

Private Libraries of the Roman Republic: Marcus Tullius Cicero as a case study

Pia Mustonen, MA

PhD student / University of Tampere

Marcus Tullius Cicero (106–43 BC), the Roman politician, philosopher and writer, was also one of the best-known owners of a private library. Cicero's letters, which have been preserved exceptionally well, contain numerous references not only to his own library but also to those owned by other Roman aristocrats, as well as to their literary habits. From the viewpoint of the history of libraries, Cicero's correspondence with his friend Titus Pomponius Atticus (110–32 BC) is especially interesting. Atticus lived in Athens and Cicero had known him since their common years at school. He was a book collector devoted to an idle way of life, and, in addition to that, a wealthy publisher and a book dealer.

The libraries in ancient Rome were similar to those in Greece as far as their types, organization and contents were concerned. In fact, many of the actual manuscripts were brought to Rome from Greek libraries. This cultural inheritance was a result of the expansion of the Roman world to the east: the first great libraries of Rome were acquired as spoils of war from Greece and Asia Minor. These libraries were models for private libraries which acted as meeting places of small social circles. Just like libraries, the early Roman librarians were often brought from the Greek East – highly educated slaves or prisoners of war. Most of the library personnel were occupied as copyists, since the major part of the work consisted of copying. They also took care of the day-to-day tasks like reshelving books, repairing damaged book rolls, keeping the catalogue up to date, and so on.

Private libraries were born on the idea of an aristocratic villa offering an opportunity for peace and honourable leisure (*otium*) with books and friends. In addition to a library, such a villa was also equipped with various artworks, gardens and places whose names – *academia*, *lyceum* or *palaestra* – were meant to bring the corresponding hellenistic institutions to people's minds. The library was a joy not only to its owner, but also to friends and acquaintances. The usual practice was to allow them access to collections and also to let them borrow books on request.