

Archival research project: The unknown story of the Athens Municipal Library as part of the city's history

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Abstract:

The Municipal Library of Athens has an unknown story to tell. Although it constitutes one of the most important fields of implementing the municipality's cultural policy, its historic origins have faded, as almost two centuries have elapsed since its establishment.

This realization set a challenge for the "City of Athens Historical Archives", which, among other things, investigates the history of municipal services. Concurrently, the proclamation of Athens as "2018 World Book Capital", a project managed by the Municipality of Athens, prompted our research interest towards this direction.

Our department discovered, recorded and studied the Library's archives for the first time. It thus became an important research tool through which multiple readings emerge. We investigated other archival units as well, in the process of reconstructing the Library's compelling chronicle. In the course of our study, interviews were held in an attempt to connect living and latent memory. The Library, as a core of knowledge and interaction with the local community, has a lot to narrate.

Information found in archival documents reflects institutional policies and political priorities that have established the Library's presence in the city's cultural life. It highlights the vision and labor of its historic personalities, but also the adversities that shaped the current situation.

Above all, the material suggests a two-way relationship between the Library and the city. The former shared the basic ideals of the latter's local governance framework, under which it was organized, such as locality and democracy. At the same time, it assumed a supra-local capacity, enriching smaller libraries and institutions throughout Greece. Finally, it played a catalytic role in supporting students' access to knowledge during difficult historical times. The Municipal Library, is regaining its historicity, while contributing to the city's historical memory.

Keywords: Archives; History; Athens Municipal Library

The Municipal Library of Athens is a thing of the present. Its timeless quality, however, bears witness to a story almost as old as that of the municipality itself, established in the capital of the newly formed Greek state, shortly before the mid-19th century.

In the Historical Archives of the City of Athens' effort to map the municipal services' legacy and narrate their story, questions arose regarding the Library's origin, operation and role in the landscape of past and present. Athens' proclamation as World Book Capital 2018 by UNESCO, under the auspices of the Municipality, meant redefining citizens' relationship with books and, among other things, reintroducing the Municipal Library to the public. Our research proposal thus met with a favorable response from the mayor and the colleagues at the Library, leading to the findings discussed in this article.

The study examines the Municipal Library under the political sphere of each municipal authority's educational and cultural influence, leading both to conclusions and to premises for more comprehensive answers. Sources consisted of the Library's own administrative record, testimonies of former employees, the City Council Proceedings, notarial and photographic evidence, records of past mayors and local administrative officials, periodical and daily Press and existing literature on the Municipality's history. It is worth mentioning that the official "Archive of the Municipal Library" was in fact created very recently, with the catalytic contribution of this study. Our service collected, categorized and ultimately classified documents stored for years. They occupy only 12 archival boxes and about 20 register volumes in total. The most significant specimens include 1957-1984's "Proceedings", 1937-1973's administrative mail and records of books and donations from 1930 onwards.

An unfortunate realization concerns the loss of hundred-years old archives from the Library's initial installment, due to insufficient preservation and the toll of the Library's adventures, such as the initial lack of housing. Therefore, the present study is a synopsis of the Municipal Library's history, as shaped by the evidence drawn from the Proceedings of the City Council and the resulting decisions.¹

History of establishment and operation; "the citizens' schooling through fine and virtuous reading"

The year of the Municipal Library's foundation is unclear. In the literature, it is reported to have been 1836, with the initiative of Athens' first mayor, Anargyros Petrakis.² Unfortunately, this information cannot be corroborated, due to the absence of the Proceedings of the City Council of the period. Consequently, testimonies can be traced to 1851 onwards. In these early years, book purchase and delivery to the Town Hall was recorded since 1853.

The term "library" surfaces for the first time in the preserved 1878 City Council Proceedings, when publisher Sp. Lamprou, DPhil, suggested the formation of a "Municipal Library". In 1881, however, there was talk of a "City Council Library", to be housed in the Council Conference Hall, curated by Councilor Al. Olympios. As a result, confusion surrounded the

¹ See: Proceedings of the Athens City Council, Historical collection, City of Athens Historical Archives

² See: Παρασκευόπουλος Γ.Π., Οι Δήμαρχοι των Αθηνών (1835-1907), 1907, 76-77

Library for years to come, regarding whether there were two separate libraries or one, sometimes called “Municipal Library” in terms of its establishment and operation under the auspices of the Municipality of Athens, and sometimes called “City Council Library”, in terms of its housing facility. The second version seems more prevalent. Therefore, the library was originally not addressed to the public, but only to the City Councilors and employees, providing them with the knowledge necessary for the performance for their duties.

