

CRISTINA DONDI, DORIT RAINES, RICHARD SHARPE (EDS.), *How the Secularization of Religious Houses Transformed the Libraries of Europe, 16th–19th Centuries* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2022)

The collection of studies edited by Cristina Dondi, Dorit Raines and the late Richard Sharpe unveils new avenues of approaching post-dissolution libraries by using extant contemporary sources, copy specifics, and databases to map over three centuries of book dispersal across Europe and the Americas. Admittedly, the study of monastic and early modern libraries is a rather daunting task due to the lack of systematic information concerning the history of collections and individual items. Despite their economic and social relevance, books were not systematically present in pre-Reformation inventories, and during the upheavals of secularization, territorial expansion and continuous political changes. Additional difficulties arise due to deliberate effacement, in which case books were not worthy of attention and documentation, or due to common carelessness, leading to degradation and unsystematic use of library items. Consequently, efforts have been made to trace the movement of manuscripts, incunabula and later prints from the shelves of former religious institutions, through basements or temporary shelters, all the way to newly established private, royal, university and city libraries. Complications arise in the case of volumes hidden, alienated through theft, or completely untraceable due to precarious acquisition policies, such as large-scale sales, private auctions or illegal transactions. Aside from their materiality, books became instrumental in operating political, religious, economic, and social changes down the centuries, as this volume emphasizes.

The fate and history of libraries is examined in seven different sections. The first part deals with temporal and territorial aspects pertaining to the dissolution. This inquiry incorporates an overview of the economic scene of religious establishments discussed from the standpoint of secularization politics and their monetary concerns. However, this study stresses one important aspect. Since books embodied a large part of the wealth of these dwellings, why were they rarely or never mentioned? In the midst of the earliest dispersal that took place in England, proclaimed under Henry VIII's government, entire libraries are believed to have been seized, but how many? Which titles were spared and which burnt? What was sold and what was kept, and by whom? At the time of the English dissolution, books did not receive much interest outside monastic circles due to the rapid changes making those libraries obsolete. The popularity of the printing press, new learning trends that rejected scholastic and theological views upheld until then, and the Reformation, not only endangered the preservation of books, but also of any record regarding their existence (47).

Individual case studies on German-speaking Switzerland, Spain, Portugal and Latin America illustrate different approaches to the dissolution, the general attitude towards collections, and contemplate the losses. This shows that the dissolution was pretty much a regional

phenomenon and had not one, but many faces. For example, libraries throughout German-speaking Switzerland suffered significantly less damages during the secularization process, although some books were indeed destroyed. Regardless, the Reformation was not solely responsible for the resulting damages (71). Monastic libraries in Germany, on the other hand, received a harsher treatment, while in Spain the expulsion of the Jesuits was rather organized and efficient, profiting the newly emerging bourgeoisie as well as the authorities (100).

A smaller section (Part 2) reassesses the impact of harmful state policies during the eighteenth and nineteenth century on Venice and Naples. Due to financial struggles and debts, the Venetian Government turned to its book patrimony and exploited entire libraries in haste, and oftentimes without leaving any accounts of its doings. The keeper of the Library of St Mark, Jacopo Morelli, profited from the secularization, which he advocated, in order to replenish his collections. He found himself in close relation with the succeeding Austrian Rule, and later consolidated relations with the Napoleonic Kingdom, hoping to bring the rarest and most important volumes in one place. During this period, books were sold, transferred to France and sent to other institutions without much regard to their monastic environment.

The newly founded National Library in Rome and the Vatican Library, discussed in the Part 3, also found themselves in the possession of a great number of both manuscript and prints as a result of these reforms. Similar measures spread to Central and Eastern Europe. The Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth witnessed the downfall of Jesuit libraries and the transfer of their books to institutions in Vienna, Berlin, Breslau.

Parts 4 and 5 discuss the newly emerging book market, together with records of sales, and respectively its substantial growth in the nineteenth century, when Europe was already flooded with confiscated books. The business of the so called “duplicates” of the Munich library marks the opening of the market for buyers outside Germany and, later on, outside Europe.

Another essential aspect, treated in Part 6, is the frequent dismemberment of manuscripts, and sometimes of printed books, into folios, bifolia or into quires to be reused later as binding material. What began as a utilitarian project, making at the same time room for new acquisitions, became a flourishing enterprise during the following centuries, when the interest in fragments started to show (an aspect also discussed in Part 4).

Finally, Part 7 provides an insight into the necessary tools for studying dispersed libraries. National projects such as *Medieval Libraries of Great Britain (MLGB3)* or *RICI* (“a tool for the history of religious libraries in Italy at the end of the sixteenth century”) help reconstruct medieval libraries. The British database brings in one place manuscripts scattered nationwide by assembling a coherent bibliography which traces books back to their monastic context, with the use of shelfmarks and brief descriptions. The latter aims to assemble a relevant corpus for the study of Italian libraries in the sixteenth century by looking at lists assembled by the Congregation of the Index as part of their initiative to clean monastic and conventual libraries of dangerous books.

The last two articles offer both a theoretical and practical example of how the *Material Evidence in Incunabula (MEI)* database can be used to reconstruct pre-secularization libraries by linking incunabula around the world to their original provenance, which eventually generates an entire repertoire. Cristina Dondi demonstrates this perfectly by using the case of the largely

dispersed Benedictine Library of San Giorgio Maggiore in Venice, which is now scattered throughout multiple libraries, such as Oxford, Padua, Paris, London, Harvard, Berlin or Rome. Data from *MEI* does not only act as a virtual library, but also offers a complete picture of the volumes' history by gathering data about previous owners, reading notes, binding, decorations, shelfmarks and many more.

The work undertaken sets an example for the many other institutions who have not yet catalogued and/or studied their collections systematically. Entire libraries remain to be reconstructed and rediscovered in the following decades, allowing scholars to have a much better understanding of monastic and mendicant libraries, and of the vast array of Jesuit collections. Further work on Central and Eastern Europe (neglected in this collection of studies) will contribute to a deeper understanding of secularization and the fate of manuscripts and prints, as will the study of the social life of books and their impact on the early development of local, national and continental affairs.

CARMEN OANEA

carmen.oanea@ubbcluj.ro

<https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5618-9023>

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