

# FROM SCROLL TO DATABASE: WHAT DO CLASSICS LIBRARIANS DO?

by W. Gerald Heverly

Libraries have changed drastically over the last twenty years. Computers have replaced card catalogs. Online journals and other electronic resources have become as important as the printed page. In this changing landscape, librarians educated in classics are still in demand. Despite technological advances, and sometimes even because of them, my career as an academic librarian continues to draw heavily on the knowledge of Greek, Latin, and classical civilization I acquired during my graduate studies.

As is true for most librarians, some of my key responsibilities are traceable to antiquity. Acquiring books, for example, was a major activity of the renowned library of Alexandria, in Egypt. In *Libraries in the Ancient World* (2001), Lionel Casson relates that the Ptolemies “sent out agents with well-filled purses and orders to buy whatever books they could, of every kind on every subject” (34). Collecting on this scale would be financially impossible today, but acquiring material is still a major undertaking in research libraries. Subject specialists, sometimes called selectors or bibliographers, build a library’s collection by ordering books, journals, CD’s, and other materials in disciplines with which they are familiar. In addition, subject specialists maintain their section of a library’s collection by reviewing titles for preservation, replacement, offsite storage, and withdrawal. At NYU, where I have been employed for the last four years, I serve as the subject specialist for classics, Hellenic studies, and philosophy.

The Alexandrians also devoted much effort to organizing their library’s vast holdings. Callimachus, best known as a poet, compiled its first serious catalog. His *Pinakes* (*Tables*), which survives only in quotations, was a detailed bibliography, in 120 books, of everything written in Greek. Scholars consider this work an expanded version of a comprehensive catalog to the library’s holdings, which Callimachus compiled while employed there (Casson, 39). A well-organized collection makes for easily-found books. Cataloging is still, therefore, a central activity in libraries. Today’s catalogers create online records for the items a library acquires. In doing so, they ana-

lyze and describe material according to established national standards, following a systematic structure designed to help library users locate information. The records they produce make possible the computerized library catalogs familiar to us all.

One aspect that has not long been a part of librarianship, however, is public services. Services that we take for granted, such as the reference desk, were unknown in antiquity. Public services, also called user services or reader services, constitute an important component of any modern library’s activities. Public services librarians assist users in locating and evaluating information, provide research consultation (in-depth or specialized assistance), and conduct library tours and classes on the use of library resources. Along with subject specialists and catalogers, public services librarians constitute most of the professional staff in an academic or research library. Some librarians work exclusively in one of these three capacities. More common, however, is a mix of duties. At NYU, for example, most subject specialists also have public service responsibilities. In an average week, I spend six hours at the reference desk, a couple of hours instructing individuals or classes in the use of the library, and another couple of hours consulting with people about their research via e-mail, on the telephone, or in my office. The rest of my week is devoted to committee work, special projects, and my subject specialist duties.

Answering reference questions perhaps best illustrates how useful my classical education has been. Here is a small sample of the questions dealing with classics that I have fielded over the past few years: What is Aeschylus’ attitude toward women in the *Oresteia*? How did the Romans make bread? What depictions of Aphrodite survive in ancient art? What stylized gestures did ancient orators use? What recent scholarship is there on Plato’s *Symposium*? Some of these questions were asked when I was working at the reference desk; others came via e-mail or a phone call to my office. Not all were from students taking classics courses. Indeed, interesting classics questions are often asked by people from other disciplines. A doctor-

al student in modern European history once asked me to vet his translation of *ignoramus et ignorabimus* (“we do not and shall not know”), the slogan of the nineteenth-century skeptic Emil Du Bois-Reymond. Sometimes questions come even from other librarians. Once a colleague cataloging a book in Latin asked me what he should enter as its place of publication. The title page said “Berolini.” Not recognizing the locative case form of Berlin, he assumed he was dealing with an Italian place name, which, of course, he could not verify. To be sure, I am not asked questions such as these on a daily basis, but they do arise frequently enough to help keep my work interesting and pleasantly challenging.

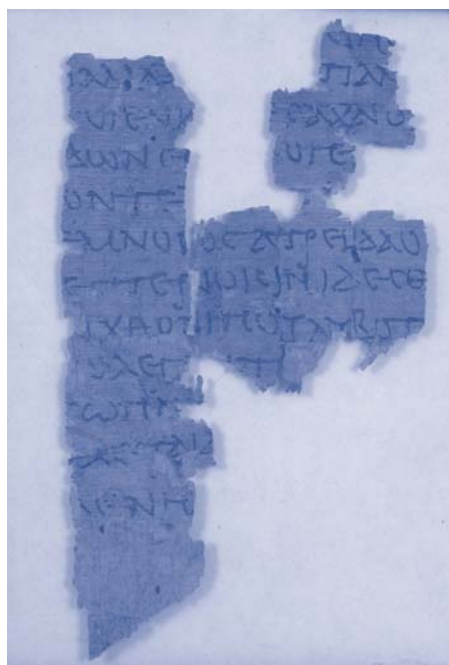
Library instruction provides another opportunity to use my classical background. Students taking a classics course sometimes need an overview of the research strategies and reference sources relevant to an assignment. At the instructor’s request, I design and conduct a library session tailored to the specific requirements of the course. Recently I have provided library instruction for undergraduate courses in classical mythology, Greek tragedy, Vergil, and Graeco-Roman art. Introducing students to reference tools that will open up new worlds to them is particularly rewarding.

