
During the past decade Konstantinos Staikos has published more than ten works, such as the *Charta of Greek Printing* in 1998, that have earned him recognition among specialist scholars. Now, in a fascinating and handsome English translation of *The Great Libraries*, the full measure of his passion for books and libraries, as well as the depth of his scholarship, is available to a broader audience.

In *The Great Libraries* Staikos imparts a humanist perspective to the history of libraries from Sumer to the Italian Renaissance. It is a splendid presentation in two parts. In Book One, the author recounts the development of libraries, collections, librarians, reading, and the book trade using a wealth of illustrations, translations from ancient authors, and archaeological evidence. He portrays both the spirit and the activity of libraries in different epochs and examines the motivations prompting the founders of libraries. His focus is on private, royal, monastic, and public collections, on buildings or rooms, and on the written scripts and texts collected. In Book Two, the author profiles fourteen libraries in eastern and western Europe at length, providing many facts and important events about their architecture, collections, interior decorations, and benefactors. His own restoration work on Byzantine imperial and monastic libraries shines through in the chapters devoted to the libraries of the Oecumencial Patriarchate and the monastery of St. John on Patmos (244-83).

*The Great Libraries* is, in part, a celebration of the library’s time-honoured role as guardian of the memory of mankind and transmitter of our intellectual heritage. It is a captivating theme: libraries preserve our intellectual knowledge in the form of rolls, tablets, and books, thus facilitating cultural and creative interchanges between people, providing a continuity of knowledge between periods, and preserving a record of intellectual thought. Each library, in Staikos’s historical outlook, is a living heritage where the preservation of the past can infuse existing learning, thus contributing to a “world library” best exemplified by Alexandria and its scholarly and bibliographic endeavour.

It is an enormous undertaking to trace this classic theme for 4,600 years. In his introduction, Staikos speaks of a community of purpose among libraries, scholars, and founders of libraries that
“transcends time, national and cultural differences and peculiarities, longitude and latitude” (vii). On balance, the author has fared well and produced a wonderful book for those who find his humanistic and historical perspective appealing. Some readers, who eschew broad themes and desire a more rigorous analytical history that explains library development in relation to changing socio-economic conditions or specific historical periods, will be disappointed. Others may be critical of Staikos’s speculative philosophy of history and reliance on a sense of historicity—an awareness of living in history—that supplies a purpose and continuity of narrative and coherence of plot to libraries covering such diverse cultures and vast time span. Readers may not agree with the author’s basic philosophical premise, but in terms of learning from history, at the very least, I believe Staikos accustoms us to change and helps us to be critical of accepted ways.

A brief synopsis of the main features of The Great Libraries follows. Book One deals with libraries and books in the ancient world chronologically, beginning with chapters on Hammurabi’s library in Sumer, the royal Assyrian library at Nineveh, and Egyptian libraries. Greek city-state libraries, the Hellenistic libraries at Alexandria and Pergamum, and Roman private and public libraries follow in six chapters. Staikos devotes an entire chapter to the Alexandrian enterprise (60-89) and outlines its sponsorship by the Ptolemaic rulers, its collections and organization, librarians such as Callimachus, and its eventual demise by the seventh century CE. Libraries at Rome and throughout its empire are important to Staikos because they provide the most evidence for a wide reading public in the ancient world (which some scholars argue did not exist) and for the conscious replication of Graeco-Roman culture exemplified by “bilingual libraries” (perhaps the practical Roman fondness for symmetry). At times, the author relies on unreliable sources, especially from the Historia Augusta, which was convincingly exposed as a forgery three decades ago. The late Roman empire was a time of transition from “ancient” to “medieval” and after the foundation of Constantinople and fall of Rome, pagan libraries declined rapidly and the codex replaced the roll.

At this point, the author turns to Christian libraries in churches and monasteries in chapters 9 and 10. The Middle Ages in western Europe comprised significant collections starting with Cassiodorus’s 6th-century Vivarium, the Carolingian Renaissance, and small court libraries. Monastic book practices and collections were especially important. A particular strength is Staikos’s authoritative, succinct
account of the Byzantine imperial libraries, Byzantine humanists
who maintained the Greek tradition, and eastern monastic libraries.
By the 14th century the appearance of university libraries is apparent,
bringing a new secular perspective to learning. The Renaissance is
the end point for the author, who emphasizes the dramatic effects of
Gutenberg’s moveable type on the distribution of books and the
foundation of libraries. At this second transformational point, the
humanistic experience of books and libraries that the author has
striven to convey for four millennia enters the modern era.

