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Libraries in the Mediterranean Region: the current situation

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The Mediterranean region is one of a handful of regions where civilization as we know it now was given its shape. Learning, scholarship and documentation developed in many of the areas bordering it from Syria and Israel in the East to Spain in the West. Ancient Greece and Ancient Rome and their colonies in Asia Minor and North Africa, and Ancient Egypt were celebrated, among many other things, for their libraries and archives, while in the Middle Ages the libraries of Moorish Spain and the monastic libraries of Italy and Greece were crucial for the preservation of thousands of texts from the Ancient World.

The royal and princely libraries of Renaissance Italy and Spain, some of them forerunners of today's national or state libraries, and the libraries of great universities like those of Bologna, Barcelona and Valencia maintained the region's fame for the quality and size of its libraries, but from the 17th century leadership and innovation in library management was lost by this region to the countries of northern Europe - to France, Germany, and Britain, a leadership shared later by Scandinavia, the Netherlands, and Belgium.

There are both historical and cultural reasons why in recent centuries Mediterranean librarianship should have lost its impetus in some countries or failed to develop in others. One important reason is, or, in some cases was until fairly recently, without doubt the tendency in Mediterranean countries to impose the dead hand of their often cumbersome State bureaucratic systems on academic and public libraries, often stifling the spirit of enterprise in individual institutions, and a tendency to regard libraries as of some importance, yes, but not essential like, say, schools. One disconcerting aspect of this philosophy in the past, one that has still not disappeared though it has certainly diminished, was a readiness by politicians in power and their bureaucratic appendages to allocate untrained people, who are misfits for mental or physical reasons, to posts in libraries. There, it is argued, they can do little harm either to themselves or to the readers.

1. Library profession and education

The past reluctance, now considerably weakening, of politicians and even heads of educational institutions to accept librarians as professionals in the way teachers have long been considered to be professionals, has been largely responsible for the weakness and sometimes dearth in the region, of long-term programmes for the training of librarians and documentalists. Until fairly recently the librarian was either a scholar, a bookman, who was expected to run a library efficiently because of his scholarly wisdom, or else he was a technician who could pick up the techniques he required as he went along. Israel is the great exception with its efficient library schools at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, the University of Haifa and Bar-Ilan University. Large countries like Spain and Italy have only a

handful of institutions specialising in library education: the Universities of Madrid, Barcelona and Granada in Spain, and in Italy, the University of Rome "La Sapienza" and those universities, such as Udine and Viterbo, which offer degrees in Conservation of cultural materials, one of the options being library and archival materials.

Some of the smaller countries are better off, relatively speaking. Turkey, for instance, has three library science departments, two of them in Ankara universities, and the third in Istanbul, which offer programmes even at doctoral level; Tunisia's Institut de Presse et des Sciences de l'Information has been offering a two-year undergraduate programme since the early Eighties. Algeria and Morocco also have training facilities, unlike Albania which has none. Greece has recently produced a graduate-level traning programme at the Ionian University, but existing library staff members are mainly equipped with diplomas from Technological Education Institutes. Only 24% of library staff have received formal education in librarianship of any kind. Malta acquired its first ongoing programme at diploma level offered by the University of Malta in the late Eighties, while Cyprus with its new University in Nicosia appears to be headed that way too.

The truth is, however, that a good many training programmes are hampered by curricula of a traditional nature and suffer from a lack of flexibility. Few of them are built round contemporary concepts of management and offer comprehensive programmes of hands-on training in automated techniques. The result is that too many libraries in the region are staffed by librarians who are only vaguely in touch with contemporary library science and in not a few cases are completely out of touch with it. Speaking of Middle East librarians, a recent author says "Library education may have to take some of the blame for the poor image of Arab librarians and their corresponding

poor state" and speaks of "the lack of adequate tools, materials, and faculty expertise" in library schools.

Although some of the library schools in the region were founded a few decades ago, they have rarely produced the right number of trained personnel for the various countries' libraries. Moreover, such is the poor esteem in which librarians are often held, that even qualified librarians are often tempted to jobs away from libraries, where they can achieve higher status and higher salaries. In the Arab countries, and to some extent in Mediterranean non-Arab countries, most of the top jobs in academic and national libraries go to academics who have no library qualifications. This is one of the greatest reasons why staff morale tends to be so low.

