

THE OLDEST LIBRARY MOTTO: ΨΥΧΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ¹

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The earliest authenticated library, that of Pharaoh Ramses II, in the second millennium before our era, bore an inscription over its portals designating it as “the house of healing for the soul.” Knowledge of the inscription was made available to the Western world in the time of Caesar by Diodorus Siculus in his Greek *History of the World*, but it seems to have been unnoticed even by the keenest Roman bibliophiles. Finally, when the *History* was translated into Latin by Poggio in the fifteenth century, the significance of the unusual library motto began to make an impact upon scholars. It is mentioned by several Renaissance writers, and it was adopted by the Swedish Royal Library for its official bookplate. Then, in 1760, when the beautiful baroque library was built at St. Gall, the inscription, in Greek, was placed upon a scroll above the doors of the main hall where it remains a focal point of interest for present-day scholars.

Late in the summer of 1976, the mummy of Ramses II, which had been sent from the Cairo Museum to the Louvre, was given a welcome to Paris such as is usually accorded to governing heads of state. Like a long-delayed appearance of the hero in a play, the arrival of the mummy immediately galvanized interest in the spectacular exhibition of the art of the reign of the Egyptian pharaoh, Ramses the Great (1292–1225 B.C.) in the Galeries Nationales du Grand Palais.² The splendor of the gold objects, the rich jewelry, the wall paintings, and the great statues and architectural remains were suddenly transferred from the realm of fantasy to the real world as the actual achievements of Ramses II. His incredible military exploits, his personal domination of the age, as well as the vast temples, tombs, and colossal statues that he had caused to be erected were somehow now more comprehensible. Yet there was a grim irony associated with it—a remarkable postscript to Shelley’s famous sonnet; all that was left of this man who had carved upon his statue words defying the world and posterity to surpass even one of his mighty works and who had sought immortality by the most extraordinary means was now in Paris to be treated for a physical disease that was threatening to destroy the pitiful remains of his person.³

For one group of people, the bibliophiles, a more fitting memorial to the mighty pharaoh than all of the splendid material treasures and of greater interest than the mummy was the spiritual legacy he left in the form of an inscription placed above

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2. The exhibition is fully described and illustrated in the catalog [1].
3. An account of this problem is given in [2].

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the portals of his library, an inscription which designated the library as “the house of healing for the soul.” We owe the preservation of the words to Diodorus Siculus [3, vol. 1, sec. 47–49 (pp. 166–75)], who, writing in the last century before our era, records them in his Greek *History of the World* in the section on Egypt, for which he had drawn chiefly from the work of the third-century historian, Hecataeus of Abdera. Diodorus outlines at length the accomplishments of Ramses II, whom he calls “Osymandias,” a distortion of the royal title, “Usima-re.” He also describes the great complex of buildings at Thebes, now known as the Ramesseum, with its temples, tombs, and royal palace, and speaks in some detail of the countless statues, unusual paintings, and extensive reliefs. Of the great hall which housed the library of sacred books, however, he gives only the Greek translation of the inscription.

The striking phrase might well have been adopted by the literary Romans, but strangely enough it was not. Apparently Cicero did not know it, for he seems to have been searching for those very words. In explaining the release from mental stress and the psychic restoration that he experienced when he could be alone with his books, he used the phrases *pabulum animorum* (“food for souls”), *pastus animorum* (“nourishment for the spirit”), and *medicina animae* (“medicine for the soul”) [4, 5]. Even these felicitous phrases seem not to have been widely quoted, and they were never applied to libraries. Indeed, Ramses’ inscription seems to have been used appropriately for the first time when the Greek words were incised and painted on a gilded scroll above the doorway of the main hall of the beautiful baroque library of St. Gall when it was built about 1760—some 3,000 years after the original. How it happened that its revival occurred in the remote Alpine library is an interesting story.