In Book Two, a variety of specific libraries that epitomize Staikos’s
outlook are profiled. There are two “national” libraries: the original
French royal library established by Charles V (d. 1380) that formed
the nucleus for the Bibliothèque Nationale at Paris, and the small
collections now housed in the Nationalbibliothek in Vienna that the
Hapsburg emperors expanded after the 15th century. There are six
notable collections assembled by princes and scholars. The Bibliotheca
Corviniana of Matthias I of Hungary (d. 1490) at Budapest (no
longer in existence) and the Herzog August Library in Saxony
reestablished by Duke August of Brunswick-Lüneburg (d. 1666)
demonstrate the importance of library building among European
royalty. In Italy, the original collections for the Florentine Biblioteca
Laurenziana and Venetian Biblioteca Marciana owed much to the
Medici family, papal, and church patronage in the 15th century. The
ruler Novello Malatesta (d. 1465) bequeathed his books to the town
of Cesena to create the Biblioteca Malatesta, which is considered to
be the first municipal library in Italy. The library of the humanist
Beatus Rheanus (d. 1547) at Sélestat, France, was based on his desire
to establish a public collection in his home town. There are three
monastic libraries: the Swiss scriptorium and library at St. Gall, the
library of the order of St. John on Patmos (which the author has
helped restore), and the Strahov Abbey collection in Prague founded
by the Premonstrate order in the 12th century. The nucleus of the
Bodelian Library at Oxford is an early English 14th-century university
library. The Vatican Apostolic Library and Oecumenical Patriarchate
Library in Constantinople, which Staikos also has helped refinish,
represent two ecclesiastical holdings devoted to international
scholarship. All the biographies of libraries supports Staikos’s belief
in the power of libraries to contribute to learning and to help
transform recorded knowledge. Furthermore, his “micro histories”
on the methods of book distribution, the book trade, and book-
collecting provide a consistent and favourable milieu for the growth
of each of the libraries he selected.
With the editorial expertise and considerable design resources of Oak Knoll Press, the author’s theme and aims are captured in text, convenient marginal footnotes, more than 400 illustrations (many in colour), an impressive bibliography (507-39), and an excellent index. *The Great Libraries* is a special book and many readers will look forward to Staikos’s plan to chronicle Jewish, Persian, and Islamic collections in a future volume.

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D’entrée de jeu, je dois l’avouer : j’ai un préjugé défavorable envers ce genre de livre pseudo-scientifique, surtout quand il est écrit par quelqu’un qui vient de découvrir la bibliophilie. Non seulement on réinvente la roue mais on nous décrit son fonctionnement. La lecture de ce livre — ardue, je dois l’avouer — a confirmé mon préjugé initial. Mais j’avais été attiré par cette boutade heureuse, « le désir de livre », qui définit bien la bibliophilie. Il faut d’abord lire la Postface pour mieux comprendre cet ouvrage. On y apprend qu’il est issu d’une thèse intitulée *Ethnologie de la bibliophilie et de la reliure à Strasbourg* et donc que l’auteur extrapole à partir d’une recherche essentiellement strasbourgeoise.

Le but de l’ouvrage est très louable : étudier les rapports des bibliophiles avec le livre et aussi des bibliophiles entre eux. Dans la premier chapitre, de loin le plus intéressant, l’auteur nous offre un discours théorique sur la fonction esthétique du livre, sur sa fonction sacrée et sur le livre comme moyen d’instruction et d’éducation. Les arguments portant sur le livre comme instrument du pouvoir et de l’ordre établi, comme instrument du sacré et comme quête d’authenticité sont convaincants. La reliure est un élément important de cet ouvrage et Muller en traite longuement (elle occupe presque la moitié de l’ouvrage mais n’apparaît pas au titre) mais il ne semble pas la considérer comme un art indépendant du contenu. Des remarques comme « l’attribution à un relieur de la qualité d’artiste ne dépend de l’objet que lorsqu’il crée des livres-objets dont la qualité de livre est mise en doute » (p. 91) n’accordent que peu de