

Defining the Public Library in the Roman Empire, c. 40 BCE–114 CE

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Public Libraries?

Why Bother?

“[Caesar planned] to open to the public the greatest possible libraries of Greek and Latin books.”

Seutonius, *Caesars*, I.93.5

Introduction

The first public library in Rome was conceived of by Julius Caesar in 44 BCE. Caesar died before construction on his library could begin, but a number of subsequent emperors included the establishment of public libraries as part of their building programs, existing both in Rome proper and throughout the empire. But what does “public” mean to the Roman population? Were there other purposes the library served besides being repositories for books for the general public?

Libraries in Rome

Before Caesar, all libraries in Rome were private. The majority of wealthy Romans would have had a private library, regardless of how interested in study they were (Seneca, *Tranq.* 9.4). These normally would be small, but could be very extensive, like the Villa of the Papyri in Pompeii. Small communities of intellectual elites would procure books through gifts, author’s copies, and copying their friend’s holdings, since there were no copyright laws. It would seem, then, that access to books before the public libraries was limited by being friends with authors and other elites who had more extensive libraries than did you.

Public libraries were larger and had more extensive collections than the typical private library. While some private libraries had educated slaves managing them, all public libraries were large enough to warrant this. Libraries were often attached to palaces or palatial complexes, and always had separate, identical Latin and Greek buildings, usually connected by a colonnade. Books, in scroll form, were shelved along the walls in niches with a large open sitting area in the middle (fig. 1). Libraries were often lavishly decorated, and had busts of famous authors as décor.



Fig. 1 Trajan’s Ulpian Library. Reconstruction by James Packer, in *Ancient Libraries* (2013).

Literacy

Historically, classicists have been optimistic in estimating literacy rates in Rome. This is partly due to widespread graffiti in Pompeii (fig. 2). However, Pompeii was more of a resort town for elites than a typical city, and therefore we cannot assume widespread literacy there would be reflected elsewhere. Harris argues that literacy only becomes widespread if certain conditions are met and there are strong positive forces toward literacy. In Rome, there was no incentive for the people who controlled literacy and learning resources to aim for mass literacy, nor is there evidence of widespread schooling available to make this happen. The cost of publishing and buying books was prohibitively high for most Romans, because paper had to be imported from Egypt. This means the average citizen would not have access to the materials they need to learn to read. Moreover, that which was written was meant for the educated elite. Overall, there was not a strong incentive for the common people to read, nor for the upper classes to teach them. With low literacy rates, the general public would not have had much traditional use for the new public libraries.

