

THE EDUCATIONAL ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN THE GRECO-ROMAN CIVILIZATION AND THE FORMATION OF THE SOCIAL CHARACTER OF READING

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ABSTRACT

The paper delves into the interplay between the history of books, the evolution of libraries, and reading habits in the Greco-Roman world. It examines how literary production and reading practices were influenced by social and cultural conditions, shaping the relationship between readers and literature. By exploring book production, library institutions, and reading attitudes of that era, it becomes apparent how reading literature not only requires but also enhances linguistic, social, and cognitive skills, thus impacting overall quality of life. This historical perspective underscores the educational role of libraries as hubs for reading, fostering culture, and emphasizing the communal aspect of reading. It suggests that the notion of reading groups as interpretive communities, as we understand them today, has deep historical roots, catering to individuals' mental needs and serving societal functions within each collective.

Keywords: History of Libraries, Reading practices, Reading communities, Greco-Roman civilization

1. Introduction

According to Cavallo & Chartier (2023), the act of reading fundamentally shapes an individual's or group's mental relationship with both the creator of the text and the society that produced it. This process indirectly involves engaging with the attitudes, social dynamics, and cultural phenomena reflected in the writing. Consequently, the dialectical nature of reading, as both an educational and aesthetic pursuit, along with its institutional support through the establishment of libraries within educational centers, can be seen as originating primarily from Greco-Roman culture. The historical evolution of speech genres and literary forms is intricately tied to the societies that generated various modes of linguistic expression to convey different facets of thought, emotion, and social experience within each community (Barbier, 2002: 19-22).

Vallejo (2022) suggests that the concept of a reading community has deep historical roots, reflecting profound psychological needs, fulfilling complex social functions, and contributing to the development of cognitive and linguistic skills in active readers. The history of reading progresses alongside the evolution of writing and the transmission of information, constituting an active rather than passive process (Jauss, 1991). As Lafond (1984) and Bourdieu (1999) highlights, it entails the essential engagement of historical subjects in understanding and responding to ideas and emotions within the structural frameworks of their communities. Lerner (2006) notes that the organization of libraries over time reflects a society's prioritization of access to stored information for various groups, regardless of their size.

Drawing from Ong (2005), this transition in Cultural History becomes evident during the shift from oral traditions to literacy within human societies. More intricate forms of social organization naturally demand sophisticated mechanisms for preserving information, crucial for sustaining cultural identity. This transition fundamentally reshapes human thought processes, establishing a new form of dialectical communication centered around written texts, leading to the institutionalization of libraries as a manifestation of the reading process (Barbier, 2002).

By extension, the existence of libraries implies the presence of societies with literate members. The term "library" encompasses both the collection of books organized according to specific criteria and the physical space where these books are stored, ranging from simple storage vessels like jars containing clay tablets to the elaborate furniture used in the 18th century AD. According to Lucas (1979) and Lerner (2006), in ancient times, a library often referred to a repository of administrative and communal records, akin to today's registry offices. For instance, the Sumerians used the term "House of Books or Tablets" to describe places where books were collected and kept.

As Semertzakis (2006) highlights, the peoples of the Middle East were early pioneers in organizing libraries, with no concurrent evidence of such institutions in Egypt. The only known reference to a building termed a "sacred library," located within a temple, comes from Diodorus Siculus in the 1st century AD, during the reign of Ramses II (1279-1213 BC). The evolution of libraries reflects their changing roles as cultural and educational hubs. In societies using pictorial and syllabic writing systems, readers were often scribes themselves, assuming bureaucratic roles within royal courts (Baines, 2004). Since much knowledge was transmitted orally, individuals who accessed literary works required strong listening and speaking skills. In ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, a small fraction of the population was literate, deciphering complex administrative texts. Proficiency in understanding numerous symbols was crucial for interpreting inscriptions and texts. The proliferation of information and the evolving social needs necessitated the development of alphabetic writing systems (such as the Phoenician and Greek alphabets), facilitating broader literacy and the preservation of written texts.

2. Theoretical background and methodology: book, libraries and readers in the Greco-Roman world

This paper takes an interdisciplinary approach, offering a theoretical and historical overview of biblical production, the evolution of libraries as educational centers, and reading practices during Greek and Roman antiquity. However, it encompasses vastly different political, social, and cultural phases of history, making its overview dense and largely focused on structuring libraries as educational hubs that foster cultural development and reading.

