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Tracing the Archetypal Academic  
Librarian

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### Introduction

A century of phenomenal advances in information technology has resulted in the exponential growth of information, and there is no end in sight. The modern world, what communications theorist Daniel Bell (1973) dubbed the post industrial “knowledge society,” has become so swamped with information, misinformation, and propaganda that neologisms like “information explosion” and “infoglut” have been invented to describe a state of profound saturation: a cognitive overload that increases uncertainty potentially to paralysis. The proliferation of so many new storage formats complicates things further, potentially limiting access to, and the lifespan of, the “memory of humankind.” A “digital dark age” looms.

Although information technology has changed so swiftly and profoundly, and the amount of information has spiked so dramatically, the librarians—the original gatekeepers of knowledge—have been around for thousands of years. Humans have captured information for over ten millennia. Since the beginning of the fourth millennium BCE, people have recorded their spoken language in the form of written text. From the start, this fixing of language into the form of lasting documents (a document being anything that captures information in a physical format) has necessitated these documents' organization and retrieval, as well as the training and assignation of responsibility to those those charged with their care and management. The modern profession of librarianship, however, suffers from a severe case of astigmatism when it comes to exploring its own history (Buckland & Liu, 1998). This is disconcerting, for

“From historical consciousness derives also adaptability to change, an acute realization that life has not always been as it is today, and that it will not forever remain as it is at present. Thus one arrives at a proper perspective upon contemporary events, an ability to relate each to its appropriate antecedents and to project, at least to some extent, its possible consequences. History properly comprehended enriches and deepens the understanding of contemporary society” (Shera, 1953, 110).

The unreflective librarian knows not from whence she came. This lack of historical awareness results in a dearth of professional identity and theoretical grounding. Reflective librarians risk trading their professional identity for “focused pragmatism,” a sin that library historian H. Curtis Wright (1986, p. 83) pinned on the seventh century BCE Assyrian king Assurbanipal himself, the first “ultrapragmatic librarian to exhibit ‘a complete absence of any speculative or reasoning effort.’ Not ability, mind you, but effort.” The unreflective librarian, then, is a *clerk*.

So, what are academic librarians? The answer *seems* obvious. However, when considering the vast tracks of time in which individuals have performed the function of “librarian” (applying the term

broadly), the answer is not so clear. This paper analyzes the available evidence to answer the question: what is the eternal librarian? Understanding the things that *every* academic librarian does, regardless of time, culture, and context, allows for the identification of the *archetypal* academic librarian, the librarian *qua* librarian. Such an understanding, furthermore, reveals the basic differences among “librarians” that stem from culture and context. Understanding the historical development of the information profession is valuable to both librarians and information scientists, allowing for the development of valuable historical perspective and fostering professional identity.

In order to achieve an understanding of the archetypal librarian, this paper compares three periods: (1) pre-Alexandrian Mesopotamian information institutions, focusing on the seventh century BCE Library of Assurbanipal (considered by many scholars to be the first universal or national library), (2) the Great Library of Alexandria (hereafter referred to as “the Library”), and (3) the twenty-first century American academic library.

### **Pre-Alexandrian Mesopotamian “Librarians”: Culminating With Their Work at the Great Library of Assurbanipal**

Humans first developed scripts as a tool for managing economic transactions. The appearance of the earliest sedentary civilizations (at Sumer), ca. 3350, resulted in complex accounting problems due to increased population, craft specialization, and the mass production of ceramics. This urban revolution heavily tasked the traditional recording system, the 5000 year old system of accounting by using clay tokens impressed with abstract representations of commodities, forcing the system's rapid evolution into cuneiform: the first written language (beginning ca. 3100 BCE) (Schmandt-Besserat, 1978 p. 58).

The Sumerian intelligentsia—the scribes—were charged with the creation, organization, and application (e.g., record keeping, business transaction, and practical science) of written documents, as well as the administration of the Mesopotamian proto-libraries (being a librarian was part of being a scribe). The scribes were an elite class of priest/administrators who maintained their influence through control of a difficult-to-master “craft literacy” that required years to learn (cuneiform being an imprecise syllabic script that might consist of hundreds of symbols) (Havelock, 1976 pp. 37-38). They jealously guarded their literacy, as the ability to read and write was a means of advancing to high governmental positions (Innis, 2007 p. 59). However, the scribe was always in the service of the temple or king, and the primary services performed by the scribe was recording data and interpreting information for maintaining *society, the temple, and the king*.

