

OF ANCIENT ORIGIN.

BEGINNINGS OF LIBRARY MOVEMENT IN FAR CENTURIES.

Some of the More Famous Institutions of Which Records Have Been Found Modern Development the Result of Long Evolution.

I.

As the astronomer computes an orbit, not by study of where a body stands today but of the track over which it has just come, so shall we glance at the past of the library in order better to understand our status and predict our future. To the superficial student of its modern American activity, the library may seem the creation of the latter half of the 19th century, but like other social institutions, the public library is the result of a long evolution, a normal development from its predecessors.

The public library of all the centuries before the 18th was an instrument not for the diffusion of knowledge, but for its conservation—as a storehouse of books to preserve them from destruction and make them available only to scholars. This institution has such antiquity that its origins almost defy research. One of the oldest collections of written documents is said to have been made in Memphis by the Egyptian King Osymandyas of the twelfth dynasty.

Over the arched entrance to the apartment where these archives were kept were inscribed the words: "The Healing of the Soul." Religious and historic records formed the earliest collections, and these naturally would be stored in sacred places. So the earliest libraries were temples and the earliest librarians were priests.

The excavations of Layard have thrown unexpected light on the ancient civilizations. The inscribed bricks or tablets found in rows and tiers of spheres, buried under the sands of the Assyrian desert, declare themselves part of an extensive library.

Many of them are confessedly copies from similar books existing in like collections centuries before. These "books of clay" imply an elaborate civilization and formed the library of Assurbanipal, the greatest Assyrian patron of literature. It is estimated at 10,000 works, methodically arranged and listed. A great portion of these is now in the British museum.

One of the earliest Hebrew libraries was the temple at Jerusalem 775 B. C. It was restored after the captivity by Nehemiah and again by Judas Maccabaeus. In Greece, Pisistratus was the first to establish a library at Athens.

The most celebrated library of ancient times was the Alexandrian, containing 700,000 rolls, founded by Ptolemy, and whose destruction has been supposed to make so wide a gap between the learning of the ancient and the modern world.

The first library in Rome was in 167 B. C., being the booty of war in Macedonia. In the time of Augustus libraries became popular, and men of culture began to have private collections. Cicero was an enthusiastic collector of books. One of the unfulfilled projects of Caesar was a free public library.