The literature employed reflects this multifaceted examination of reading as both an educational and social process. Specifically, it draws on theoretical principles and scholarly works concerning: a. the history of books and libraries, b. an interdisciplinary understanding of reading and writing, c. the cultural and social contexts, as well as the book production of influential intellectuals and writers during the Greco-Roman era, and d. the role of libraries in promoting reading within a framework of dialectical learning. As highlighted by Barbier (2002) and Mioni (1998), the transition toward more literate societies is marked by an increase in handwritten tradition and literary texts. In the Greco-Roman world, the biblical tradition is associated with writing on durable materials such as clay and stone, but primarily on papyrus, which was introduced from Egypt via Phoenicia. However, significant changes occurred with the emergence of parchment during the 2nd century BC, which became predominant from the 3rd to the 4th centuries AD.

It's noteworthy that when referring to ancient Greece, we encompass all areas where Greek populations settled, such as Asia Minor and Sicily. According to Lesky (2003), Greek and European literature originates with the recording of the heroic Homeric epics, dated to the middle of the 8th century BC. However, poetry existed prior to this period, even during the late Mycenaean era (1600-1100 BC). Over time, the development of a literary tradition and the dissemination of philosophical ideas across the broader Greek-speaking region necessitated the creation of collections and increased literacy to access these works. The dissemination of the Homeric epics, the poems of Sappho, and the writings of natural philosophers during the 6th century BC laid the groundwork for the establishment of libraries (Semertzakis, 2006).

As mentioned by Davarinos (2003), Athens likely had a public library around 560 BC, when the tyrant Peisistratos assembled a collection of books, which he donated to the city's people. Reflecting the significance of specific works in shaping collections, Peisistratos ordered the publication of the Homeric poems with critical comments in his attempt to win favor with the Athenians. Additionally, references exist to private libraries owned by figures like Polycrates of

Samos and the poet Euripides. Following the Persian Wars, the use of the written word proliferated, evidenced by the increase in public and private inscriptions. The emergence of tragedy, resulting from the fusion of epic and lyrical traditions, demonstrates how social and cultural conditions influenced literary production. Athenian democracy further elevated the importance of all forms of speech, including literature, leading to the creation of new textual genres such as Attic prose, historiography, and dramatic works. Lycurgus enacted laws in 330 BC to protect the texts of tragic poets from forgery during copying and mandated the depositing of original texts by authors (Kovacs, 2005; Davarinos, 2003).

Based on Lesky (2003) and Vernant (1991), although no clear archaeological findings exist, themes in works from this period, like those found in Aristophanes' comedies, suggest widespread reading and writing among the public. Despite initial skepticism towards the written word from prominent figures like Plato, movements such as Sophism and Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy ultimately contributed to an increase in manuscript production, highlighting the significance of literature.

According to Blanck (1994), private libraries began to emerge in the 5th century BC, organized by philosophers and rhetoricians such as Speusippus, Aristotle, Isocrates, Demosthenes, and Zeno, who utilized written notes for teaching purposes. These scholars sought out books to access information, with their schools serving as spaces for copying manuscripts. Plato likely drew inspiration from works like Sophron's *Mimes* and Epicharmus's comedies for the dialogic structure of his texts. The architectural layout of his Academy, which included a library building and a Reader's House, served as a model for later ancient libraries, such as the Museum (Temple of the Muses) in Alexandria.

Furthermore, Aristotle, a student of the Academy, created the most important library of antiquity, as reported by Strabo (*Geographics* 17.1.8). According to Davarinos (2003) and Staikos (1996), in the context of his School (Lyceum and later Peripatos), he gathered a rich collection of Greek literature through the resources he secured from Alexander. Part of this collection later enriched the Library of Alexandria, while through its looting by Sulla, ancient Rome gained access to important works of Greek literature.

As noted by Wallbank (1999), Alexander's campaign facilitated fruitful cultural exchanges between Greeks and the peoples of the East. The Hellenistic kingdoms and confederations supplanted the institution of the city-state, with Koine or Hellenistic Greek—an amalgamation of Ionic and Attic dialects—emerging as the international language of the period. Cities like Alexandria, Antioch, and Pergamon became spiritual centers whose influence extended beyond the Hellenistic world into the Roman era. The growing interest in the Greek language and literature spurred an increase in biblical production. Classical works were systematically studied

and commented on, while the multicultural milieu fostered the emergence of new literary genres, such as New Comedy with Theocritus as a notable representative. Historical epics gained popularity, and philosophical schools like the Platonic Academy and the Peripatos continued to flourish alongside new movements like the Stoics and Epicureans (Lesky, 2003: 817-820, 825-828). During the 4th century, the Library of Alexandria, under the Ptolemies, became the preeminent intellectual center of antiquity. Scholars at the library collected and translated ancient literature into Greek, including the translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew, known as the Septuagint translation (Wallbank, 1999).

