shared heritage of the various peoples who live there, also carry the signs of a German and Italian presence. As for the history of book printing and its connection with Alsace – Johannes Gutenberg spent some years in Strasbourg – the French are certainly not the only nation to be able to lay claim to this legacy.

The history of libraries is a 'material history of European thought' (Frédéric Barbier). Changes affecting the linguistic or thematic compositions of their collections faithfully reflect the intellectual orientations of the cultural community in question. In accordance with the developments that characterize European cultural history, German and Italian works dominated library collections from the sixteenth to the seventeenth centuries, with French and English books emerging in the eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries, respectively. As depositories of intellectual products given a material form, libraries are the custodians of European collective memory. Their foundation, their development, their distribution, their role in representing political and urban life and their regularly readapted presence in the most diverse everyday and cultural representations (including the speculations on the infinite developed in *The Library of Babel* and *The Book of Sand*, by Jorge Luis Borges) form a major chapter in European history. The attempts at destruction to which they have often been subjected only serve to prove that the accessible treasures they hold make a substantial contribution to European values.

NOTE

1. Seneca, *Moral Letters to Lucilius*, translated by Richard Mott Gunmere (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, vol. I, 1917; vol. 2, 1920).

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