



**HAL**  
open science

# The University Library and the Humanities: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Anne Baillot

► **To cite this version:**

Anne Baillot. The University Library and the Humanities: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives. The Changing Role of the Humanities in the Academy and Society: Historical and Transnational Perspectives, Sep 2011, Berlin, Germany. hal-00676073

**HAL Id: hal-00676073**

**<https://hal.science/hal-00676073v1>**

Submitted on 2 Mar 2012

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



Distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

# The University Library and the Humanities: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives

Anne Baillot

Berlin, 15. 09. 2011

In this paper, I would like to address the central questions of the conference by presenting the specific case of University Libraries. University Libraries play an important role in the constitution and institutionalized transmission of knowledge. They display interesting phenomena related to the process of institutionalization of the Humanities and connect to the question of their extra-institutional development. In their founding phase, they also relate strongly to the national culture of the place where they are founded. I will begin this paper with a reconstruction and an analysis of the early history of the University libraries of Berlin and of Chicago. I will then sketch some of today's orientations of both libraries. I hope to be able to show then that reconstructing the origins of these institutions can open perspectives for Humanities today and tomorrow.

## 1. Hitzig's Reading Room

When the Berlin University was founded, in 1810, Prussia was in a situation of great political distress due to the concessions it had to make to Napoleon. The decision to found a University in the capital city was neither easy nor natural. But the fact that the city had a series of institutes and collections, a solid hospital, two academies and consequently a pool of scholars already active pleaded in favor of Berlin. In times of post-war budget-cuts, mutualizing infrastructure was the core of the whole university project.<sup>1</sup>

What was created was not a university as we understand it nowadays with all of its administration, rules and substructures. It lacked, among a lot of other things, a University Library attached to it. Wilhelm von Humboldt considered that the access granted to the Royal Library and its books stock was sufficient to the needs of students as well as of professors.<sup>2</sup> The Royal Library was within the hands of the Academy of Sciences located opposite to the University itself, and several members of the University staff were also Academy Members. But despite the geographical and scientific closeness of interests, the collaboration was not as successful as one could have expected.

There were in fact several problems connected to the absence of a proper University Library. First, the stock of the Royal Library was not intended for University use only: Academics would miss books borrowed by other users and the other users would miss the books used by Academics. Second, the Royal Library offered a book stock, but the reading room had ridiculously reduced opening hours (only a couple of hours within the week)<sup>3</sup>. And third, its stock didn't contain the books and reviews that were necessary to research and teaching at a top level. Although all Prussian publishers were in theory compelled to send in a certain amount of their new publications to the Royal Library, its stock was in fact not representative of what was at the forefront of science. Many of the publishers did actually not send the due books, and, most importantly, the scientific reviews were not part of the deal.

---

<sup>1</sup> Friese, S. 2.

<sup>2</sup> QUOTE ANNA.

<sup>3</sup> Friese, S. 4.

This was, as recent works of Anna Busch have shown,<sup>4</sup> the main problem. Scientific reviews were the best and practically only way to connect to what was on the forefront of scholarship. Having access to them was necessary to anyone who wanted to keep updated concerning evolutions and debates, experiments and discoveries, editions and manuscripts newly found. The problem for students, and for professors too, was that they could not financially afford as many review subscriptions as their studies would require. Some reviews could be read in cafés, but not all and most of the time, these were more political or literary than scientific reviews.

The publisher and businessman Julius Eduard Hitzig soon realized that he could develop a fairly profitable business model that would fill in the gap. He created a reading room which professors and students could access for a decent subscription fee. They could find there the scientific reviews and the textbooks on the topics lectured at the University. Writing material was also at their disposal, so that they might be able to take notes they could take back home. The reading room was opened every day until dusk. Hitzig, who knew the professors, asked them well ahead of time what books would be of use for their next class, so that he had ordered and received them when the new semester started. It was also possible to issue queries for a specific scientific review or book. The subscriptions ended up being largely sufficient to provide all the necessary material and generated a substantial profit for Hitzig. In the first years, a vast majority of students and professors had subscribed.

