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Western Civilization

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### Aristotle, the Father of Libraries

Most cities, and even small towns, in the world today have some sort of public library. Libraries are such a common sight, they are sometimes taken for granted; it's as though they've always existed. Libraries have a long history of providing people with access to information and the resources they need for learning, but libraries have a finite past and can be traced back to the development of western civilization. It is easy to imagine the famed Greek philosopher, Aristotle, being a fan of today's public libraries. Aristotle was a thinker, a student, and a teacher (Devender), exactly the kind of card-carrying library user we'd expect to see today. But in Aristotle's time, libraries were not common. In fact, without Aristotle, libraries as we know them might not even exist. Aristotle was the father of libraries because he developed one of the first libraries where students could come to learn, his library was a model for others to replicate, and documents from his library survived and became part of other important collections.

In 335 B.C., Aristotle returned to Athens and "rented some buildings in the Lyceum and established a school there" (Morison). The school became known as "Peripatetic" due to Aristotle's habit of delivering lectures as he walked with students around the Lyceum grounds (Morison). These roving discussions covered subjects such as philosophy, mathematics, science, and politics, and the basis of the knowledge

shared was derived from the materials in Aristotle's library ("Aristotle Biography"). Devender explains, "in addition to specimens, the Lyceum housed hundreds of manuscripts and numerous maps. The objects in the museum were used to illustrate Aristotle's lectures and discussions." Norman references the first century geographer Strabo, who wrote of Aristotle that "he was the first man ... to have collected books." Instead of keeping these sources hidden for personal use, Aristotle made them available to his students and fellow philosophers at the Lyceum (Morison). As new discoveries were made, the library grew to include the findings of the "members of the Lyceum" ("Aristotle Biography"). Aristotle was a model of teaching and learning for his students, and his library at the Lyceum was a great illustration of the importance of knowledge in the development of the western world.

The positive effects of Aristotle's library at the Lyceum were not isolated to Athens and Greece, but rather its impact reached as far away as the ancient city of Alexandria in Egypt. According to Strabo, Aristotle "taught the kings in Egypt how to arrange a library" (Grout). This does not mean that Aristotle sat down and actually taught the kings how to catalog a book. What Strabo meant is that Aristotle's work in the Lyceum library was well-known and had the potential for replication. For example, Grout writes that it was "Demetrius, a student of Aristotle, who advised Ptolemy I Soter in founding the Great Library" in Alexandria. Another example of Aristotle's indirect impact on the library at Alexandria comes in the form of "Theophrastus, a student of Aristotle, [who] left 'a very large number of writings,' which, given their excellence, he felt compelled to catalog" (Grout). It's not surprising that Aristotle's library was copied in

Alexandria. Alexander the Great, Alexandria's namesake, had been a student of Aristotle, and the "Lyceum's fame--and the fame of other schools in Athens--attracted increasing numbers of philosophers and students from all over the Mediterranean world" (Morison). Clearly Aristotle's concept of a repository for shared knowledge and learning resonated with others, transcending the boundaries of culture and geography (Devender).

It is possible to walk the aisle in a library today and find a book by Aristotle; however, browsing the shelves at a modern library is very different from what Lyceum students would have experienced in their time. The majority of works in Aristotle's library at the Lyceum would have most likely been scrolls (Lukács). As expected, scrolls proved difficult to preserve over the generations due to their rarity and exposure to degrading elements such as "moisture and moths" (Norman). Of Aristotle's estimated 200 works, some believe that only 30 to 40 survived ("Aristotle Biography", Lukács). Even though not all of Aristotle's writing survived, enough of it did survive and helped to establish his place as one of the "fathers of philosophy" ("Aristotle Biography"). Following his death in 322 B.C., Aristotle's school and library collection were passed to his predecessor Theophrastus (Norman). Norman goes on to describe the transfer of Aristotle's writings from teachers and kings to copyists, bibliophiles and later library enthusiasts. Some of Aristotle's writings even ended up on the shelves in the library at Alexandria. Despite their falling "out of use ... in the century following Aristotle's death, [his] were revived during the first century" and preserved for later generations ("Aristotle Biography").

Libraries are centers for knowledge and lifelong learning in today's society. Whether they are the center of our school or the cornerstone of our small town community, libraries are clear examples of our taxpayer dollars at work for the common good. We live in a time when libraries, as valuable as they are, are so commonplace we often forget the benefits that they afford us. But they had to start somewhere. It took the development of libraries as places of learning, someone to model how libraries should work, and someone to plant the seeds for the ideas and writings that fill library shelves. Thanks to Aristotle and his efforts to build the library at the Lyceum, we have libraries that we can enjoy today.

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