My institution’s special collections department has also given me interesting opportunities to apply my training in classics. Precious materials such as rare books, manuscripts, and archives require special care and security. In most academic libraries, a department exists specifically for this purpose and is usually called special collections. For years, NYU’s department had a large number of uncataloged books in Greek and Latin, printed mostly in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. No one had the time or knew the ancient languages well enough to determine what these books were about and whether they should be kept or sold. Shortly after I began working at NYU, the head of special collections asked me to review them and decide their fate. Because many turned out to be landmark editions of the classics (including an Aldine Ovid and Lambinus’

Lucretius), the project proved especially satisfying.

My position also constantly challenges me to learn more about classics. In order to make sure that I order all the important books coming out, I routinely read reviews of titles published about the classical world. In this way, I learn about new developments in scholarship and more. Recently, for instance, a book review made me aware of Achilles Tatius, a Greek novelist of the second century A.D. I frequently consult the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* and other reference works when deciding whether to buy books on specialized topics. For example, when I was trying to determine whether to order a book entitled *La Peucezia in età romana (Peucezia in the Roman Era)*, I learned from an Italian encyclopedia that the Peucetii lived in southeastern Italy, came in contact with the Romans in 291 B.C., and remained peaceful during the Social War. Similarly, I knew little about papyrology until three years ago, when NYU began participating in the Advanced Papyrological Information System (APIS). Funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities, APIS is a database that combines high quality images of papyri with descriptive information about each item. Our special collections department houses a collection of papyri that is being cataloged and scanned for APIS. As coordinator of this project, I have studied handbooks of papyrology in order to improve my knowledge of the field. I have also experienced the thrill of working directly with the papyri in our collection, including fragments of Homer nearly two thousand years old (see Fig. 5).

Many librarians with a background in classics use it in their jobs as routinely as I use mine. The cataloging department at Yale handles a steady stream of books in the classical languages. Anthony Oddo, who leads the department's Arts and Sciences Team, catalogs some of these items himself and frequently deciphers title pages in Greek or Latin for other catalogers. Phoebe Peacock, classics specialist at the Library of Congress, uses her knowledge of classics when answering questions about the ancient world at the reference desk. Off the desk, her language skills are called upon by members of Congress who request Latin to English or English to Latin translations. Some legislators even request references to classical sources that bear on matters before the House or Senate (e.g., Cicero on the abuse of power). As a matter of policy,



**Fig. 5. Papyrus fragment (NYU Inv. 524) of Homer, *Iliad* 3.188-99, from Karanis, early first century A.D. Photo credit: Fales Library, New York University.**

however, Ms. Peacock is not told the identity of Congressional inquirers.

Even at smaller libraries, it is possible to use a classical education routinely. The head of special collections at Trinity College (Hartford), Jeffrey Kaimowitz, oversees his institution's numerous early printed editions of the classics. He has mounted several exhibits at Trinity featuring these books and uses them as a teaching resource when speaking to classes about such topics as the history of classical scholarship, the transmission of texts, and Neo-Latin poetry. Building on his routine responsibilities, he has twice taught a course on Renaissance printing, which includes a healthy classics component, through Trinity's continuing education program.

Karen Green, classics librarian at Columbia University, has also had an exciting opportunity to apply her knowledge of classics beyond her regular duties. Two years ago, she was in Egypt's Western Desert, setting up a field library near the Amheida excavation site. This reference collection, which will eventually include about a thousand volumes, focuses on Graeco-Roman Egypt and is consulted by faculty and students working on the dig.

By now it should be clear that librarianship offers an interesting and rewarding career for someone who has studied classics. The study of Greek and Latin certainly hones analytical skills and

attention to detail, both of which are essential for library work. Furthermore, graduate study of classics fosters not only in-depth knowledge of the ancient world but also reading knowledge of French, German, and Italian, languages for which there is a steady demand in research libraries. Anyone who can read these languages, even with a dictionary, has a distinct advantage when applying for a job as a subject specialist, cataloger, or curator of special collections. In addition, teaching experience gained during graduate school is good preparation for work in public services. Assisting readers at the reference desk and instructing groups or individuals in the use of the library require the kinds of communication skills sharpened by classroom teaching.

A degree in classics will, however, normally not be enough to land a library job. For most professional positions, an M.L.S. (Master of Library Science) is required in addition to any stipulated subject or language expertise. As the shortage of academic librarians grows, institutions may become more flexible about requiring the M.L.S. for certain entry-level positions. In any event, both the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) report nervously that academic librarians are in short supply. Applicants proficient in ancient and modern languages are especially sought. Thus, graduate students and other classicists contemplating alternative careers to teaching may find it worth their while to explore librarianship. ACRL's Western European Studies Section, to which many classics librarians belong, maintains a Web site for anyone wishing to learn about the kinds of library careers open to people with foreign language skills and subject expertise (<http://www.columbia.edu/~klg19/WESS/index.html>).

*W. Gerald Heverly (gerald.heverly@nyu.edu) has been an academic librarian for eighteen years, first at the University of Pittsburgh (1988-2001) and now at NYU (since 2002). He earned an M.A. in classics and an M.L.S. from the University of Pittsburgh. This article grew out of a panel session on library careers that he organized for the Spring 2004 meeting of the Classical Association of the Atlantic States. He thanks his fellow panelists for their encouragement and valuable comments on a draft of the article.*