In maintaining this Mesopotamian “stream of tradition” (Oppenheim, 1960), the Sumerians (and the cultures that followed them) developed into obsessive record keepers. Approximately 90% of the over 200,000 tablets discovered to date recorded economic transactions (Barker, 1998 p. 3). There was little Mesopotamian “literature.” For example, of the 15,000 tablets and fragments discovered at the Royal Library of Ebla (mid fourth century BCE, located in what is now Syria), only 25% represent “literature” (and the majority of these are formulaic spells and divination texts—only twenty myths and legends have been identified) (Matthiae, 1980 p. 164). What little literature there was often lacked diversity, likely due to the cuneiform script's inability to express “fine distinctions and light shades of meaning” (Innis, 2007 p. 81). Literature did not support the development of ideas through dialectic. Mesopotamian “science,” as a result, was practical (e.g., geography was studied to help set land boundaries as opposed to discovering axioms), and the Mesopotamian *b elle lettres* devolved into archetypes (Havelock, 1976 p. 34).

Mesopotamian proto-libraries, resultantly, served the pragmatic purpose of *maintaining society* rather than advancing it. Both transactional records and “literary” documents became operational devices for achieving this goal. Records helped maintain the economic infrastructure of the society while the literature continued the cultural milieu: “it was considered an essential part of the training of each scribe for him to copy faithfully the texts that had made up the [Mesopotamian] stream of tradition” (Oppenheim, 1960 p. 410). Oppenheim (1977) concluded that this resulted in the accumulation of large quantities of

transactional records, along with a modest number of “literary” texts for education and cultural conservation purposes (e.g., predicting the king's welfare).

Scholars often write that Assyrian king Assurbanipal's (668-627 BCE) library, founded mid-seventh century CE, represented the pinnacle of Mesopotamian proto-libraries and dub it the west's first true “library.” This massive library (number of tablets estimated at 20,000 to 22,000) was *systematically collected* and *universal* in its scope (Arksey, 1977 p. 835). Assurbanipal sent out agents to collect tablets throughout his empire, and even to lands outside of his domain, to collect records for his use: “[Assurbanipal orders that] any tablets and ritual text about which I have not written you, and they are suitable for my palace, select (them) and send (them) to me” (Weitmeyer, 1956 p. 229).

Despite its novelties, Assurbanipal's library was no different from other Mesopotamian information institutions in its basic purpose of maintaining the status quo. Assurbanipal charged his “librarians” with creating and maintaining an “easily workable” collection (Posner, 1972 p. 61), one suited for documenting the past while providing access to materials useful in present or future crises. Beyond its size, the composition of the collection itself does not appear terribly different from its predecessors, with only about 15% of the tablets dedicated to “literature.” While the library housed all types of Mesopotamian literature, the main categories covered were “omens, incantations, medical texts, [and] lexical lists” (Pedersen, 1998 p. 164).

Considering the king's acquisition policy, the scribes would most certainly have been deeply involved in *identifying*, *acquiring*, and *selecting* tablets for inclusion (Assurbanipal's “agents” likely were, or reported to, his scribes). Their *organization* of the collection was a feat *par excellence*. They divided the collection by subject, dedicating rooms to specific document types: (1) history and governmental affairs, (2) intelligence and foreign nations, (3) geography, (4) taxation records, (5), laws and legal decisions, (6) legends and mythology, (7) biology, (8) mathematics, (9) medicine, and (10) natural history (a simple, yet effective, classification system) (Harris, 1995 p. 20).

Colophons inscribed on the tablets served as metadata for text identification and *retrieval* purposes, providing information to identify and provide access to the work (e.g., title and series information). Assurbanipal's “literary” texts tended to have longer, more complex colophons (Pedersen, 1998, 163). The tablets identified their content through markings on their top or side edge for easy retrieval when ordered on shelves like books. The scribes constructed series to compile larger “texts,” with tablets in a series being identified as such. Finally, the librarians catalogued their collection, as the Mesopotamians had been doing since the third millennium BCE. The library's catalog tablets served as a checklist to account accurately for the collection's holdings, providing “titles of works, the number of tablets for each work, the number of lines, opening words, important subdivisions, and a location or classification symbol” (Harris, 1995 p. 20).

