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Ancient Roman Libraries: Culture, Access and Patronage at Play

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Argument

Ancient Roma mimicked, expanded and stole Greek and Egyptian concepts of libraries, assimilating and reinterpreting them into something that became inherently Roman. Private collections transformed into quasi-public, quasi-private libraries and resulted in the later establishment of public and imperial libraries throughout the empire. Book collections were constructed within private homes, temple and forum complexes, baths and palaces of emperors. Imperial power, Roman strength, culture and learning were all projected within these buildings and their contents, causing libraries to truly represent the Roman empire. Accessibility and patronage also contributed greatly to the physical and social implications of these collections. Construction, layout, literacy rate, user makeup and censorship impacted how Roman libraries were used and accessed by the general public and social and intellectual elite. The rapid creation and evolution of Roman libraries displays the Roman and inherently human inclination to quickly confront problems, implement solutions, and claim entities and information as their own. By examining ancient Roman libraries, it is apparent that the human desire for the collection and storage of knowledge is extremely tenacious and will continue to survive for many more millennia.

The reconstructed façade of the Library of Celsus, Ephesus, Turkey, built 106-107 CE and reconstructed in the 1970's.

Sarcophagus with a Greek Physician reading a scroll.

Private Libraries

During the first 500 years in Rome, the only significant libraries were privately-owned and dependent on the unreliable book trade for increasing their collections. As Rome expanded eastward into Greece and Egypt, libraries were captured and transferred home as war spoils. As a result, private libraries expanded and were opened to scholars and the elite, like the Lucullus's library, as referenced by Plutarch and Cicero.

"But what [Lucullus] did in the establishment of a library deserves warm praise. He got together many books and they were well written and his use of them was more honorable to him than to his acquisition of them. His libraries were thrown open to all and the cloisters surrounding them and the study-rooms were accessible without restriction." - Plutarch, *Lives*, XLII

Language also transferred across cultures and geography. The Latin word for library, *bibliothēca*, derives from the Greek word for library, *βιβλιοθήκη*. This is traced from the Greek word for book, *βιβλίον*, that stems from the word, *βύβλος/βίβλος*, relating to Egyptian papyrus. While Greece supplied Rome with libraries, Egypt furnished the papyrus that made ancient books. The majority of literary references to libraries use the Greek-derived word, *bibliothēca*, showing the dominating influence of Greek on libraries.

This exchange of information, mixed with the presence of intellectuals seeking the new private Roman libraries, encouraged the emulation and mimicking of Greek culture. Roman art, literature and architecture of the time display this, as well as the establishment of the first public libraries in the city of Rome, the result of a vision of Julius Caesar.

Using X-Ray technology to read charred scrolls from the Villa Dei Papiri in Herculaneum.

Public Libraries

After seeing the Library of Alexandria and as his power peaked, Caesar created a plan to establish libraries in Rome. His dream included a library divided in two collections based on language, a clear deviation from Greek libraries. Four years after Caesar's death cut short his dream, his lieutenant Asinius Pollio, carried out the plan and established the first public library in the city of Rome. It contained both a high quality art gallery and a scroll collection, that was divided between Greek and Latin works. Later libraries continued moving towards the "Roman" library concept, with decoration, ornamentation and reading space.

