
Les articles formant les deux premiers numéros de la RBAnQ sont d’un intérêt divers, mais ils composent une publication d’une valeur indéniable. Ils ont le grand mérite d’illustrer la richesse des fonds d’archives de BAnQ et la possibilité d’y mener des recherches poussées et intéressantes. Les artisans de ce beau projet ont atteint leurs objectifs. Le lecteur appréciera le graphisme, la quantité et la qualité constante des illustrations – extraits de documents écrits, cartes ou photos, les résumés des textes en français et en anglais et les notices biographiques des auteurs. La présence de notes de bas de page et la reprise des documents et études consultés à la fin des différents textes satisferont les plus exigeants. Enfin, ce qui ne gâche rien, le prix de vente de la revue est très abordable.

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This is the fourth volume in a series of six. The first three were reviewed in these pages and comments there apply equally well here, and will also, I expect, to the fifth, due in 2012, subtitled “The Renaissance: From Petrarch to Michelangelo.” (The sixth will be a bibliography and index.) Volume 1, “From Minos to Cleopatra,” was

The word for this book is “lavish.” It is “a lavish production with excellent images and easy-on-the-eyes typeface” (Allen) and “lavishly illustrated” (McNally) with over 170 “black-and-white and colour illustrations contained in a lavishly produced format” (Distad).

The first chapter begins with Rome and Italy after Constantine had moved the capital and in a few pages gives an overview of the rest of the book: the growth of Christian writing and scholarship, scriptoria, the crucial role of monks and monasteries, the Carolingian Renaissance, and the rise of universities. The preservation of classical literature through medieval times is where libraries, such as they were, played a key role, and four important Christian scholars involved in this were Boethius, Cassiodorus, Isadore of Seville, and the Venerable Bede. Tertullian (b. 150) begins a discussion of early Christian writers in Latin.

Chapter 2 covers monastic libraries and changes in book production and distribution. St. Jerome’s work process illustrates the practices of the times: he dictated to a *notarius* and the text was given to a trained and educated scribe who would make an examplar that would be used by copyists in a scriptorium as the basis for more copies. St. Augustine’s personal library is examined (one of many such in the book), and there is discussion of the Bible – so important that the scribe’s work of copying was an apostolic task – and of manuscripts that survived the start of the Early Middle Ages. The chapter ends with the Vivarium, a monastery founded in 538 by Cassiodorus, who “foresaw that with the collapse of political institutions monasteries would play an important part in preserving the Graeco-Roman tradition.”

Chapter 3, “Roman and Early Medieval Britain,” oddly covers nothing about Roman Britain. Monasteries in Britain and Ireland were important in keeping classical knowledge alive, and libraries there became the best in Europe. Some of the best evidence comes through Bede at Jarrow where “there was no comparable collection in continental or insular Europe.”

Chapter 4 is about the Carolingian Renaissance. Englishman Alcuin, who met Charlemagne on a trip to Italy and later joined his court in Aachen, revived the teaching of the seven liberal arts and played a crucial role in saving manuscripts and building libraries. Charlemagne himself built a large library of his own. The chapter
also looks at the major monastic libraries of the period, such as St. Martin’s and Corbie Abbey in France and St. Gallen in Switzerland. As universities began to appear from the twelfth century, and education moved out of the control of monasteries and eventually away from the Church, so too did books and libraries. An early textbook system arose: *peciae* were chapters of books used as the basis of study; they were written by teachers, then copied, sold, rented, and passed on from student to student. The library of the Sorbonne is discussed in some detail: in 1272 it received a donation of 300 books that doubled its size. In 1286 the books were split into those that circulated and those that were chained. By the mid-1300s the library had 1,720 books, over 300 of them chained: it was the largest existing university library.

Chapter 7 closes the Middle Ages by looking at a number of individual libraries, beginning with Richard de Bury, an English bishop and diplomat whose *Philobiblion* is “an essay recording the paths and methods he pursued for the composition of his library … nothing was to stand in the way of his enriching his library, not even the financial factor.” The libraries of Charles V of France, Simon de Plumetot, and Hereford Cathedral are discussed in detail, as are the papal libraries in Avignon and Rome. (The chapter ends with an unrelated but charming and curious section that stands outside the rest of the book, a paean to “the book guardian” and “the lord of the library” from classical times to the Renaissance that will warm the heart of any librarian.)

The final chapter is about architecture, and Staikos, an architect, clearly enjoys it. It is well illustrated with drawings of cupboards and bookcases, plans, diagrams and photographs.

How well does the book cover its subject? McNally’s evaluation holds: “To the question – for whom will this book be of value? – there is no easy answer. Scholars will appreciate the large amounts of literary evidence from many languages. Unease will, however, be felt at the loose interpretive structure. General readers will be fascinated by the wealth of illustrations but overwhelmed by the detail and lack of a compelling narrative … [T]he overall construction lacks a firm design … Serious library historians will wrestle with the remaining chapters, alternately thankful for and frustrated by the lush and unruly detail.”

There are a number of typographical errors (e.g. “expanses pf water” [109], “objects of virtu” [144]), but worse are sentences that border on the incomprehensible, such as one beginning “While remembering and to remind of persons who undertook and performed
the duties of library superintendents at this point” (363). In chapter eight, footnote 49 reads, “Regarding the abbey of Cluny, see pp. 000-000.” In the index, readers will be confused that Richard de Bury and Richard de Furnival are under R, not D, or B and F, but Peter Abelard is listed as “Abelard Peter.”

As Distad said, “Staikos’s earlier book, The Great Libraries: From Antiquity to the Renaissance (3000 B.C. to A.D. 1600), appeared in 2000 in a larger but equally sumptuous volume ... A comparison of the two elicits a feeling of déjà vu that extends beyond the format to nearly all of the illustrations, as well as large chunks of text, which, though, slightly rearranged and with minimal rephrasing, are virtually the same in both works.” The curious reader is advised to start with it and Scribes and Scholars: A Guide to the Transmission of Greek and Latin Literature by L.D. Reynolds and N.G. Wilson (3rd ed., 2001).

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Before there could be an Italian literature, of course, there had to be an Italian language, if not a country called Italy. Before the fourteenth century the Italian language as such existed as a range of local dialects – in many ways it still does – and in purely oral form. If all this seems like a barrier to a sense of the place of literature in the roots of Italian society, it isn’t. It was that almost arbitrary choice of the Tuscan dialect as the foundation of modern Italian and the continuing sense of a national identity manifest in its literature that are at the roots of the unity of modern Italy. Italians celebrate their literature in ways the Anglophone world may fail to understand and certainly fails to emulate. On my shelves in Verona I have a dozen or more sets of free CDs, DVDs, weekly newspaper supplements, and build-it-by-the-month histories of Italian literature from the past ten years alone. Italian bookstores sell compilations and anthologies, coffee table books, and children’s guides on Italian literature on a