According to Casson (2006), under the reign of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, the library produced critical and annotated editions of Greek authors, attracting intellectuals from across the known world to Alexandria. While the Brucheion library was accessible only to scholars, the heightened interest in reading prompted Ptolemy III Euergetes to establish another library, the Serapeion, which was open to the public. Competing Hellenistic kingdoms, such as Pergamon under Eumenes II, also invested in cultural production by collecting papyrus books to support scholarly endeavors. Crates, a Stoic philosopher, likely played a role in organizing and operating the library in Pergamon, situated near the sanctuary of Athena (Davarinos, 2003).

The Ptolemies' attempt to hinder the cultural development of Pergamon by restricting papyrus exports to its kings led to the widespread adoption of parchment as a writing surface. As discussed by Skiadas (1976) and Vallejo (2022), the use of parchment laid the groundwork for the evolution of writing practices, facilitating the stitching of codices—a precursor to the modern book—during the Roman era (Johnson, 2012).

Apart from the renowned libraries in Alexandria and Pergamon, various cities during the Hellenistic period established their own libraries. Notable among these is Ptolemy's Gymnasium in Athens, which boasted a catalog of books (referenced by Strabo 1,17,2). Additionally, archaeological finds and references indicate the existence of libraries in Rhodes, Ephesus, Kos, Delphi, and Epidaurus, the latter known for its medical library. While much of the book production from this period has been lost, it is evident that libraries were accessible to the reading public of antiquity, often located near gymnasiums, institutions associated with education. For instance, Ptolemy's Gymnasium provided spaces for study and lectures, where renowned orators and philosophers like Antiochus delivered speeches (Di Cesare, 2018). Surviving records, albeit incomplete, mention titles and donations of books housed in these libraries, including copies of the Iliad and tragedies by dramatic poets, with Euripides' works holding a prominent place in the collection (Barbier, 2002).

According to Cavallo (2023) and Johnson (2012), in Greek and Roman antiquity, reading was approached dialectically. It served as both an internal process for scholars, as seen in the case of

Cato, and a public and social activity, as evidenced by gatherings in Aemilius Paulus' mansion (Cicero, *De finibus*, III, 7). Recitation, as noted by Barbier (2002), served as a means of publicizing the content of new works. Whether within closed communities of students or among groups of scholars with shared scientific interests, the dialectical approach to texts required skills in expressive reading and active listening. This aspect of reading reception demanded the cultivation of various skills in the reader of antiquity, deemed essential for their engagement with written texts, whether literary or non-literary (Kenney & Clausen, 2000: 31-33).

3. Reading practices and reading skills of the Greco-Roman world and the birth of the social dimension of reading

Spanning this long period, there were numerous fluctuations impacting education and reading, notably evident in the changes during the Greek and Roman eras. As noted by Duff (2000), understanding the cultural context in which a work was produced was pivotal for readers and listeners who wished to interpret its significance for both themselves and the society to which the author belonged.

Consider, for instance, the level of political awareness and information required of Attic comedy viewers to decipher references, subtexts, and complex allegories. This cognitive process was challenging, especially if we consider that reading was predominantly akin to listening, and access to manuscript books was limited (Kenney & Clausen, 2000: 56). It's no surprise that readers of the time typically possessed well-developed literary and intellectual interests, with post-reading discussions serving as a crucial means of delving deeper into a work's ideas and form.

Rhetorical skills were essential for those engaged in public reading or speaking, particularly in political and philosophical discourse. Regarding literature, ancient readers needed to differentiate between various genres and forms prevalent at the time, such as epic poetry, drama, lyric works, and historiography (Cavallo, 2023: 93; Fuhrmann, 2006). They had to grasp the distinct rules governing the form and content of each textual genre, which influenced their reading response and aesthetic appreciation of the texts (Eidson, 2013: 190; Kenney & Clausen, 2000: 39-41).

Critical information management was a crucial aspect of ancient reading, directly linked to the access and interaction with ancient books. Emotional responses to literary stimuli within a community of readers, akin to modern literary reading, were fundamental attitudes in Greek antiquity and became even more pronounced in the Roman era (Cavallo, 2023). Although ancient Greek libraries may not have functioned as reading rooms per se, they were integral parts of educational centers, providing dedicated spaces for book copying and a dialogic engagement with the written word. In essence, libraries served as repositories of knowledge intricately

connected with the social and educational roles modern libraries seek to uphold (Matarasso, 1998).