The remains of Trajan's Library show this Romanization of libraries. Built within his Forum, it consisted of two massive chambers facing each other across a great square. They had a number of semicircular niches within their walls, a feature of Roman libraries. These niches held wooden cabinets (*armaria*) where scrolls were stored. Trajan's library was extremely splendid, with two stories and a large amount of marble, sculpture, and art. Public libraries and their imperial counterparts, were extremely opulent. Archaeological remains imply a sense of grandiose and lavishness that is impossible to imagine. Additionally, buildings' value would have been immense, with the cost of construction, decoration and the value of both the book and art collections. The opulent nature created the idea of the Roman library as a visual experience that displayed the power of the empire, aesthetically, physically and intellectually.
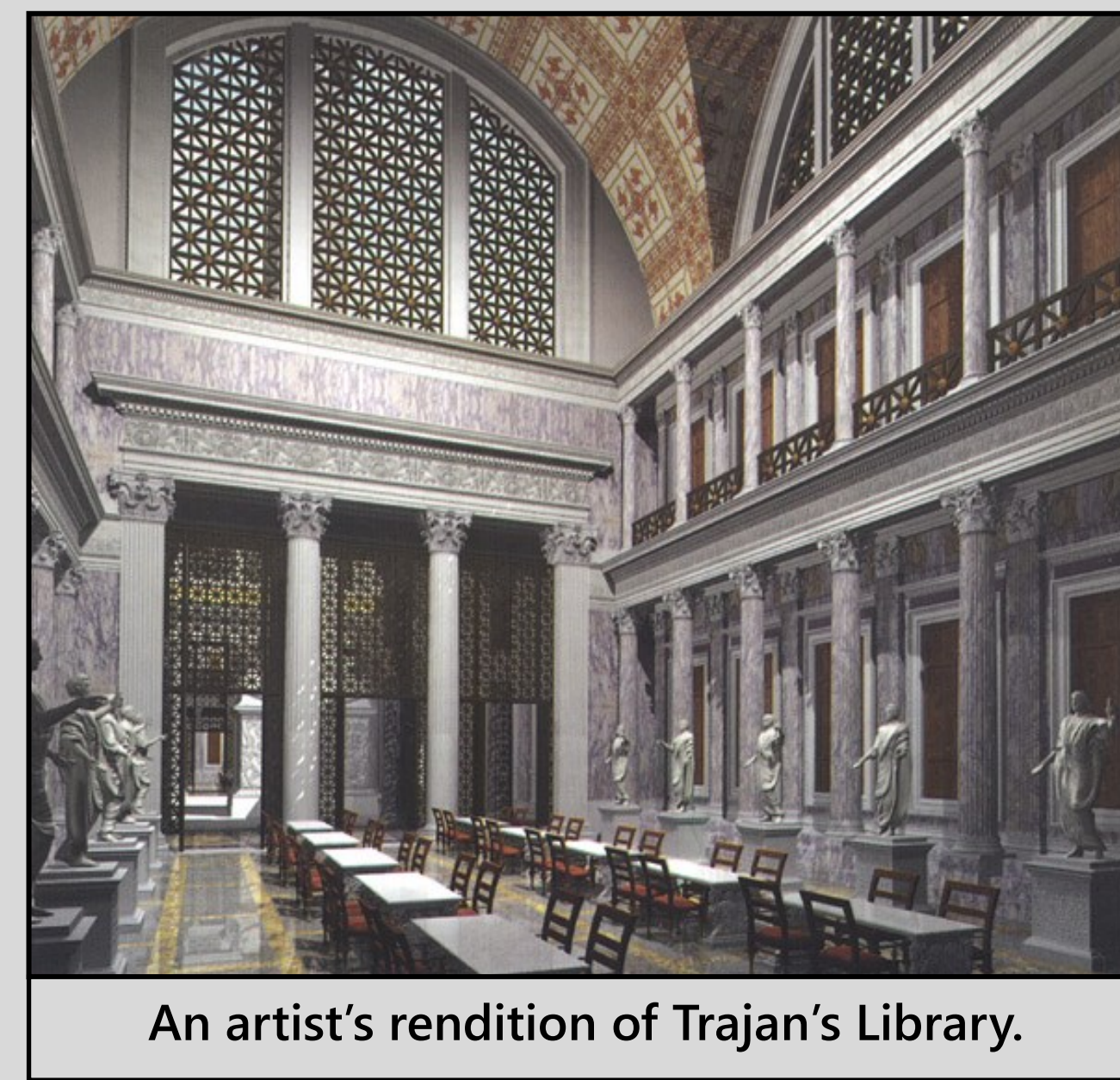
An artist's rendition of Trajan's Library.

Imperial Libraries

Imperial libraries displayed and promoted the splendor and power of the Roman empire. Though private, they resembled public libraries in design and decoration. They were not open to the public, with access limited to the emperor, his family, and his entourage and clients. Initially they were simple additions to previously existing structures that over time evolved into independent and distinctive structures, such as the one in Hadrian's Villa. A number of the libraries within imperial residences were probably used as official archives for state papers and private documents for the emperor's use.

Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli.