2. Academic Libraries

Throughout the region school libraries and public libraries, those engines of educational and democratic development, have a much smaller importance than they have in Scandinavia or the United Kingdom, or even France. The result is that when young people go up to University or to some other institution of tertiary education, they are frequently unaccustomed to using libraries systematically, and often graduate without having acquired the habit of turning to libraries for the information they need.

Academic and research libraries tend to be the ones receiving the greatest financial support from the State or from parent institutions, often at the cost of neglecting national libraries and special libraries in departments of State. The astonishing expansion of tertiary level studies is a phenomenon of Southern Europe, North Africa and the Middle East as much as it is of Northern and Central Europe, so many countries in the region have had to create new universities,

polytechnics and so on, and have devoted more resources to library provision for them than for other libraries supported by State or by local governments, even if in several or even most cases this support has not sufficed to make them sturdy enough pillars of teaching and research at their parent universities.

In Spain there are no fewer than 53 universities served by central libraries as well as by a large number of departmental and institute libraries. Most of Egypt's universities have been founded since 1960, many of them being overcrowded and having insufficient library resources to cater comfortably for their large or sometimes huge student numbers e.g. 95,000 at Cairo and 92,000 at Alexandria. Most of Greece's universities are also fairly recent, the old universities being those of Athens and Thessaloniki respectively. Its rival Turkey, which is a much larger country, has 29 universities, including several young ones. The smallest countries in the region, Cyprus and Malta, have one university each, Cyprus's being a very recent one, whilst Malta's dates back to the 18th century.

Young university libraries face the grave problem of building up sometimes from scratch collections sufficiently strong and comprehensive to enable their parent institutions to function satisfactorily. Several of them in our region, however, have not received the extraordinary financial support needed in the first years to lay the foundations firmly, and so have had to struggle hard for several years. Some of them have never overcome this initial handicap.

Egyptian university libraries in the provinces are often badly off for books and periodicals in foreign languages, including English, but they are lucky in that Egypt has a strong publishing industry, so literature in Arabic can be acquired cheaply. The scarcity of foreign journals and of reference books of all types is a serious problem

especially for the researcher. For this reason the well-stocked American University in Cairo and the old university libraries in Cairo's two universities are continually being resorted to by academics from the other universities.

Egypt's problems are to be found more or less in the other North African countries and Turkey, all of which have insufficient foreign exchange for the purchase of foreign library materials. Israel's galloping inflation has not prevented most of its university libraries from developing at a good rate, partly because of the great support most of them receive from Jews in countries round the world.

Italy has retained its economic strength despite its interminable political problems, so both its old and its newer universities have been able to acquire stocks of library materials, Italian and foreign, which are often of high quality. Malta and Cyprus can afford to give their universities relatively much higher resources than their Middle East and North African neighbours, but there is a great limit to what small countries, even fairly prosperous ones, can afford to buy. These two countries are finding it difficult to meet the mounting needs of research workers for current periodical literature, especially in the fields of science and technology, and ironically enough the growing capacity of Cypriot and Maltese libraries to access databases and library catalogues in scores of countries is making it more difficult for them to persuade financial authorities to increase their funds for subscriptions to periodicals.

3. National Libraries

National libraries in the region mostly do not play the dominant role of their counterparts in, say, the United Kingdom, France or Denmark. Even countries like Spain, which has a large National

Library with very rich collections, and Italy, which has two central national libraries (in Rome and Florence respectively) have no strong sense of direction for their library and information systems coming from the centre. In Italy leadership tends to come from a separate institution, the Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico delle Biblioteche Italiane which was and remains responsible for the important SBN (Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale) network, but I should add that the Florence and Rome national libraries were amongst the first libraries to link up with SBN.

In Spain and indeed in most Mediterranean countries leadership tends to come from groupings of academic libraries or individual libraries in their category. Throughout the region national libraries, with the exception of those e.g. the National and University Library of Croatia in Zagreb, which also function as university libraries, tend to be somewhat badly off for funds and to lose their best-qualified staff to the academic sector.

Most of the national libraries in the Arab countries round the Mediterranean are fairly young, only Egypt and Algeria having national libraries founded in the 19th century, while those of Libya, Syria and Tunisia were founded as recently as 1950, 1984 and 1985 respectively. All these libraries have an intimate connection with their parent countries' assertion of national identity and see themselves as custodians of their countries' written heritage. They also publish the various national bibliographies, so in this respect they do play a significant part both nationally and internationally, and the large collections in the national libraries of Algeria, Egypt, Morocco and Tunisia serve as important backups for the poor collections in many of these respective countries' other libraries. The national libraries of Egypt and Morocco, like others e.g. Malta, in the region are also responsible for the national archives. The Egyptian,

Moroccan and Syrian national libraries also act as public libraries, following a tradition common to most developing countries.

