

The World's Greatest Libraries

The following interesting facts about libraries that are little known were published recently by an American secular paper:—

Some imagine that we have finer and larger libraries than are to be found in Europe, but such is not the case. Precise knowledge concerning the first libraries of history is not obtainable. Several competent authorities seem to agree that there was a library of 20,000 tablets at Tello, Mesopotamia, 2500 B.C. It was discovered while making excavations. It was removed to the Louvre in Paris. It belonged to Gudea, ruler of Lagash. The inscriptions are in cuneiform characters. There was quite a large library at Nineveh, 1222 B.C. The inscriptions are on clay tablets, which are preserved in the British Museum in London. There are 20,000 of them. The Egyptians had libraries, but they were on papyrus. However, most of the material has decayed and very little of them remains. Mention is made in history of a large library at Memphis, Egypt, but time completely obliterated it. The great Alexandria library was founded by Ptolemy Soter 300 B.C. At one time it contained 700,000 manuscript rolls. For many centuries it was famous throughout the world, but it was destroyed by the Arabians in 641.

The Jews had small collections of manuscripts, although there is very little evidence of them except in the Sacred Scriptures. The Grecians had a number of private libraries. One of the most noted of them was that of Pergamum. There were very few libraries in pagan Rome until the closing years of the republic. Pliny, the historian, says that the first public library was established 39 B.C. In pagan Rome and Greece, slaves copied thousands of manuscripts for the libraries of their masters.

Early Christian Libraries.

Small Christian libraries were established at various places in Europe, in Palestine, and in northern Africa during the early centuries of the Church. Among the collections mentioned in history are those of Constantine at Constantinople in 336 and of Alexander, the Bishop, 250. Mention is also made of the libraries of St. Jerome, St. Augustine, and St. Pamphilus. The great Constantinople library was destroyed by fire in the eighth century. The monks of St. Benedict founded the first library at Canterbury, England, in 596. The other early libraries in England were those of St. Peter at York, St. Cuthbert's, at Durham, Bury St. Edmund's, and St. Alban's.

The Popes founded a number of libraries, and Charlemagne did much to encourage the movement throughout his empire in the ninth century. The Venerable Bede had a library in the seventh century, and St. Columbanus and sixty other Irish missionaries visited France, Italy, and Switzerland during the sixth century, preaching the Gospel and encouraging the collection of manuscripts at various places. They founded one hundred monasteries, and each monastery had in time a library. The Benedictine monks were very active in the movement in southern Italy, although it was very difficult to make headway during centuries of warfare while the barbarians were overrunning many of the countries of Europe. Especially worthy of mention among the libraries of the early centuries were those of Fulda, Richenau, Corvey, and Sponheim in Germany, and Fleury, St. Riquier, Cluny, and Corbie in France. Fulda had perhaps the greatest collection of its time in Christendom. Had it not been for the zeal and industry of the monks of the early and middle ages, many of whom spent their lives in copying old and valuable manuscripts, and in protecting them from fires and disasters, during the barbarian invasions, very little of the literature of the ancients would have been brought down to the present time. Because of the time and labor it took in copying the books, they were of course very valuable. Most of them, in our present money, would cost at least £20 per volume. It was quite difficult to preserve them because of the

damaging effects of moisture, heat, and other destructive elements. The American Declaration of Independence, written in 1776, has practically faded out and is no longer allowed to be publicly inspected. What a task, then, it was to preserve until the fifteenth century, when the art of printing was invented, the many pagan and early Christian classics. Among the leading libraries of the middle ages were those of Canterbury, Glastonbury, Dover, Bury St. Edmund's, Durham, Citeaux, Clairvoix, St. Victor's in Paris, and St. Germain's. The libraries of the Renaissance period are those of Valencia in Spain, founded in 1212; Salamanca in Spain, in 1220; the University of Oxford, in 1230; the University of Prague, in 1348, and the Heidelberg University library, in 1386. Most of the modern libraries were established after that date. So great was the demand for books and so difficult was it to keep track of them and insure their safe return, that in some places they had to be chained to shelves so that they could not be carried away.

Libraries of the Middle Ages.

In Ireland there were several libraries worthy of mention during the seventh, eighth, ninth, and subsequent centuries, but they were destroyed during the reigns of Henry VIII., Elizabeth, Cromwell, and the other British monarchs who demolished or confiscated Irish churches and other institutions of learning during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

Paris has the largest, finest library in the world, although the Vatican library has the most valuable collections to be found in Christendom. The Paris library was founded in 1367. It numbers 3,000,000 volumes. In 1862 a law was passed requiring a library in every primary school. In 1882 there were 20,000 of these libraries. France is noted for the large number of its excellent provincial libraries. Some of them, however, are not so large as are to be found in the various large cities of Europe.

Berlin has 70 libraries. There are many splendid collections in the other cities and the universities of the German Empire.

Italy has many of the largest and best libraries in the world. A great number of old manuscripts, many of them the classics of 2000 years ago, are to be found in the collections of Italy, France, and Spain.

Russia has several great libraries. The largest and finest is that of the Imperial at St. Petersburg. It contains over a million volumes. It is open to all over twelve years of age. There are also large and old libraries in several other countries of Europe.

Very little interest was taken in the organisation of libraries in the United States until the last half of the nineteenth century. In 1876 there were 4000 registered libraries in our country, containing approximately 12,000,000 volumes, though many of the books were not so valuable as those to be found in the older libraries of Europe.

The great libraries of the world are those of Paris, the British Museum, the Vatican, the Imperial at St. Petersburg, and the Congressional of the United States.

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