Libraries in Baths

Some libraries were located in baths, such as those of Caracalla or Trajan. These were incredibly public spaces and very accessible. They promoted intellectual stimulation, alongside hygiene and socializing. This displays the Roman focus on stimulation for the mind as well as the body. Libraries were extremely important to the public and emperors. Many were built during the first few hundred years of the empire. Additionally, when they were destroyed in accidents, they were often rebuilt and restocked with the highest priority.
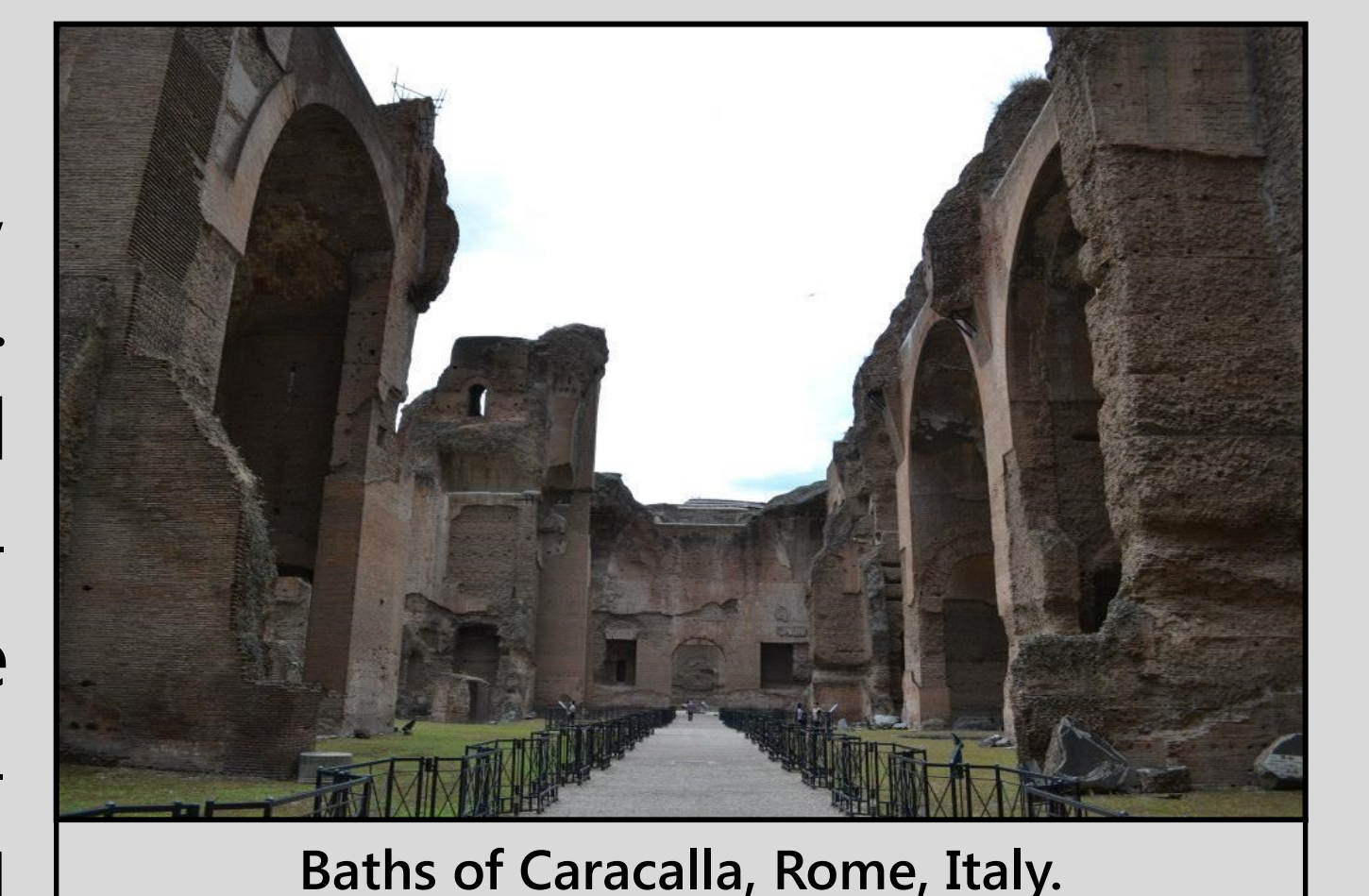
Baths of Caracalla, Rome, Italy.

