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'The Medieval Library' - The Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature Conference 2010

Before attending the Society for the Study of Medieval Languages and Literature's conference my knowledge of, and interest in, the medieval library was limited to the libraries of monastic foundations. As an undergraduate at the University of East Anglia, I studied M. L. W. Laistner's article on 'The Library of the Venerable Bede' which first excited my interest in the degree to which monastic foundations had access to individual texts. Presently I am studying as part of the taught MA programme in Medieval History, also at UEA, as a result of which I have developed a particular interest in William of Malmesbury, whose 'library' included the book collections of several monasteries beyond his own foundation. Therefore, I hoped by attending the conference I could expand my limited knowledge and really explore the definition, context and significance of the medieval library.

Immediately the conference began my presumptions were challenged. The day started with a paper by Dr Matthew Nicholls on the classical precedents of the library that encouraged me to think outside the limits of a specific timeframe in order to see a wider picture. The paper sought to establish a distinction between private royal libraries, for example at Alexandria, and the more 'public' libraries that later emerged. Dr Nicholls therefore raised the issue of access to libraries that was to continue as a theme throughout the conference.

The second paper also helped me to put aside any preconceptions of what a library might be. Professor Richard Gameson displayed a series of images of the medieval library. We were shown illustrations of book chests, a book cupboard on a Ravenna mosaic, and reading wheels, along with the more 'normal' open shelving systems. Perhaps the image that best presented the idea that a library was not solely a building, or even a collection of books, was the image of the book cupboard from the Codex Amiatinus. Professor Gameson highlighted that here was shown the threefold meaning of the word *bibliotheca* - a library, a bookcase, and the Bible.

Given that I have only recently embarked upon the study of Latin palaeography, the opportunity to view a display of Durham University MSS after lunch was much appreciated. It gave me a real feel for the environment of the medieval library and for the many hours of labour that were put into such texts by the scribes who copied such books within the

monastic scriptorium. Later in the afternoon, Dr James Willoughby refocussed my attention on this point during his paper on the medieval library and the arrival of print. Although the new technology did not immediately affect libraries, the expanding numbers of texts, and the increased speed with which they could be produced, meant that scholars could afford to acquire larger libraries that could themselves be built up relatively quickly.

Another significant feature of the library that the papers highlighted was the importance of patronage. Dr Peter Clarke's paper on the formation of the Cambridge University and college libraries definitely emphasised this, since the founders of the colleges often made gifts of books to their house, as did royal and ecclesiastical patrons. This theme was also taken up by Dr Hanno Wijsman, discussing the princely libraries in late Medieval Europe, in particular focusing on the court of the Dukes of Burgundy. Both these papers helped me to understand how libraries, throughout the medieval period, were heavily influenced by their patrons. They also made me realise that it was the patrons of libraries who, often unwittingly, determined which particular texts would survive into the modern era. Texts that such patrons did not regard as important to their own libraries, and which were therefore passed over for others, may have been texts that today have entirely vanished or of which all trace has been lost.

This sense of a great loss of knowledge was emphasised by David Rundle in the evening roundtable discussion, which also provided a perfect opportunity for the general themes of the day to be discussed. The conference as a whole exceeded my expectations, considerably and evidently widening my knowledge not only of the medieval library, but also of the library in general. Durham Castle provided a perfect setting. The opportunity to meet academics and other graduate students with similar interests was invaluable. The conference was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, and I would like to thank the Society for giving graduate students the opportunity to attend, and especially for the financial contribution that the Society made to my attendance.