Considering this success – not the least of it being the economic success it represented – it would have only be natural for the University to take over such a model. But it took the University another ten years to realize its own reading room – and what is more, one which students were not granted access to.<sup>5</sup> And it took yet another ten years for the University to get, 1831, a Library of its own.

Before I come to the founding of the University Library itself, let me draw a couple of preliminary conclusions:

- First, we have to do with a situation in which a private person successfully takes over the role of an institution. This has to do with the fact that by 1810 intellectual networks had a long history of being structured by the Bildungsbürgertum, contrarily to the newly founded University, which lacked many of its institutional fundamentals for several years. In my view, Humboldt did not as much found the Berlin University as hand over a couple of bricks. It is in fact the people who worked at the University and at the Ministry of Cult between 1810 and 1820/30 that really founded the Berlin University. This process, as we can see with the example of the Hitzig reading room, was supported by civil society.
- Second – and this has to do with Berlin intellectual networks as well – Hitzig's reading room was based on a constant exchange of information. Of course, it could only work because it developed on a small scale – pretty much everybody knew everybody in intellectual Berlin around 1810. But it is still remarkable that it was the collective input that allowed to optimize the exchange of information. In that sense, it is a very modern system.

## **2. Foundation of the University Library**

---

<sup>4</sup> HIER REF ART. ANNA

<sup>5</sup> Friese, S. 6-7.

Let me come now to the founding of the University Library itself. Because of its institutionalized dimension, it took a much slower and more complicated start than Hitzig's Reading Room. It had to be an institution that should last as long as the University itself and in that sense, it had to establish its legitimacy.

In 1817, Friedrich Wilken was appointed to the University of Berlin. He had served at the University of Heidelberg as a professor of oriental history and chief librarian of the University Library. It was him who founded and directed the University Library in Berlin too. Wilken urged Minister and King to create a specific University Library distinct from the Royal Library. According to his analysis, the Royal Library encountered too wide a public interest.<sup>6</sup> Students and professors had to have a place of their own, preserved from the intellectual appetite of the Berlin bourgeoisie. Also, it turned out that the students didn't respect the rules they had to observe when they borrowed books from the Royal Library - they even dared passing books to one another without telling the librarians, causing chaos and additional work. In order to allow the students to be able to consult all the necessary textbooks and topical scientific reviews, the University Library was to be a reference library. Wilken also negotiated with the Ministry on one side and with the Senate of the University on the other how high the budget would be, who would have to pay for it, how many rooms were necessary, what the assistant librarian would be in charge with. Wilken's aim was to create a small University Library that would allow the Royal Library to fulfill its missions better by being relieved of the task of helping out students.

The King did not consider the foundation of a University Library a really necessary step, but accepted to give his blessing as long as it was financially self-sufficient. The expenses for the purchases were to be carried on the one hand by the leftover of the heating and lighting money each student had to pay for, and on the other hand by a subsidy which every person receiving their doctor or professor title or being appointed at the University had to donate. And the University Library remained in the rooms of the Royal Library for ten more years, where it was allotted not the three rooms Wilken wished, but only two.<sup>7</sup>

The University Library was not granted a decent budget by the State until the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. By that time, several scholars and teachers had increased the collection by donating their personal library. This is the case of Wilhelm von Humboldt's linguistics collection, but also Jakob and Wilhelm Grimm's, August Boeckh's, Theodor Schmalz', Gustav Parthey's, August Twisten's books, and some more.<sup>8</sup> This inheritance contributed to the greatness of the University Library in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Two directions of interpretation seem to me to be of interest concerning the development of the institution:

- One can observe that some major contributions were made by single individuals (the scholars who donated their private collections or whose collections were purchased) and not lead by the institution itself. This point is well illustrated by the example of Humboldt, the Grimms or Boeckh, thanks to whom the philological section was particularly well represented

---

<sup>6</sup> Wilken quoted by Friese, S. 11.

<sup>7</sup> Friese, p. 27-29.