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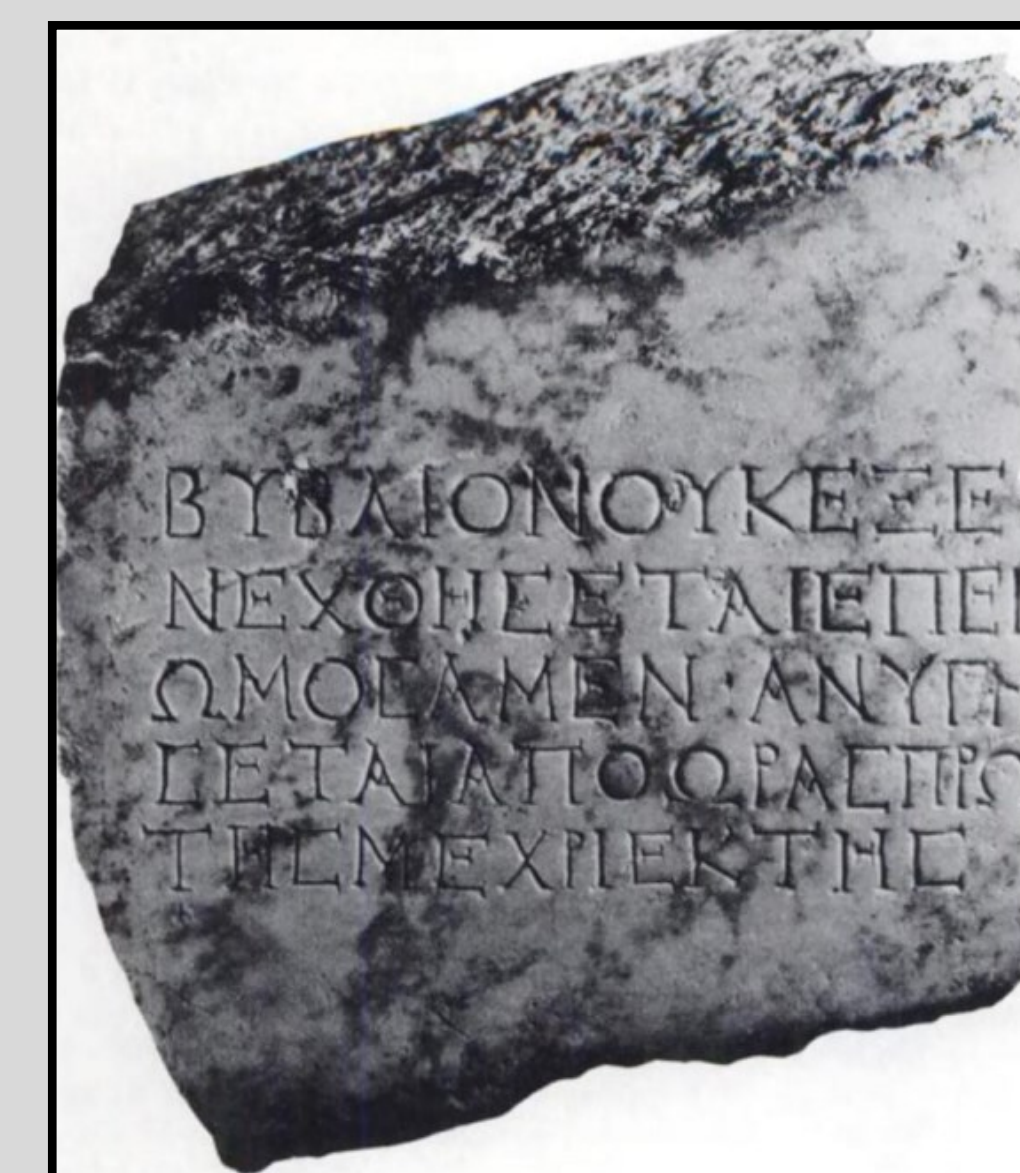
Access

Most libraries were in temple, forum or bath complexes and available to the public, not just upper-class patricians. Anyone could enter through large doorways or colonnades. However, a series of podiums, platforms and cabinets (*armaria*) separated users from the collection of scrolls. Library employees stood upon these platforms and fetched items for patrons, who could not acquire the objects themselves. Collections were open to the public and important to the social and intellectual structure of the empire, but there was some security.

In terms of abstract access and censorship, most book collections were made public freely by the emperor but there were occasionally instances of censorship, such as Augustus's condemnation of Julius Caesar's "youthful poems," as well as Ovid's work after his exile from Rome. However, these occasions were fairly rare and most authors who were included within libraries were guaranteed wider readership and preservation of their works.

Inscribed rules of the library of Pantaenus, "No book shall be taken out, since we have sworn it. It will be open from the first hour until the sixth [i.e., dawn to midday]"

Patronage

Despite the accessibility of Roman libraries, they were in fact created for the social and intellectual elite. Although the literacy rate of the empire is unclear, an inscription at the Library of Pantaenus in Athens states that "opening hours from six am to twelve noon," so it was probably used by those who had these hours free for leisure. Additionally, authors Vitruvius and Pliny the Younger support this through their arguments that libraries were best where there would be morning light for reading. Other references by authors like Galen and Aulus Gellius reference "private gatherings" of communities within public libraries, furthering the idea that it was a small select group of the social and intellectual elite of Rome that frequented the libraries. Combined with the rich donations the emperor made to the collections and his ability to control the contents, it is clear that public libraries were probably an extension of the emperor's patronage to his more exclusive clients.