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ASSIGNMENT

Institutional Libraries in Europe

A Comparative Study of Monastic, Court, University and City Libraries around 1500

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Introduction

Libraries, as a precious source of knowledge, have always attracted the curiosities of many scholars, especially their ancient and mediaeval functioning and organisation. This essay goes in the same direction but limits itself to the period around 1500 and focuses only on the similarities and differences between university, monastic, court and city libraries in Europe. This comparison will be made firstly with regard to their accommodations, then to their collections and finally to their functions and users.

1. Accommodation:

The accommodation and location of libraries depended on the institutions to which they were attached and the same differences and similarities between the owning institutions also applied to the libraries themselves.

As a general rule, universities, monasteries, cities or royal palaces had their libraries within those same institutions. A special room was provided to serve as a library. For instance, in the library of the Carthusian monastery at Mainz in 1470, 'the books were kept in a vaulted room in the tower',[1] while those of the Frankfurt municipal library – opened in 1477- were located in the city hall. [2]

Likewise, court libraries, like the one of King Matthias Corvinus of Hungary ((1440-1490) or Louis XII´s Bibliothèque Royale de Blois, books had a specially designed room. In this case, Kings would show all their megalomania not only through the collection but also through the building and decor of their libraries. Thompson gave an idea of what Corvinus' library looked like:

> *All these acquisitions ...were splendidly housed in a wing of the royal palace*
> *built of red marble and located on a hill overlooking Buda. The books were*

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[1] James Westfall Thompson, *The Medieval Library*, (Chicago,1939), p. 458
[2] Ibidem, p. 471.

kept in two large and magnificently decorated rooms, one containing Latin manuscripts and the other Greek and oriental works.[3]

Unlike the above-mentioned categories of libraries, university libraries had no central place where books were kept and read. Instead, books were scattered here and there in the different faculty, college or student libraries. In the University of Leuven, there were even no special rooms for books until 1636.[4] However, the situation of university libraries improved little by little starting from the mid-15th century with special library rooms – usually long, narrow and lighted by many tall windows- being allocated or built.[5]

2. Collection

Surprisingly enough, the differences in accommodation observed above could not so clearly be seen in the collections contained in the three of the four categories –excluding city libraries. As Thompson suggests, 'there is always an intimate connection between what men read and what they can know, think, write, and do'.[6] This means that intellectual movements of the time- renaissance and humanism in a God-fearing and pious society- determines the contents of libraries.

Therefore, in the four categories, theological and devotional works were predominantly present. Beside them were Latin and Greek classics, books on civil and canon laws, science, philosophy,…but the latter were in a smaller proportion in city libraries than in the other categories.

The collection of Louis XII in the Bibliothèque Royale de Blois- composed of works on the French monarchy, classics, theology, canon and civil, philosophy, grammar, logics, poetry, rhetoric, history, sciences, medicine, astrology, perspective, arithmetic , geometry, military art, architecture and agriculture[7]- gives a general picture of a court

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[3] Ibidem, p. 474.

[4] Petro de Somer, *De Universiteit te Leuven (1425-1985),(* Leuven, 1986), p. 65. 'Oorspronkelijk had de universiteit geen centrale bibliotheek: tot 1627 bezat ze geen eigen verzameling boeken en vóór 1636 geen bibliotheekruimte'.

[5] Michael H. Harris, *History of Libraries in the Western World, 4th edition*, (Metuchen, 1995), p113

[6] Thompson, *The Medieval Library* , p. v

[7] Ursula Baurmeister and Marie-Pierre Laffitte, *Des Livres et des rois. La Bibliothèque royale de Blois*,(Paris, 1992), pp. 26-27

library's collection. It is strikingly similar to the 1,000-title collection of King Corvinus' library.

A considerable difference between the four categories could be observed in the size of collections. While around the 1470s the Hamburg city library had only 40 volumes containing 159 titles[8] all originating from generous donations or legacies, the Bibliothèque Royale de Blois had 1,626 volumes, [9] the St. Augustine's Abbey in Canterbury about 2,000 volumes [10] and the Cambridge's Queen's College 199 volumes[11] (A university could have 4 , 5 or more colleges).

Court libraries' collections seemed to be the richest and the most complete since kings had both money and the power to acquire any book whatever its cost.

3. Functions and users

Functions and users are treated together because one determines the other. All the four categories had in common the vocation to enable users to instruct themselves. However, excluding the city and court libraries to some extent, the two other categories performed primarily an extra function of scholarly research.

It may wrongly be assumed that monastic libraries were exclusively used by monks or the secular clergy. While it is true and undisputable that late 15th century monastic libraries 'were intended for devotional purposes, and were rich in Biblical texts and the writings of the early Fathers',[12] it is also true that they were used by other scholarly researchers, students and professors, for their works which had nothing to do with religious matters. Monastic libraries were said to be truly public libraries in the modern sense since they 'were reasonably accessible for purposes of reference to all who required to use them'.[13]

Though they had a similar scholarly function as monastic libraries, universities restricted the access to their libraries to professors and graduates. The same applied to the court

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[8] Thompson, *The Medieval Library* , p. 471.
[9] Ursula, *Des Livres et des rois,* p. 23
[10] Thomas Kelly, *Early Public Libraries: A history of Public Libraries in Great Britain before 1850*, (Liverpool,1966) , p.15
[11] Harris, *History of Libraries,* p.113
[12] Kelly, *Early Public Libraries,* p.17
[13] Ibidem, p. 22

libraries, which were open to the royal family and the nobles, and whose function was to instruct that particular group and maintain its prestige and intellectual supremacy over the ordinary people.

Interesting are the functions performed by city libraries. Beside the informative one, they too, performed a devotional function and added a social one on top of it. Kelly provides the example of the Bristol city library founded by Bishop Carpenter in 1464:

> *It was open to both men and women, and made provision for the usual functions of such gilds-monthly meetings of members, prayers for the souls of the members and departed members, the care of the poor and the sick, and so on.[14]*

Concerning the users, it appears that the reading public was globally very limited because around 1500 almost all books were still in Latin, a language of the learned.

Conclusion

The four categories discussed in this essay presented a number of similarities, notably the dominance of theological and devotional works in their collections, and some differences such as the open or restricted access to the libraries.. They all had in common the vocation to instruct their users, depending on their level of knowledge and literacy. However, the late 15th century being almost an all-in-Latin period, the reading public was limited to the clergy and the well-to-do classes.

References

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[14]Kelly, , *Early Public Libraries*, pp. 32-33