<sup>8</sup> Vgl. [http://www.konyvtar.elte.hu/hirek/rendezvenyek/2004/digit\\_konf/ebp\\_ea.htm](http://www.konyvtar.elte.hu/hirek/rendezvenyek/2004/digit_konf/ebp_ea.htm)

within the Humanities, and also contributed greatly to the scholarly reputation of Berlin in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

- Neither King nor Minister considered it a priority to set strong ideological guidelines. For all of his poverty, Wilken had the freedom to acquire the books *he* considered necessary. The University Librarian was given the opportunity to, for instance, have a certain interpretation school better represented than the other. This is also true for the donations. Humboldt, Grimm, Boeckh did not only have their field of specialty, they also had ideological interests which lead to the over- or under-representation of parts of that field in their book collections. All in all, the University Library has been shaped by a handful of Librarians and Scholars – and generations of students were trained according to their choices. Interestingly enough, the freedom of teaching and learning, which is considered as one of Humboldt’s greatest achievements and which was in reality very relative considering the many ways censorship was implemented, could express itself more fully in the constitution of the Library. It was poor, but free.

### 3. The foundation of the Chicago University Library

The direct continuity between the Berlin and the Chicago story is obvious. It begins in fact in Evanston with what Jeffrey Garrett, Director of Special Collections at Northwestern University, calls "a tale of two cities".<sup>9</sup> In the 1860es, the Librarian of Northwestern University was able to acquire the books of Johannes Schulze, a passionate book collector who was also a major protagonist in the Prussian education system. Schulze contributed greatly to establishing Hegelianism as the dominant ideology at the Berlin University.<sup>10</sup> Northwestern University was able to buy his book collection that the Prussian State, by then in war with France and accordingly budget-wise pretty tight, had just turned down. This is not the only example of the Berlin-Chicago connection.

Some thirty years later, still in Chicago, a handful of entrepreneurs dreamed of establishing a University of their own. They asked William Harper, a well-known Yale scholar, to be its founding President. The very first thing Harper did was – to constitute and acquire a scholarly rich University Library. He was hoping that this would “legitimize the University’s broad commitment to education as well as cast an aura of scholarly respectability over the whole enterprise.” (Rosenthal, curator of the Special Collections)<sup>11</sup>

So Harper set sail for Europe, and more precisely for Berlin, in 1891. “Within two weeks of his arrival in Berlin, Harper received from Simon an offer for the entire contents of the Calvary stock, which was stated as containing 300,000 volumes and 150,000 pamphlets. The large scale no doubt appealed to Harper’s sense of enterprise, for never before had an American university acquired so many books at one stroke. He could also see the Calvary books as part of the strategy that would be necessary once he returned home. He (...) would (...) have to enter immediately into a fund-raising drive that would literally create a campus and get the University started within a year. Harper saw beyond the books to the attention which they would draw to the University.”<sup>12</sup>

---

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/node/2618>

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.library.northwestern.edu/node/2618>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/excat/berlin/history.html>

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/excat/berlin/history.html>

The negotiations proved harder and the deal not quite as good as it seemed in the first place. The seller didn't deliver as many volumes as he had originally promised. And although the board of trustees had secured the money for acquisition and shipping of the books, the hope for an adequate building was not really fulfilled according to Harper's wishes. It was only 1906 that the plans for a library building were realized – a building that would significantly carry Harper's name.

Rosenthal states: "But the collection did yield other results. The University Library became the largest in the city, and by 1896 it was the second-largest university collection in the United States with 340,000 volumes, the Berlin Collection contributing its uncertain but dominant share. This rapidly achieved status was used by Harper to lure faculty and also to give a sense of stability to the University."<sup>13</sup> This did not only concern the scholars. The press had largely contributed to the myth of the deal of the century and hence to establishing a little bit more what would be a long-lasting connection between business and scholarship in the US.