The Mesopotamian librarians were master organizers, and the Assyrians had the benefit of a well-developed tradition of bibliographic control. It is tempting to agree with Peter Briscoe et al's assertion that the Library of Assurbanipal “performed the same basic functions as a library today. It (a) carefully *collected* written texts from throughout the known world; (b) *cataloged* and *classified* them by subject; (c) *conserved* records by recopying; (d) used them to answer the king's questions (*reference*); and, (e) provided him [Assurbanipal] and a few others with something to read (*circulation*)” (Briscoe, Bodtke-Roberts, Douglas, Heinhold, Koller, & Peirce, 1986 ). One critical element, however, is missing, the *creation* of new knowledge through scholarship on the part of the librarians.

### **The “Scholar-Librarians” of the Great Library of Alexandria.**

After seizing Egypt from the Persian empire (332 BCE), Alexander the Great of Macedon (356-323 BCE) saw the advantages of building a Mediterranean port city beside the natural bay formed between the isle of Pharos and mainland Egypt. Ptolemy I (Soter) (ca. 267-282 BCE), Alexander's former general and friend, also recognized Alexandria's natural advantages and potential as base of operations

for administering Egypt. Soter seized Egypt for himself upon Alexander's death and cemented his authority as Alexander's successor by hijacking Alexander's embalmed corpse and enshrining it in Alexandria (Strabo 17.1.8, trans. 1950). The corpse sat in Alexandria for centuries afterwards, heralding the city's pre-eminence as center of the Hellenistic world. Ptolemy's dynasty lasted until 31 BCE. Alexandria would serve as Soter's capital: a new city for a new, *Hellenistic* Egypt.

Among Soter's greatest achievements (if not *the* greatest) was the foundation of the Alexandrian Museum, a community of scholars, and its associated Library. The Museum and Library represented the pinnacle of cooperative scholarship in the ancient world, and moderns still regard them as symbols of the human intellect's capacity for genius. Demetrius of Phalerum (ca. 350-280 BCE)—whom Soter placed in charge of organizing the Library and Museum (ca. 297/6 BCE)—was an Aristotelian and a student of Theophrastus (Aristotle's esteemed successor to the Lyceum “deanship”). Demetrius Collected over 200,000 scrolls for the Library at the behest of Soter (Pseudo-Aristeas, 9-10). Byzantine scholiast John Tzetzes (in Parsons, 1952) estimated that it contained over 532,800 rolls (including the 42,800 rolls in its nearby sister library, the Sarapeum), and by the mid-first century BCE it is said to have contained over 700,000 rolls (Aulus Gellius, 7.17.3, trans. 1946).

Dwarfing its Mesopotamian predecessors in the sheer *amount* of information it contained, the Library was also qualitatively different in the *type* of documents it collected. Ptolemy's aim was to collect the *sum total* of Greek *literature*—the recorded expressions of *intellectual* activity (as opposed to the Mesopotamians' tendency to hoard the documentation of everyday life, such as records of business transactions, legal rulings, and divination texts). While there is no clear distinction between library and archive among the Mesopotamians (even at Nineveh), the Library was a *library* in that it collected and organized recorded expressions of intellectual activities: knowledge based resources. There is also evidence that the Library was a *universal* collection. For example, Pseudo-Aristeas, a Hellenized Jew writing in the mid-second century BCE, wrote that Ptolemy II (Philadelphus) (reigned ca. 285-246 BCE) had the books of the Hebrew Bible translated into Greek and added to the Library (Pseudo-Aristeas, 10-12, trans. 1973).

Rooted both in Ptolemy's iteration of Alexander's worldview and Aristotelian thought, the Library was a *universal* collection that served as a tool for the *creation* of knowledge. The the encyclopedic and comprehensive nature of these institutions' research mission evidences the Aristotelian link to the Library and Museum, their demarcation of scientific and scholarly disciplines, their tentative and dialectical character, and the Alexandrian scholars' orientation towards empiricism. The Library was an entity *sui generis*, something new and profound, and represented a fundamental shift in the nature of scholarly communication from systems aimed at primarily cultural and political conservancy (e.g., the Library of Assurbanipal) to those aimed at scientific inquiry.

