



41. Cologne Mediaevistentagung  
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# The Library

Spaces of Thought and  
Knowledge Systems

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In the digital era, the experience of what a library once was seems to slip away slowly but unstoppably: the library meant access to a substantial, yet limited amount of books, which were available only at a certain place, at a certain time and under certain conditions. It was a collection subject to certain criteria, which required a reasonable and steady order to enable finding anything there. All of these limitations concerning the immediate access to books are increasingly removed by global search engines and comprehensive search algorithms. We experience every day in which way our reading and working conditions are practically altered by this. Which consequences this might have for our conceptions of knowledge and research is, however, at best only vaguely apparent.

Thus, making the *Library* topic of a *Mediaevistentagung* is supposed to reveal some generalities regarding the relation between the library and knowledge, which might facilitate our reflection on current changes as well as on conditions and mechanisms of knowledge in general. This may be achieved by studying the question of how libraries in their various forms fit into and affected intellectual processes and their social and material conditions. For this purpose – and according to the framework of our conference –, we look upon a millennium in which libraries played a crucial role in passing on knowledge across linguistic and cultural borders. Libraries were places of thinking, writing, translating, and copying. A library is not merely a cluster of books which are waiting for their users. Libraries are spaces of thought and institutions of organized knowledge. They reflect the questions of their times and preserve them for the future. Thus, they are privi-

leged spaces of participation in knowledge, to which we contribute with the books we write ourselves. Early on, those knowledge carriers were treasured in places in which they could be stored, studied, and reproduced. Those places were archives of all kinds and, above all, libraries. According to their size and conception, they have since granted access to a certain and at the same time limited amount of knowledge carriers: may it be scrolls, documents, manuscripts, books, microfilms or databases.

The concept of a library shows the interdependence of conceptual and material culture, the interweaving of the history of knowledge and institutional context conditions. At the outset of every considerable movements of knowledge reception are books or text corpora. In this context, libraries are spaces of thought which, on the one hand, reflect concepts and, on the other, enable them in the first place. Many knowledge systems originate from library practice, which can itself – implicitly or explicitly – be an expression of a theoretically established knowledge system, which again becomes accessible only through this practical knowledge. Thus, there is a broad basis for an interdisciplinary approach to the conference's topic. Without intending to be exhaustive, some questions shall be addressed in the following.

**(i)** First, there is the question of how libraries emerge and decline: Where do they exist? Who owns them? Who establishes them? How is the material collected? Where do the books come from? What are their values? How does the collection develop over time? How do storage, arrangement, and utilization of the material take place? Who are the users? Which rules must be followed in using the material? Who monitors this and how? What do the users do with or to the books under certain circumstances, e.g., read them, copy them, gloss them, damage them, steal them...? When and how are catalogues prepared? According to which systems? Are libraries at certain points purposely reconstructed? For which reasons? What are the reasons for the loss of libraries?

**(ii)** In this context, the question of how contemporaries perceive and describe libraries arises. For which purposes are they visited? Who is allowed to visit them? Who is not? What does a visit to the library look like? Is there an awareness of the specific features of a certain library? Are there descriptions of experiences concerning a certain library, its richness or its shortcomings?

**(iii)** Closely related to this is the image of a library: How are libraries depicted in literary texts and paintings – actually existing ones, on the one hand, and stereotype, fictional, or imagined ones on the other? Which mental experiences (insight, epiphany, conversion, boredom) are connected to libraries? What does the layout of a library (e.g., chest, lectern, rooms, buildings) and of its books (e.g., covers, illumination) tell us about their meaning and the perceptions of their owners? And last, which perceptions and wishes shape the (actualized as well as not actualized) planning of a library?

**(iv)** Libraries, as text ensembles, are not necessarily bound to a certain place or a specific material form. We reconstruct immaterial libraries and, in doing so, investigate what an author might have read, which sources were available to a reader, and what a nowadays lost library might have looked like at a certain time. The digital era further opens new possibilities for the creation of ideal libraries that, concerning their claim to completeness and their presence, exceed their historical paragons by far and thus open new, unprecedented perspectives for research. At this, the reconstruction of the library of an author does not only represent his intellectual cosmos, but also provides an insight into his ways of doing research, his search for specific texts, their selection and compilation as well as the observed gaps, which were then filled by their own productions.

**(v)** Further, classifications, reading guides, lectionaries, and establishing systems essentially belong to the library. Regarding, for instance, the Aristotelian and Platonic text corpora (although these are certainly not the only ones), it becomes apparent that libraries and scientific classifications are closely linked. There are libraries for scholastic and mystical theology, for physicians, lawyers, and astronomers. That way, a canon is established, taught, transmitted, transformed, and replaced.

**(vi)** Moreover, libraries are the basis for intertextuality. They thereby demand certain skills of the reader. How is this particular knowledge imparted? Do libraries feature a 'common core' for the discourse across fields of expertise? To what extent do libraries influence the reading and quoting habits of their users?

**(vii)** In terms of disciplinarity, the topic encompasses different realms, which – according to the type of library considered – may occur separately or in conjunction: monastic libraries, university libraries, court libraries as well as the libraries of professors (e.g., Amplonius), of physicians (e.g., Arnaldus de Villa Nova), of academic prelates (e.g., Nicholas of Cusa), of writers (e.g., Richard de Fournival, who, among other things, composed a *Biblionomia*), of councilmen, rabbis, and travelling scholars reflect the interests of their users and the collectors. Various aspects also emerge by including Byzantine culture, Jewish tradition, and the Islamic world, with their often quite different conditions, for instance, the notable dominance of private libraries.

**(viii)** Libraries have always been places of media transfer: from scrolls to parchment to paper, from manuscripts to letterpress to digital storage media. Transfer processes, however, always involve the danger of losing something. Only rarely are collections entirely transferred from one medium to another. Certain technical and social changes can be observed through the prism of the library, such as the introduction of paper, of letterpress, or of the increasing vernacular literature (also in the sciences). How is this media change and transfer addressed? What does it mean for the collection of a library?

Like always, the Cologne *Mediaevistentagung* aims at the broadest possible interdisciplinary spectrum. Thus, we would like to invite philosophers and theologians, historians and philologists, literary scholars and cultural scientists, art historians and science historians, and so on, to participate with a question from their field of expertise or with an interdisciplinary issue in the 41. Cologne *Mediaevistentagung*. It is our goal to challenge and reconsider habitual perceptions and opinions and to thereby open up new perspectives.

Let me conclude by kindly asking for your topic proposals together with a short abstract (of about 1 page), preferably to be send in by **August 15, 2017** (thomas-institut@uni-koeln.de).

I would be delighted to welcome you personally at the 41. Cologne *Mediaevistentagung* next year. Please feel free to forward this invitation to colleagues who are not yet listed in our address file or send us the address of those who are possibly interested.

Thank you very much!

I am looking forward to receiving your proposals and remain with kind regards

Cologne, March 2017



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