

Libraries and the Production of Knowledge

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Intellectual life is in no small way determined by the image of knowledge its constituent members bring to everyday practice: such conceptualizations, imaginings and representations are vital to the production and transmission of knowledge. Representations of knowledge, in other words, are not simply passive reflections of a cognitive paradigm, but interact with the practice of knowledge on a day-to-day basis. This relationship is frequently intensified in periods of cognitive or disciplinary stress. This paper will explore the image of knowledge projected by the early modern library and its consequences for our understanding of the use of books and book-collections by early modern readers.

We will consider three influential imaginings of the library which appeared between 1545 and 1627. I wish to discuss these representations not in terms of the particularity of their genesis, but rather in terms of the image they provide of the library as an organizing principle of intellectual life: that is, as something around which the consumption and production of knowledge could be structured. We will begin with Conrad Gesner's *Bibliotheca universalis* of 1545. Long hailed as a landmark of bibliographical scholarship, the *Bibliotheca universalis* is much else besides. In both his prolegomenary adumbrations and in the methods of compilation which he allowed his readers to glimpse on almost every page, Gesner presented the library as unbound by fixed poles of navigation: it was rather a shifting site of discovery, a locus of communication and interaction between texts and readers. Gesner's library was certainly universal, but it was by no means the idealized abstraction it is sometimes made out to be: it is populated by books and readers past, present and future.

From Reformation Zurich we travel to Counter-Reformation Rome, to the new Vatican library opened by Sixtus V in 1589. More specifically, we will examine three cycles of frescoes which graced the walls of the *Salone Sistino*. At first glance, the frescoes appear to offer a closed image of the library solidly at odds with Gesner's studied openness. On one side of the *salone* are a series of images of ancient libraries, both biblical and classical; opposite these ancient library scenes are depicted the major church councils, in which book-burnings feature prominently; and on pillars through the centre of the room stand the inventors of alphabets, culminating in the image of Christ as alpha and omega: language, text and doctrine have as their proper home not simply the Catholic Church, but the Vatican Library. Yet behind the obvious claim for the primacy of Catholic doctrinal orthodoxy lies a quite different, yet complimentary, message: that of the library as a site for the exercise of intellectual judgment and as a locus of ideological power.

We turn then to Paris, and to a consideration of Gabriel Naudé's *Advis pour dresser une bibliothèque* of 1627. Naudé undertakes a self-conscious refraction of the library images offered by Gesner and the Vatican. The library is universal; for the library to function properly, however, critical judgment must be constantly exercised by its constituent members. Crucially, the library delineated by Naudé plays a pivotal role within the new image of knowledge being established by experimental philosophy. Naudé not only articulated a concept of the public library, for which he is perhaps most famous, but he also gave expression to a conception of the library as an instrument of discovery: the public library provides an institutional framework for the pursuit of public, verifiable knowledge.

The triptych of library images examined here is necessarily discordant – it accurately represents a Europe undergoing acute religious and intellectual upheaval. The disputes, however, are localized: what emerges from all three is an image of the library as a key organizing principle of European intellectual life. The early modern library was much more than a simple store-house of books: it offered pathways of intellectual discovery and communication in an age in which textual knowledge provided the foundation of cognition.