[Let's take a closer look at the content of the Berlin Collection. Classical Philology, Archaeology and Natural Science were the three fields which were particularly well represented. Simon highlighted the following aspects in his offer: "For "certain branches of classical philology and principally in classical archaeology the stock forms the richest existing library in the library world so that it is superior to the British Museum and the Royal Library in Berlin." (...). Simon (...) noted that the greater part of the manuscripts came from the library of Pope Pius VII and included such "treasures" as three autograph letters of Raphael, the original manuscript of Abbe Rance's work against Mabillon, an unpublished work of Friedrich von Schlegel, and a fourteenth-century Book of Hours "with unknown French poems illustrated by an artist of the early Burgundian school."<sup>14</sup> Although several of these informations proved erroneous, this description sketches accurately what was considered as the greatest scholarly advantage of the collection - and also what was considered as an attractive business offer. Both aspects show Philology as a leading discipline in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.]

Let's draw a small comparison between the Berlin history and the Chicago history.

- The foundation of the Berlin University was in many ways a patriotic act. Being able to teach and perpetuate scholarship after Prussian standards, being a scholarly active nation in spite of the war and its economic consequences, those were actual motivations for the founding of the University. In this setting, the University Library played a secondary role, mainly because such institutions as the Academy of Sciences, the Royal Library, etc. were already in place. Starting from scratch, the Chicago people inverted the process and put the University Library in the center of the University project as a way to make up for the lack of every other institution, or a core around which the other parts would grow by accretion. Instead of referring to a national tradition, they aimed at founding one by keeping allegiance to the world-wide recognized German philological tradition.
- The input of civil society in early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Berlin was to be found on the level of intellectual exchange; in Chicago, it was of economic nature. The relationship between institutionalized scholarship and the non-Academic world then necessarily evolved differently in both countries.

---

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/excat/berlin/history.html>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.lib.uchicago.edu/e/spcl/excat/berlin/history.html>

I would now like to take a look at these institutions today and see what they tell us about what civil society expects from Academia.

#### **4. Setting new standards: preservation, digitization and new buildings**

Today's University Libraries face new challenges compared to their ancestors, but they face more precise ones. First, they are in charge of the preservation of books and manuscripts. The standards in that regard have evolved dramatically since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Librarian Science has developed preservation techniques and set preservation priorities. Not all media will be preserved in the same way, but the older media, partially because of their rarity, are an object of particular attention. Ultimately, the most precious documents will be engraved in miniature in nickel, a non-corrosive metal that would be likely to survive a global nuclear catastrophe and would only require the basic cultural skill of producing a magnifying lens in order for people or whatever form of intelligent beings to be able to retrieve information from it.

Second, University Libraries have to offer a space where to work on their collections. These missions are at the core of both brand new University Library buildings in Berlin and Chicago. The architectural choices are different, one building choosing the underground, the other one the elevation, both working with glass elements. The Reading Room is the core of Mansueto Library. If you need a book, you order it online, a robot picks it up for you and delivers it within 15 minutes in the spot of your choice. The work atmosphere is radically different from the tradition of thick walls and skyliness that usually prevails in Libraries. The Jakob-und-Wilhelm-Grimm-Zentrum made the choice of displaying the books for the users to pick them up. Both libraries encountered a success that actually disrupts their effective functionality. Groups of tourists thrive through Mansueto, while it is almost impossible to find a free seat at the Grimm-Zentrum. The Grimm-Zentrum, of course, has a more complex task towards non-University public than Mansueto, which is open for use to students and professors of the University of Chicago only.

Both examples show how the University Library has become a recognized space for scholarly work, not only inside the Academia, but also in a strong connection to civil society. The Grimm-Zentrum was not acquired with the students' heating and lighting money, but with the University's own budget. Mansueto carries the name of the generous Alumni who funded its construction. Not that the Grimm-Zentrum doesn't count on exterior donators; especially Alumni are invited to contribute by donating money to restore the Grimm's books. But the Library itself is not named after the donator,<sup>15</sup> it is named after the intellectual inspiration and inheritance. It is a different choice, one that reconstructs a bridge to the age of the founding fathers. You can see it also a recognition of a past that doesn't require a direct confrontation with the third Reich, in a city that is architecturally marked at each corner by world war 2 and cold war.