Arab national libraries, and likewise the National Library of Greece in Athens or the much younger National Library of Malta have rarely been influential in the technical aspects of their countries' librarianship. One of the few exceptions was at one time the Egyptian National Library which produced a code of cataloguing rules in 1938 widely followed in Egypt and in some other Arab countries, while in more recent times it has played some part in the further development of these rules. Turkey's National Library has been even more influential from time to time. Its recent automation of its catalogue and of its two main bibliographical publications, the National Bibliography, and the Bibliography of articles published in Turkish periodicals since 1952, has been valuable not only for Turkish libraries but also as its contribution to UBC.

4. Cooperation

Whether in future it comes from the national libraries or, as is likelier, from specially set up bodies like Italy's Istituto Centrale per il Catalogo Unico or else from groupings of e.g. academic or special libraries, it is essential that there should be a much higher degree of inter-library cooperation, both national and international, in this region to make possible the bridging, partial if not total, of the gap between most Mediterranean countries and Western Europe. Hitherto formal schemes of cooperation, well-established and well-regulated networks of any sort, have been uncommon, especially in the Eastern Mediterranean and North Africa.

Italy and Spain, however, have given a lead in their creation of some schemes. The former's Servizio Bibliotecario Nazionale, set up

some years back in the face of a certain scepticism, is proving to be very successful, and by now a few hundred libraries, including most of the research libraries, are linked to it, making available to all member libraries records for millions of monographs and serials. The effect on cataloguing as well as on interlibrary lending has been greatly beneficial: the libraries in SBN now do original cataloguing of just 50% of the documents they acquire. Again, the Rome Group of libraries, using the Conspectus tool, is aiming to cooperate in the acquisition of expensive materials in law, history and government publications. The arrival of the Internet and the World Wide Web has now been the catalyst for those schemes of regional cooperation which have hitherto been defeated by Italian individualism.

In Spain it is the university librarians who have shown the way forward to the many librarians who desire to cooperate with others but need both ideas and leadership. Since 1987 a number of surveys of these libraries have been carried out, such as the 1988 report Situacion de les Bibliotecas Universitarias (dependientes del M.E.C.). Moreover, networks such as DOCUMAT and REBION have been set up.

DOCUMAT is a network of mathematics faculty or departmental libraries which consists of a union catalogue, shared cataloguing, cooperative acquisitions and exchange of information regarding preprints, while REBION, a network of 15 university libraries, has already published on CD-ROM a union catalogue, and organizes training courses each summer. Other networks include RUEDO composed of twelve university libraries which use DOBIS-LIBIS.

In fact, membership of the EU appears to have speeded up the modernization of Spain's academic libraries which are showing an even greater interest in the applications of contemporary management theory, and have even started thinking seriously about

earning at least part of their income by charging for certain services to their users.

In other Mediterranean countries, with the important exception of Israel, cooperation is all too rare. In Croatia, the National and University Library in Zagreb is beginning to take on a leadership which will, perhaps in more peaceful and more prosperous times than the present, bring forth fruitful cooperative schemes. Further south, in Greece of the just over 200 libraries within the country's 17 universities only 25% carry out some form of cooperation with other libraries, nearly all of these cooperative arrangements being informal, and only 10 cooperate in some way with foreign libraries. Even one of the most basic forms of inter-library cooperation, interlending, is far from flourishing and in some cases libraries lend material only on a personal basis to a known member of another library, rather than to the library or institution, and in most cases interlending is not one of the library's regular activities.

Like most other forms of cooperation, interlending whether within individual countries, or with countries within the region or without the region, is still most unsatisfactory in North Africa. For instance, in Algeria it is described as being carried out in a voluntary and disorganised fashion. In 1988 only 15 titles were borrowed by Algerian libraries from other libraries in the country, and 55 from other countries. Again, Moroccan libraries are badly off for interlending facilities for until fairly recently their country had no national centre and national system despite an experiment made between 1974 and 1977 by its Centre National de Documentation (which is looked upon as a national clearing-house of bibliographical information) with a group of libraries dependent on the Projects and Planning Ministry. There is, however, an interlending scheme limited to four University libraries falling under the Ecole des Sciences de

l'Information, in Rabat, while University libraries throughout the country have a scheme for the exchange of documents. It is unfortunate that the Bibliotheque Generale et Archives, the national library, does not lend any of its stock, and supplies photocopies of only certain categories of documents.