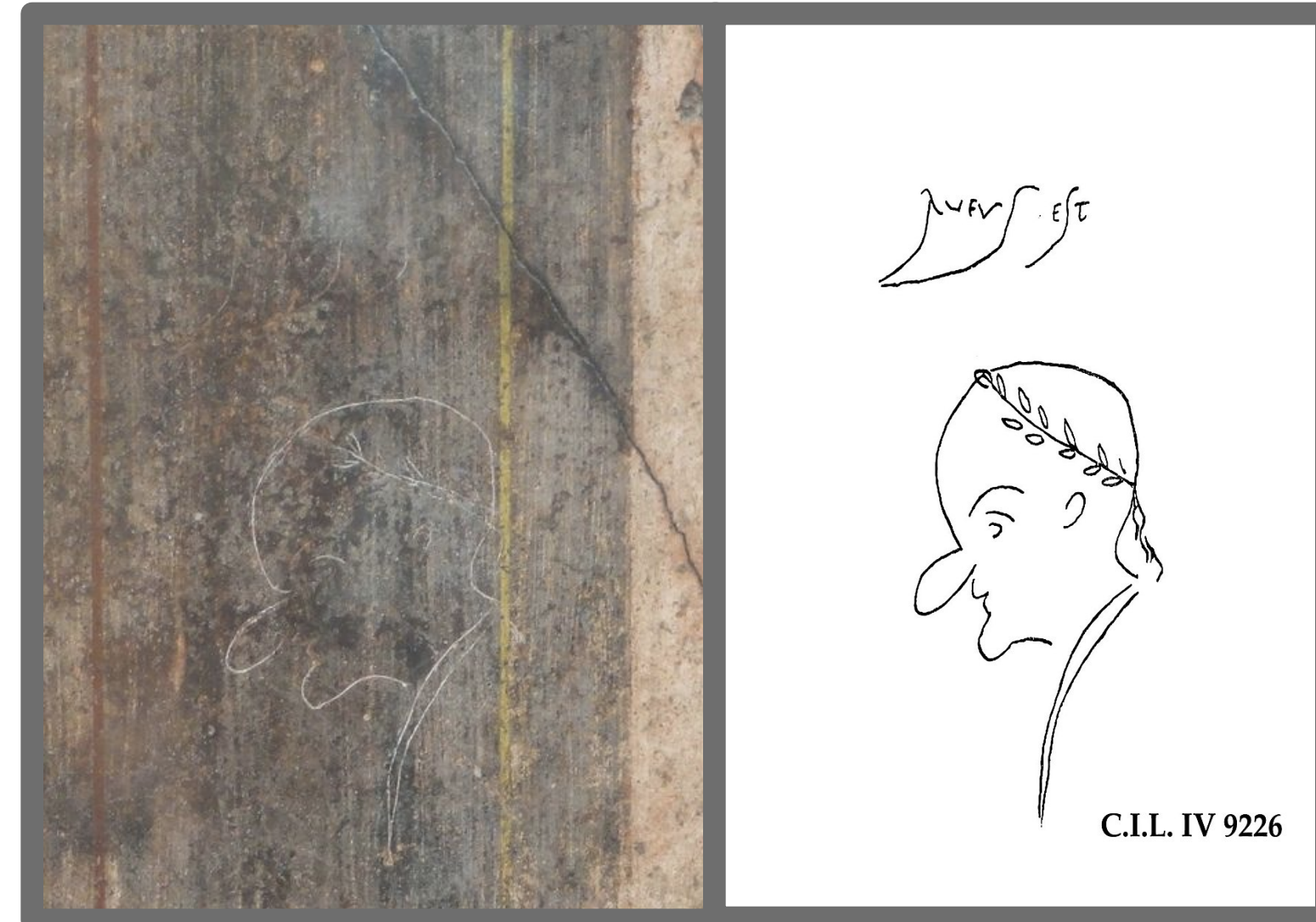


Fig. 2. Graffiti in Pompeii reads: “This is Rufus”
Vincent Ramos, *Characture at the Villa of Mysteries in Pompeii*. 2012: Wikimedia Commons.

Library Users

If the majority of Romans were not reading, then how were public libraries used, and by whom? Booksellers found them useful, because if a patron requested a book that they did not have, they could send a scribe to the library to make a copy. The literate also seemed to use it for this purpose, to increasing holdings in their private libraries. Literates also used libraries as a gathering place for intellectuals. Cornelius Gellius discusses many times when he and his friends hung out in various libraries in Rome.

There is also evidence that authors held public readings of their works. This may have been a way the illiterate public could have interacted with the library. we should be careful in assuming that, because these readings did not require literacy, that they were meant for the general public. These recitations may have been patronized mainly by those who already had an interest in academic philosophy, the literate elite, who had been exposed to these ideas before. It also seems that, based on the circuses of ancient Rome, the public would have had other, more entertaining leisure options provided by the state.