Let me come to my last point concerning the mission of University Libraries today. Third and last, they have to grant access to their collections and keep those up to date. Many of the books that were representative of contemporary scholarship at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – not to speak of the manuscripts – have already begun to deteriorate. The best way to make those accessible – and for that matter, not only to Academics, but also to a wider audience – is to digitize them.

---

<sup>15</sup> Add here ref to the donor-website listed on the webpage.

I will not get too deep into the meaning of digitization for the world of Libraries in general and University Libraries in particular. More and more conferences are dedicated to the technical aspects connected to it. I will just state a few elements that can shed light on the questions of this conference.

A digitization is a very fragile medium, but it has the advantage of being susceptible of being saved on different servers, in different places, which increases the likeliness for it not to disappear. Also, it is a way of communicating knowledge without much infrastructure: once the digitization is online, you need neither a librarian nor, for that matter, a robot to get the book for you. Whereas the Mansueto Reading Room is not open to public, all of the books and manuscripts digitized by the UofC library are accessible online to anyone. But the digitizing process takes infrastructure. So the real important question is: What has been digitized? When a digitization is not determined by preservation reasons (if a book is falling apart for instance), it has to be part of a Library project - and projects are defined mostly by the money they bring in, but sometimes also by the way they relate to the history of the library.

The Digital Culture is in the process of changing radically the way we read texts and the way we give them to read to others. This change of paradigm affects philology in particular. The roles of editor and interpret are being redefined. Both have to be able to deal with hermeneutical as well as technical issues. The text layers between the establisher of the text and its recipient are multiplied. Many moments of encoding, decoding, organizing query systems in complex databases and implementing search engines, mediatize the relationship the scholar has to his text: it is not just your text editor and you. It is not just your 500 exemplars of your book. It is making a text accessible, potentially, to people you don't know of and who will be interested in your text for a reason you cannot imagine. Libraries are accountable for that change too and in that sense too, they relate directly to their 19th-century ancestors. University Libraries, by then as well as today, were forges for a new kind of philology, trying to figure out how to edit and interpret.

## **5. University Libraries and civil society - by way of a conclusion**

Although they have established themselves as a part of Universities, University Libraries remain today in an ambivalent position. Their primary role is to serve the University they are part of, but they also remain a platform between Academic world and civil society. They occupy a singular space through which each nation relates not only - and maybe not mainly - to their political, but to their intellectual history. The dilemma which Wilken had to face is still present in Berlin: the University Library has a limited budget, a great scholarly mission and opportunities within which it has to make choices. Which of the major scholar's inheritance should be reconstructed first? Grimm, Boeckh, Schmalz? The dilemma Harper had to face is also still present in Chicago: The Library needs investors to be able to take care of the precious collections it is harboring. How far should the recognition towards the generous donators go?

In Berlin as well as in Chicago, institutional structures and collections did not come together as parts of a big plan, but accumulated partly randomly in the course of history, as a deal between reality and ideal that had to be perpetually re-negotiated along time. Interestingly, this historical construction has acquired the status of a funding myth in the institution, although the knowledge we and the University Library have of them is still blurry. To this day, there is no list of the books that originate



from the Berlin Collection in Chicago, nor is there a list of the books, for that matter, that belonged to Boeckh in the Berlin University Library. The golden age of glorious philology is surrounded by a foggy aura.

I am not saying that such idealizations of historical constructs are not necessary. They are of need, especially to create connections with a wider audience. But it is our task to allow this wider audience to get deeper in the reality of it. University Libraries are invaluable platforms when it gets to bringing students closer to research, when it gets to making civil society aware of fact that not everything has been said yet about the past, that the past constructs itself in the present and the future. It is a huge chance for a us that University Libraries have actually evolved to being what they now are, buildings that shape the city, collections that give it an intellectual imprint, and that acknowledge their history. Berlin will never be Chicago and Chicago will never be Berlin - but as long as they both digitize the history they have in common, we will be able to look into mysterious, old manuscripts and see how close they are to us.