In an often-quoted letter, Poggio Bracciolini [6, pp. 193–96], the noted Italian humanist and unrivaled book collector, tells of his experience in seeking and finding manuscripts at St. Gall. While he was attending the Council of Constance in 1414, Poggio took the opportunity to visit the libraries of some of the old Swiss monasteries. The Benedictine house of St. Gall, which had had a remarkable history of religious, cultural, and literary achievements in the ninth and tenth centuries, had suffered a sad decline. With the relaxation of discipline and a subsequent loss of interest in scholarship, the once-famous library was utterly neglected. So it was that Poggio discovered there numerous treasures that had long been forgotten, for example, the works of Quintilian and several orations of Cicero. Some of these manuscripts he had copied; others he carried away, and they were never returned. Perhaps in a similar book-hunting expedition elsewhere, he came across a manuscript of the *History* of Diodorus Siculus. At any rate, before 1455 Poggio had translated that work into Latin. It was printed in Bologna in 1472 and reprinted in at least five other editions before the end of the fifteenth century and in six more in the sixteenth century. Then, Latin translations by other scholars also began to be printed. In 1539 a Greek edition was printed in Basel, and Stephanus produced the Greek text in Geneva in 1559. By the end of the century, translations into French, German, Italian, and English had appeared. Happily, the sixteenth century saw a revival of interest in books and scholarship at the abbey of St. Gall, particularly under the

leadership of Abbot Otmar Kunz [7, p. 13]. It was this cleric who obtained for the library the 1559 Greek edition of Diodorus. Later the 1539 edition and the 1515 edition of Poggio's Latin translation came to the library.

Not only was the text of the *History* available, but it was also being read, and the aptness of the inscription over Ramses' library was noted. The great Belgian scholar, Justus Lipsius (1547–1606), for example, in his *De Bibliothecis Syntagma* gives the quotation in Greek, cites his source in Diodorus, and comments on the library of Osymandias [8, p. 9]. Attention is called to Lipsius's account by Johann Samuel Misander in his *Bücher-Freunde und Bücher-Feinde*, published in 1695, but he gives the important phrase in Latin—"Medicam animae officinam."⁴ In Hamburg in 1682, R. Capel's *Lectionum bibliothecariorum memorabilium Syntagma* was published. On the elaborate title page of the book is an engraving depicting the colonnaded entrance to a library, over the archway of which the Greek inscription appears, and on the steps leading to the entrance there is a paraphrase of Virgil—"Procul late profani"—and of Horace—"Odi profanum vulgus et arceo, favete pii bonique" [10, 11].⁵ One of the most striking instances of the adoption of the motto occurred in Sweden in 1710 when the learned scholar, Eric Benzelius, had the words, translated into Swedish, stamped in gold upon the covers of the vellum-bound books in the library of the Royal University at Upsala [12, pp. 376–78].

The present distinguished librarian at St. Gall, Dr. Johannes Duft, in his account of the library has given some interesting details of the background to the building of that beautiful edifice that now houses a remarkable collection of manuscripts and rare books [7, pp. 7–15]. He notes that the official decree to proceed with the building of a new library and hospital was made in 1757. At that time it was the custom to place a suitable motto over the portal of a library. Duft cites a number of examples of these mottoes, for instance, the quotation from Saint Paul (Col. 2:3): "In quo omnes thesauri sapientiae et scientiae," which was used in the libraries of the neighboring monasteries of Wiblingen and of Salem. In choosing an appropriate device for the new St. Gall library, the architect was influenced by the location of the large hall for the collection of books. Since it was adjacent to the infirmary where the physical ills of the community were cared for, it seemed fitting to stress the role of the library in releasing the soul from mental and spiritual ills. Since the greater part of the books were religious—bibles, works of the fathers, sermons, lives of the saints, etc.—they could be expected to be efficacious in healing spiritual afflictions as well as securing men against the disease of ignorance in religious matters. So the choice for a motto fell on the one that had been used for the sacred library of Ramses: ΨΥΧΗΣ ΙΑΤΡΕΙΟΝ, "the house of healing for the soul." Happily, the Greek words from Diodorus's text rather than the Latin translation of Poggio—"animi medicamentum"—were chosen.

As in 1760 when the library was built, so today the Greek motto is a focal point

4. This is quoted in [9, p. 100], and there is a facsimile of the title page in [9, p. 135].

5. A facsimile of the title page is reproduced in [12, p. 398].

of interest at the great hall of the library.⁶ Placed above tall doors, the panels of which are outlined in gold, the gilded scroll with the inscription extends across the two wings of the doors. Two marble columns flank the doors and above each is a graceful “putto” who reaches out toward the scroll, directing attention to the motto that indicates the purpose of the library.⁷ These two words, in the estimation of book lovers, constitute a perfect memorial to the insight and understanding of Ramses II and so are of greater significance than all of the material splendor of the great Paris exhibition.

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6. There is a photograph in [7, p. 12].
7. In 1764 the motto was used over the portal of the ducal library of Modena [13, p. 131].