In these social and cultural contexts, the oral tradition retained its strength, as a significant portion of reader-listeners lacked access to written records. According to Harris (1991), the interpretation of many works and texts relied heavily on the body of oral tradition. Thus, mythical motifs preserved in literary works circulated in manuscript form, serving as reservoirs of narratives yet to be documented. Consequently, readers of the time had to engage with a shared cultural tradition primarily transmitted orally to fully grasp and interpret the work. Interestingly, this dimension persisted not only in the city-states, where small populations facilitated greater cohesion, but also in the Hellenistic kingdoms and the Roman Empire. Scholars continued to seek stories and narratives encoding values essential for social cohesion (Vallejo, 2022).

Regarding the evolution of the relationship between libraries and reading in the Roman era, it is evident that Latin literature and book collections were significantly influenced by their interactions with the Greek world (Cicero, Volume V, Brutus, orator, 167). Greek classical and Hellenistic literature profoundly shaped Roman intellectual thought, evident in the Greek knowledge possessed by scholars and aristocrats. The movements of Classicism and the Second Sophistic underscore the Roman world's indebtedness to Greek antiquity. However, this indebtedness evolved beyond mere imitation, gradually transforming into a fruitful assimilation of values, ideas, textual genres, and reading practices. These elements formed the foundation for the development of a literary production that reflected the social and cultural conditions of each era. Despite lacking the linguistic diversity of Greek literature, Latin literature produced seminal works across various genres, such as Virgil's *Aeneid* and Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, shaping the formation of Europe's national literatures (Kenney & Clausen, 2000; Staikos, 2006).

In Rome, the writing and circulation of books were governed by the concept of "publicity." Authors or manuscript owners conducted public readings of texts in the presence of a circle of relatives, initiating communication between author and reader. However, once a text was made public, control over it shifted away from the author. Any individual who obtained a copy could reproduce and circulate it. Consequently, authors initially opted to read their works within a small circle of readers with similar interests, seeking advice and feedback for potential corrections (Barbier, 2002: 37-38; Kenney & Clausen, 2000: 42-43).

Cicero's works serve as the primary source of information regarding the existence of books and their distribution, as well as the presence of libraries in Rome. This information spans a relatively short period, from the 2nd century BCE to the 1st century BCE (Barbier, 2002: 37). The growing interest in reading books during the Roman Republic era justified the emergence of

commercial activity in the book trade. Professional booksellers, known as librarii, both copied and sold books, making literature accessible even to the less privileged classes (Cicero, *Philippicae*, 2.21 in Kenney & Clausen, 2000: 43-44). However, the lack of education among these copyists led to errors in copying, which scholars of the time viewed with skepticism (Kenney & Clausen, 2000: 45; Gamble, 2012). Public reading or listening to a book was the most common way for people to engage with its content. Authors were primarily motivated by political and social factors, with the costs of copying and publication often covered by sponsors (Barbier, 2002: 40; Casson, 2006).

The rise in the literate population and the limited availability of manuscript books, particularly the demand for Greek works, prompted Maecenas and emperors to establish libraries containing both Latin and Greek texts. The earliest collections were assembled from spoils acquired during military campaigns in Phoenician and Greek territories. Library development began in the 2nd century BCE, with evidence of private libraries emerging in the 1st century BCE, such as those of Lucullus and Cicero (Barbier, 2002: 43; Cavallo, 2023: 85).

These private collections transformed the mansions of dignitaries into cultural hubs, hosting public readings and discussions based on the content of the books. Libraries in the residences of figures like Lucullus, Cicero, and Atticus followed the standards of the Library of Alexandria, combining scholarly reading interests with social interaction, thus preserving the recreational aspect of reading, especially literature (Cavallo, 2023: 102-103).

According to Kenney & Clausen (2000), Julius Caesar was the first to propose establishing a public library in Rome, intending to house two separate libraries within the same building, one for Greek and the other for Latin books. This initiative aimed to democratize knowledge, reminiscent of the efforts of Peisistratos in Classical Athens. Varron was tasked with procuring books and organizing the library, and he authored the treatise *De Bibliothecis*, which laid the foundation for the operation of Roman libraries, although it has not survived to the present day. However, Caesar's assassination halted the project, and the first public library in Rome was eventually established by Gaius Asinius Pollio in 39 BCE, utilizing spoils secured during military campaigns in Macedonia.