“Sitting in the library of Trajan's temple, looking for something else, the edicts of the early praetors fell into my hands...Then a friend of mine who was sitting with us said that he had read in the seventh book of Gavius *On the Origin of Words*.”
Gellius, XI.7

State Censorship and Control

As discussed in the Library Users section, booksellers and elites used libraries to copy items for their personal use. As more people and bookstores came to rely on the libraries, they could have been used to exercise imperial censorship and control access to certain materials. There is some evidence of this; Augustus ordered the head of the Palatine library to not make public some of the works of Julius Caesar, and Caligula threatened to remove all texts of Virgil and Livy from public libraries. Horace seemed to know to be wary of public books, as seen in this quote.

The location of libraries may have also been chosen to exert control as well. Augustus’ Palatine library was housed in the Temple of Apollo complex, which was very close to Augustus’ private residence. This would have allowed Augustus to keep an eye on what was happening in the complex, and may have deterred any negative speech about the emperor so close to his home.

“Forbear to touch whatever writings the Palatine Apollo [library] has received: lest... be exposed to ridicule.”

Horace *Epistles* I.3.

“It was not taste, it was not thoughtfulness, it was learned extravagance - nay not even learned, for they had bought their books for the sake of show, not for the sake of learning.”

Seneca, *On the Tranquility of the Mind* IX.4

Public Image

Augustus’ Palatine library being so close to his residence would reinforce the idea that this was Augustus’ space, and others were allowed in a guests of his generosity. Building the library in the Temple of Apollo linked Augustus with the gods, as part of a whole program of religious building projects. . Even if there was no intention for the general public to actually use the library, emphasizing the publicness of the things Augustus was building would have underscored his generosity, regardless of how public it was in reality.

Given the cost of books, their having a library meant that the empire and emperor were successful enough in their campaigns to fund a stocked Greek and Latin library. The architecture and materials used for building also reinforced this wealth. This quote by Seneca references private libraries, but it can easily apply to public ones as well. Book shelves were pushed off to the edges of the buildings, leaving a large open floor space, which was inefficient in terms of space for the actual collection. What it did create was space for people to comfortably linger and take in the wealth and generosity of the emperor who provided the space. This would be something any library user would understand, literate or not.

Trajan’s Column and Ulpian Library

In 106 CE, Trajan defeated the Dacians, and established Trajan’s Forum and the Ulpian library with the spoils of that victory. Much of the forum seemed to exist to remind people that Trajan had defeated Dacia, and became very wealthy doing so, including Trajan’s column. The column was about thirty-five meters tall with a continuous narrative frieze circling it, showing Trajan conquering Dacia in fine detail (figs. 3, 4). But, because of its height, there was no way anyone would have been able to actually see the details or quality of the carving. There was no reason for Trajan to spend the money for the quality except to show that he could.

The conspicuous show of wealth is mimicked in the Ulpian library. The Greek and Latin buildings surround the column on either side, and to get from one library to the other one must pass the column. At least one of the libraries had a triumphal Trajan statue inside (fig. 1). That way, whether inside or out, the library user was confronted with the reminder that Trajan conquered Dacia. Trajan’s library was so decorated and embellished that Classicist Lionel Casson called it “recklessly wasteful of space” (2001). The relatively small amount of shelf space was further taken up by giant open archways along the walls, exposing the books to the elements but also giving the library prominent display from the outside. Much like the wasteful opulence of the column, it seems like Trajan’s goal of the library was a conspicuous show of wealth rather than a practical space.

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Fig. 4 Trajan’s Column.
Photographed by J. M. Katzmire. Available from: http://library.artstor.org/asset/SS7729519_7729519_11926679.

Fig. 5 Close-up of Trajan’s Column, Scene 99: Trajan Sacrifices
Roger Ulrich. 2014, Digital Image. Available from: www.trajans-column.org/?attachment_id=626.

Conclusion

Rather than being true “public libraries,” repositories of books for the general public to use and learn from, it seems the libraries built by the emperors of Rome were intended for more than that. Not enough of the population was literate enough to justify making books public, and those who were had access to private libraries. It therefore seems that libraries existed for the glory of their benefactors, and reiterated to the public how generous and successful the emperors were.