Just as remarkable as the Library itself were the librarians that worked there. Demetrius was followed a succession of Head Librarians famed for their scholarship (Demetrius is generally considered to have been in charge of organizing the Museum and Library but not to have officially been its Head Librarian). Edward Parsons (1952, p. 160) analyzed two variant lists of Head Librarians, John Tzetzes' *Prolegomena to Aristophanes* and the anonymous *Oxyrhynchus fragment 1241* to propose a chronological list of Head Librarians [see Table 1, below]:

	From	To
Demetrius of Phaleron		282 BCE
Zenodotus of Ephesus	282	c. 260
Callimachus of Cyrene	c. 260	c. 240
Apollonius of Rhodes	c. 240	c. 230
Eratosthenes of Cyrene	c. 230	195
Aristophanes of Byzantium	195	c. 180
Apollonius the Eidograph	180	c. 160
Aristarchus of Samothrace	c. 160	131

Table 1. Parson's chronological list of the Head Librarians of Alexandria.

By any measure, this is an extraordinary list of thinkers. Zenodotus, Aristophanes, and Aristarchus were all renowned grammarians. Callimachus was a famed poet and compiled the *Pinakes*, the Library's monumental catalog. Apollonius of Rhodes wrote the epic *Argonautica*. Eratosthenes quite possibly was the best of them: he was a polymath, mathematician and astronomer, and is justly famed for providing a near accurate estimate of the Earth's circumference. Even if the list of Head Librarians is not completely accurate, it is increasingly clear that there was little distinction between librarian and scholar among the Alexandrians. It was a bookish age, and the scholars of the Museum were bookmen.

The first century Greek geographer Strabo wrote (13, 1, 54, trans. 1950) that Aristotle was “the first man, so far as I [Strabo] know, to have collected books and to have taught the kings of Egypt how to arrange a library” (Strabo, 13.1.54, trans. 1950). If one accepts the Aristotelian origin of the Library, it is plain that the collection was a tool for actualizing Aristotle's *dialectical method*. Aristotle's scientific method hinged, first, on the examination of prior esteemed opinion ( *endoxa* ) as a prerequisite for the creation of new knowledge. Explanations of Aristotle's dialectical method are scattered throughout his scientific and practical philosophic treatises. Well known examples include passages found in his *Topics* (100b20), *Nichomachean Ethics* (1145b1), *Eudamian Ethics* (1216b; 1235b13), and *Metaphysics* ( 995a24-b34) (Aristotle, trans. 1984). The Library and Museum represent, respectively, a *physical* manifestation of Aristotle's methodology through the collecting of books (containing *endoxa* ) and the loci of its *practical* application through the Alexandrian scholars' use of the Library as a tool for the systematization of knowledge. Librarianship became a union of the theoretical inquiry peculiar to the Greeks (as opposed to the practical science of the Mesopotamians) and bibliographic control (as likely borrowed or adapted from the Library's Near Eastern predecessors, as well as influenced by Aristotelian methodology—particularly that found in his *Organon*, or logical works). The first major task of the Alexandrian scholars, the recension of Homer and the major Greek authors (Tzetzes, 1952 pp. 112-113), illustrated this point. Not only were the librarians responsible for *organizing* the collection, they actively took part in *creating* the information through *editing* the texts and thereby fixing the canon of Greek literature.

But the Alexandrians were scholar/ *librarians*, and the Library represented a bibliographic control task of colossal proportions. Librarians had to identify and procure scrolls, and the scrolls poured in. Galen, the second century CE Greek physician, wrote that Ptolemy III (Eurgetes) (reigned 247-221 BCE) placed an embargo on all books coming into the port of Alexandria so that workers might copy and add them to the Library (Galen, 3.17.1, trans. 1976). Surely, it was left up to the Alexandrian librarians to sift through the piles of incoming scrolls to decide what was worthy of inclusion in the Library. Moreover, choice of inclusion was no haphazard affair. It is reasonable to assume that, since the librarians were conducting a recension of the Greek literature, librarians were not accepting corrupt texts into and were systematically expunging them from, the collection. Although we have no surviving “collection development policies” for the Library, the fact that we have a “canon” of ancient Greek literature, including

authoritative versions of Homer and early Greek poets and dramatists, is evidence that the Alexandrian librarians were rigorous in the control of their collection.

The sheer volume of material collected in the Library and Serapeum demanded extreme rigor of classification and cataloging for the collection to be workable. And the collection was workable; Strabo's *Geography* reference hundreds of Greek works that he tracked down in the Library's "stacks." Unfortunately, little is known about how this monumental task of bibliographic control was accomplished. The Byzantine grammarian John Tzetzes wrote that "Under the royal patronage of Ptolemy Philadelphus, Alexander of Aetolia edited the books of tragedy, Lycophron of Chalcis those of comedy, and Zenodotus of Ephesus those of Homer and the other poets" (Tzetzes, 1952, pp. 112-113). Robert Barnes (2000, pp. 68-69) noted that this feat would only have been possible if the books were ordered by subject matter, and then likely, as is the case with previous Greek "lists," ordered alphabetically.