As Beagon claims(2013), Caesar's successors would finance complexes of public buildings, the fora, which usually also included libraries - a fact that reveals the social and recreational nature of reading in the Roman era. Almost nothing survives of their collections due to fires and to the abrupt transcriptions of manuscripts from papyrus to parchment in the 4th and 5th centuries. Notable among them is the library of Augustus, also known as the Palatine Library, founded by Octavian Augustus in 28 BC. Destroyed by fire in 191 AD, and it was rebuilt by Diomitian in AD 80. Suetonius and the epigraphic finds provide information from which it can be seen again that

this library was also part of a complex of buildings, where the palace of Augustus and the temple of Apollo were located. But the most interesting detail on the question of reading habits is that the way its two sections were configured ensured a space suitable for reading, with seats and tables for the readers. This space was also used as a meeting place for the Senate in extraordinary cases. Although the library was completely destroyed in the 3rd century AD. It provides a clear example of the new dynamic that Roman libraries gave to the reading practices of the time. They create attractive spaces for readers in the heart of the city, where the goal is no longer just for visitors to locate a book, but to stay in the reading room. Public libraries become, therefore, spaces for social gathering and exchange of views and are not strictly addressed to the small audience of students of a School or a cultural center. This creates communities of people with increased reading motivation and performances (Staikos, 2005: 344-345).

From the library of the temple of Irene, built by the emperor Vespasian in AD 79, the form of the double library changes form and is no longer just parallel buildings, but flanks the temple, to which the library was dedicated. Trajan's library, for which we have epigraphic findings, applies the new architecture and was founded in 112/113 AD (Staikos, 2005: 184-187). Based on the existing evidence, it is estimated that the library had twenty thousand papyri and was decorated with luxurious materials. Its large capacity and lavish decoration show the interest of the Romans in book collections, which is also explained by the fact that libraries were created in various cities of the Roman territory (see e.g. private: "Papyrus Library" of Heraklion in Campania or the Library of Hadrian in Athens). (Staikos, 2016: 126-133; Iosif, 2015).

The increased demand of readers, combined with a great drought during the reign of Tiberius, led to insufficient papyrus supplies to meet needs. Consequently, there was a gradual replacement of papyrus scrolls by parchment scrolls and codices. (Stephens, 1988: 421-436) Information from the library of Pantainus in Athens during the period of Trajan confirms the enhanced social dimension of libraries as places for reading and discussing books. (Staikos, 2016: 112-122).

4. Discussion

It is evident that only by considering these relationships together can one progress towards a more holistic understanding of the role and dynamics of reading groups in library settings. Only through an interdisciplinary perspective can we highlight how reading communities function (or should function) as quintessential educational processes that shed light on the ideological and aesthetic dimensions of literary works in various ways. Simultaneously, they redefine the relationship of libraries with society and their educational role through the socializing dynamics of reading (Mondloch, 2011; Cavallo, 2023).

The Greco-Roman world lays the groundwork for the educational dimension of libraries, whether we refer to the libraries of the Philosophical Schools of Classical Athens or to the Hellenistic gymnasiums and schools in the Roman era. Generally, the establishment of libraries was supported either within a context of aristocratic patronage or due to the increase in literacy seen in times of democracy, which enhanced reading as both an educational and political act (Lintott, 1999).

During these periods, the dialectical process of learning is established concerning the establishment of public and private libraries. However, contact with the written word is not an isolating process but a form of social interaction, either in the context of the interaction either between teacher and students or between writer and listener-readers, who gather in libraries, schools, or even bookstores (as seen in Roman times). The libraries of the ancient world set their main goal as activating reading communities in any form with the aim of fulfilling their mission, as they not only store information but also contribute to the production of new knowledge. This dimension of knowledge management is also a fundamental legacy of modern libraries (Aabø, 2005), because every new piece of information is produced in direct connection with the intention of creative individuals to participate in the knowledge society, expressing a positively charged relationship with culture and its derivatives (Bourdieu, 1999).

5. Conclusion

In summary, Greco-Roman culture emphasizes the recreational aspect of reading within reading groups, where individuals learn to derive educational and pleasurable experiences through association. These reading communities, particularly in the Roman republic, serve as models for modern reading groups by demonstrating how reading fosters a sense of belonging and overcomes the isolation prevalent in modern societies characterized by extreme individualism and massification. This shared experience of reading promotes empathy and facilitates the enjoyment of literary texts (Paulson, 2001).

This sense of belonging is a fundamental aspect of cultural engagement and plays a central role in shaping both literary writing and the reader's response to its multiple meanings. (Beach & Hynds, 1991: 453-460) The enduring interest in participating in reading groups underscores the importance of this social sphere for dialectical communication about and with literary works. While the ways in which reading groups operate may change and be influenced by various factors, their existence remains a deeply rooted human need and a fundamental right of readers (Bolter, 2006).

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