

LONG OF THE AGES

SOME OF THE NOTED CONTINENTAL LIBRARIES.

How Priceless Manuscripts and Books of Past Centuries Have Been Gathered and Preserved—Men and Nations That Have Lent Their Aid.

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John Stow, an antiquarian of the 16th century, said of one of his attempts: "I know the cause requires the pen of an excellent artisan, but fearing that none will attempt it, I choose rather to handle it after my plain fashion than to leave it unperformed."

In glancing over the material, out of which artistic number two must be wrought, the writer of these sketches realizes more than ever that it requires a talent for the combination of extreme brevity and the utmost clearness to bring an untired reader face to face with the founders, patrons and students who for centuries have been building the world's great libraries. From the embarrassment of riches in the shape of historical matter, we must be content to glance at a few of the mediæval libraries which may, in some sort, serve to bridge over the vast interval between the famous Alexandrian of ancient times and the model of today.

Mainly these are libraries which still exist, and whose life histories are bound up with the history of the time.

During the dark ages of Europe the flame of learning was kept alive in the monasteries and universities, and the book collections of the time range themselves almost exclusively under these two heads. Here libraries of some thousands of volumes were painfully gathered by the patient toil of the copyist, and who can measure the services rendered by these priestly scribes in thus preserving and handing down to later and happier eras, the gems of classic thought and learning. The monasteries were far safer repositories for precious volumes than either University or Royal Palace.

Of all the monastic orders, our library studies lead us to regard the order of St. Benedictine as having rendered the greatest services to mankind in this guardianship of letters. Almost every European library of today is indebted to the mediæval monasteries for the nucleus of its book collection, as well as for its greatest treasures in manuscripts of rare value.

As the former center of civilization, Italy is the country in which the oldest existing libraries must be looked for. St. Benedict came into Italy in the sixth century and established the monastery, the prototype of all similar institutions in Western Europe. He brought with him a handful of manuscripts which are still to be seen in the monastery of Monte Casino.

A century earlier we find evidence of the beginning of the great National Library of Italy in Rome. The Biblioteca Vaticana stands today in the front rank of European libraries. Under the generous patronage of Popes and Kings, it has become one of the most magnificent in its housing, and in its stores of priceless codices and early prints. The mural paintings are by great artists and are in series, representing the interiors of ancient Roman libraries, and historic scenes in the life of the church. Two hundred thousand books on open shelves accessible to the public, and modern cataloguing is being introduced.

As early as the twelfth century Spain had numerous libraries.

The Biblioteca Nacional at Madrid numbers 600,000 volumes, and in consequence of the numerous accessions from libraries of suppressed convents and monasteries, the classes of theology, law and history are particularly complete.

France has been for several centuries well supplied with public libraries. In Paris the Bibliotheque Nationale, the most extensive in the world, had its origin in the manuscript collections of Charlemagne.

From its founding to the downfall of Napoleon it was the pet of each successive sovereign. As the Roman Varre was the first to ornament a library with the busts and statues of learned men, so Paris set the fashion of fine, artistic and expensive buildings for libraries. Paris has more libraries than any other city in the world. France has a remarkable number of provincial libraries, most of which were formed by confiscation at the time of the Revolution.

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