The *Pinakes* ("tables") of Callimachus, a masterwork in 120 books that cataloged the Greek literature (and possibly works that were *translated* into Greek, like the Pentateuch) of the Library, is evidence of the classification and cataloguing efforts at the Library. Rudolf Blum (1991) deduced from these fragments that Callimachus divided authors into classes and subclasses, arranged the authors alphabetically, added biographical data for each author, listed the titles written under each author, cited the opening words of each work, and listed the number of lines for each work. The *Pinakes* appears to have been a living catalog, meeting the demands of a growing collection: Aristophanes of Byzantium performed a major revision of the work.

It is safe to assume that Callimachus (and later Aristophanes) did not act alone in completing this enormous task, and while we know little about the administrative structure of the Library's administration, it is not unreasonable to think that Callimachus was aided by a variety of "assistant" and "associate" librarians serving as "subject specialists." These subordinate librarians have equal claim to being true scholars as the Head Librarians did (e.g., Lycophron and Alexander of Aetolia).

### **Assurbanipal, Alexandria, and the Modern Academic Library.**

The bibliographic control methods used today are iterations of millennia old Mesopotamian methods adapted to manage massive amounts of information and advances in information technology. While the primary purpose of the institutions has changed, from cultural political conservancy (the Mesopotamians) to the creation of new knowledge (Alexandria and the modern academic library), the basic functions of bibliographic control ascribed to their librarians remains the same. Librarians from all three eras were/are responsible for *identifying*, *selecting*, and *acquiring* materials, and then *organizing* it (via cataloguing and classification) in the hopes of later *retrieving* it. In addition, all of our librarians were/are responsible for *conserving* the collection

Differences, however, emerge. The Mesopotamians and Alexandrians performed *editing* of texts as one of their function. With Assurbanipal's librarians, such *editing* was a performed as an educational device and as a means of quality control. The Alexandrians, as exemplified by Zenodotus and Aristarchus, developed *editing* into *literary criticism* and therefore creative *scholarship*. Although they are *selecting* material for their collections, the majority of modern librarians do no *editing* of the texts themselves.

Finally, *scholarship* in the sense of actively creating new theoretical knowledge was a *basic* function of only the Alexandrian librarians. The Mesopotamian scribes engaged in neither dialectic nor theoretical science, and although many modern academic librarians are required to fulfill a "research component," it often consists of "best practice" reports and is often secondary to their service function. Libraries are increasingly hiring academic librarians, furthermore, as "professional staff" with no research requirements whatsoever. Unlike the Alexandrians, the modern world makes a distinction between a scholar and a librarian.

Table 2 summarizes the functions performed by librarians from the three periods considered in this paper, with the shaded area delimiting the *archetypal* librarian:

	Assurbanipal	Alexandria	Modern Academic
Identifying	Yes	Yes	Yes
Selecting	Yes	Yes	Yes
Acquiring	Yes	Yes	Yes
Organizing	Yes	Yes	Yes
Retrieving	Yes	Yes	Yes
Conserving	Yes	Yes	Yes
Editing	Yes	Yes	No
Scholarship	Practical	Theoretical	(primarily) Practical

Table 2. Functions performed by librarians across three historical periods

The basic functions of the librarian have remained constant over thousands of years. Although writers often look to the Library as a model for the modern academic library, today's librarians differ from the Alexandrians in that theoretical *scholarship* is not seen as fundamental element of their professional constitution; it is an ancillary element.

The archetypal librarian remains delimited by what Jesse Shera (1972, p. 206) called her *organizational* (i.e., characteristics of recorded information) and *environmental* (i.e., characteristics of readers) knowledge. Jacques Barzun (1946, p. 116), however, wrote that “the ideal would be to have no distinctions whatever between librarianship and scholarship: scholars would be librarians and librarians would be scholars.” It is fashionable to predict what the “librarian of tomorrow” will be like. Most of these predictions see the roll of the librarian as becoming increasingly more dynamic in the face of the proliferation of information and new technologies. But, as this paper suggests, librarianship may potentially flower by looking backwards, by transcending the archetype, librarianship and scholarship may once again be synonymous—amazing things will result.

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