4. Information Technology

During the past few years, automated networking has left its mark on Italy which is now shedding its image of a country with splendid library resources hampered by a somewhat conservative library professions and shackled by a cumbersome bureaucracy. Few libraries of any importance have not automated all, or at least most, of their functions and many of them are linked to the SBN while some belong to Gruppo Armonizzazione Reti per le Ricerca (GARR) the Italian research network with its Network Information Service (NIS). This last has recently come up with an Opac Directory which offers Web, Telnet and gopher access to Italian OPACs. Again, CILEA (Consorzio Interuniversitario per l'Elaborazione Automatico) has developed for universities in Milan a Virtual Library which covers five subject areas ranging so far from Architecture to Radiology.

The important developments in the use and applications of Information Technology have not gone hand in hand with similar developments in the introduction of managerial theory, despite the fact that Italian industrial managers are among the foremost in Europe. Spanish librarians, though hampered like the Italians by the burdens of bureaucracy, appear to be moving much faster towards the kind of managerial setups and philosophy familiar, say, to British librarians. The setting up of the Conferencia de Directores de

Bibliotecas Universitarias y Cientificas, following the IFLA meeting in Barcelona in 1993, has provided a forum for the discussion of current problems affecting academic libraries, not least of them managerial ones. Some librarians have, for instance, started charging for services given to certain categories of readers. Spanish libraries are trying to solve the problems presented by the failure of library staff to grow at the same rate as the university bodies that they serve. This is a problem faced by librarians right round the Mediterranean littoral.

Greek librarians, even university ones, have been relatively slow in automating, but by now most university libraries have introduced the computer to some extent, and some of them e.g. Crete, Patras (Central Library) and Thessaloniki (a number of departmental libraries) have by now considerable experience.

Thessaloniki has now benefited for some years from an exchange programme with Kent State University, Ohio, while a few like Patras have made much progress through participating in the E.U.'s Libraries Programme. Patras and other University libraries are now hoping to obtain substantial funds from the Greek Ministry of Education out of the so-called Delors Packet.

In North African libraries automation progress has been on the whole slower. In Egypt, for instance, the national library has been automating its catalogue since 1983 but the progress is sluggish, and until fairly recently it was still without an OPAC. A similar situation prevails in some of the university faculty libraries. The Tunisian national library still lacks an OPAC though it has been generating the database for the new Arab Maghreb Catalogue. Like most other Tunisian libraries, the university libraries have not moved much ahead in the field of automation because of financial constraints and also because of a dearth of staff trained in computer applications for

libraries. In fact, in this country and in a number of other Mediterranean countries, there is a tendency for library staff experienced in automation to leave after a while for much better paid jobs in business or industry.

Some North African libraries, such as that of the Tunisian Ministry of Agriculture or the National Documentation Centre in Rabat, Morocco have been using MINISIS software which was Arabised by ALDOC, the Arab League Documentation Centre, in the 1980s. Many of them have dipped their toe in the ocean of library automation by going in for CD-ROMs but they are finding a lack of Arabic information sources.

Of the other Mediterranean countries, Croatia is working hard to create a national bibliographic database through its National and University Library in Zagreb which uses ORACLE applications for all its main functions, but is facing the problem of so many libraries partially or totally destroyed during the recent war, while the Croatian Ministry of Sciences has developed CARNet, a research network. Malta and Cyprus both have university libraries with integrated library systems. Malta, moreover, has just started automating its National Library as well as its public library system.

A region as culturally complex as the Mediterranean and having such economic inequalities is bound to produce a pattern of unequal development in the library and information field. If these widely different levels are to be corrected, not only must the various national governments allocate a larger slice of their national budget to the information infrastructure, and development of library and information institutions, but more aid especially in the provision of knowhow needs to be supplied from outside the region. Greece's recent progress has been due to handsome aid programmes provided by the European Union, programmes from which Malta and Cyprus

may be able to benefit when in all likelihood they join the EU before the end of the century. Until then these two countries, together with others like Turkey, Syria and the North African countries can only benefit from funds channelled through the Med-Campus Project of the Coimbra Group which has already organised one training project for some of these countries, and is about to embark on a second and more ambitious one.

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