

History of Libraries

History of Libraries – Key Points & Chronology

1. Early Beginnings (c. 2600?BC – 500?BC)

Era / Culture	Notable Collections	Features & Purpose
Ancient Mesopotamia (Sumer, and the Babylon)	Clay tablet archives in Nippur, Ur, and the <i>Royal Library of Ashurbanipal</i> (7th c. BC)	• Stored administrative, legal, and literary texts. • Organized by subject and sign type; tablets kept in clay boxes or shelves.
Ancient Egypt	Temple and palace libraries (e.g., Library of the Temple of Amun at Karnak)	• Papyrus scrolls kept in wooden or stone cabinets. • Access limited to priests and officials.
Ancient China	Imperial archives (Zhou, Qin, Han dynasties)	• Bamboo slips and silk scrolls; cataloged by “class” (e.g., classics, histories).
Classical Greece	“Bibliotheca” of Athens; private collections of philosophers (e.g., Aristotle’s Lyceum)	• “Bibliotheca” = “bookstore.” • Emphasis on scholarly exchange; early catalogues on papyrus.
Roman Empire	<i>Bibliotheca Ulpia</i> (Trajan’s Forum, 2nd c. AD) and private libraries of elite families	• Public reading rooms; marble stacks; “tabularii” (librarians) managed acquisitions.

2. The Golden Age of Antiquity (c. 300?BC – 500?AD)

Institution	Location	Size & Content	Innovations
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Library of Alexandria	Alexandria, Egypt	Estimated 400,000–400,000 scrolls (works of science, literature, geography).	• Systematic acquisition policy (buying copies from ships). • <i>Pinakes</i> – early subject-based catalogue by Callimachus. • Dedicated scholars (e.g., Euclid, Eratosthenes). • Development of parchment (pergamena) as a writing material, influencing the later term “paper.”
Library of Pergamum	Pergamum (modern Turkey)	~200,000 scrolls; rival to Alexandria.	
Imperial Library of Constantinople	Constantinople (Byzantium)	Continuation of Roman collections; later merged with monastic libraries.	• Preservation of Greek classics during the Dark Ages.

3. Medieval Period (c. 500–1500)

3.1 Monastic & Cathedral Libraries

- **Key sites:** St. Cuthbert's (Durham), Abbey of Saint Denis, Monte Cassino.
- **Materials:** Handwritten manuscripts on vellum or parchment; later, paper introduced via the Arab world (12th c.).
- **Organization:** Catalogues (e.g., *Liber Index* at Monte Cassino) listed works by *liber* (book) and *scriptor* (author).

3.2 Islamic Golden Age (8th–13th c.)

Library	City	Highlights
House of Wisdom (Bayt al-ikma)	Baghdad	• Translation center (Greek, Sanskrit, Persian). • Hundreds of scholars; systematic indexing (alphabetical).
Al-Qarawiyyin Library	Fez, Morocco	Founded