In 1898, a plan was put forth charting its three-fold arrangement; a) “referring to the history of Athens”, b) “referring to the municipal service”, and c) “lay, towards the citizens’ advancement”. This triple thematic layout also defined the target audience of the material. The aim was the formation of a library, filled with books and collections, “worthy of the capital”.

The recruitment of a calligraphist for the books’ classification and record-keeping, noted in 1900’s Proceedings, stands as proof of a functionally organized “Municipal Library” by the end of the 19th century, officially added to the annual Municipal Budget from 1901 onwards.

Its intended popular orientation appears to have delayed to take effect, since discussion on the Library’s introduction to the public was ongoing up to the first decades of the 19th century. Archival research reveals this to have happened probably in 1942, over a hundred years after its foundation. It is worth noting that this occurred under the German Occupation, simultaneously with its institutional upgrade from “library office” (1930) to “Department of Municipal Library”. It was subsequently equipped with a reading room and staffed with a Curator and seven employees.

Its administrative way of function is outlined in the Operating Regulation of 1954. The Library’s public character was henceforth institutionally established by its definition of purpose as “the citizens’ schooling through fine and virtuous reading”.

From existing records and preserved evidence of book lending, it can be inferred that the Library was lending already by the 1930s and 1940s. However, this service was restricted to City Councilors, employees and academic scholars, as mentioned in its Operating Regulation of 1954. The restriction was ultimately lifted to include the general public since 1986.

Finally, it is worth mentioning that the Library undertook the binding of all unbound volumes it received, in collaboration with Athenian binderies. For financial reasons, the establishment of a municipal book bindery, operating inside the Library, was then suggested. Although discussed at various times (1955, 1974), the idea never materialized, due to the facility’s unsuitability.

Library in search of a loving home

As previously mentioned, the Municipal Library was initially housed in the City Council Conference Hall of the Town Hall. The latter was gradually transformed throughout the years, including its major renovation in the 1930s, turning it into a manor. Nonetheless, the arrangement left a lot to be desired. The concept of a library translated into shelves and furniture filled with remarkable, albeit seldom accessible, books, until the 1940s.

According to an administrative report of 1950, the Library was composed of a hall and two reading rooms in the mid-floor of the Town Hall, as well as a storage room in the basement.

As the books' number started to increase, the pressing need for new premises was never met. The situation was temporarily resolved with the addition of a reading room in the Town Hall, to fulfil the obligatory term in the will of benefactor G. Charitakis, in which he bequeathed his personal library to the City of Athens.

As years went by, accompanied with landmarks of historical, social, financial and political significance, the Library remained in the same facility, suffocating under the bulk of books and the dire infrastructural demands. Despite propositions for housing in a private building, the authorities opted for renting a floor in a neighboring mansion at Kratinou Street in 1961. While this measure was intended to be temporary, it ended up lasting for an entire decade. In 1970, the Library was transferred in the second floor of a new municipal building, situated in the city center, close to the Town Hall, at Karamanou Street, while in the fall of 1986 it found its way back to the Town Hall.

Following the devastating earthquake in Athens of 1999, the building suffered serious damage, rendering it unsuitable for housing the Library. Until construction and repair work was concluded, books were temporarily stored in containers and storehouses.

In the fall of 2002, the inauguration ceremony of the Municipal Library was held anew in the municipal building of Domokou Street 2, renovated to adapt to its needs. Its opening marked the onset of the automation of its collection, under way to this day.

The lack of a stable seat has proven decisively dysfunctional and, in a way, degrading to the Municipal Library. It is also apparent that there was no firm policy on the issue by the municipal authorities alternating in power. This treatment, coupled with other deficiencies in staff and financial resources, led to decadence and gradual visitor decline. Nevertheless, the Library withstood all setbacks and continued to serve its purpose.

Enriching the Library

The Municipal Library expanded its collections by means of:

1. Statutory contribution

A set of laws, covering the entire second half of the 19th century up to the mid-1940s, provisioned the mandatory reposition of copies by printers and publishers to the National Library. Since 1910, the Municipal Library's inclusion in the legislation has contributed to its collections' enrichment.

However, such a leverage is demonstrated, through archival records' analysis, to not have been effectively handled by the Library. While statutory contribution was intended to be annually fixed and planned, fluctuations in the number of copies imported into the Library is observed. Such a shortcoming can be attributed not only to the staff number's insufficiency in enforcing the policy, but also to the Library's lack in prestige, that led to the disobedience and disrespect of the publishing and writing world.

2. Donations to the Municipal Library

Considering the Municipality's limited means, private initiative contributions were critical. Academics, politicians and prominent historical figures supplemented the Library's material with their donations, rendering it the most culturally and educationally attractive venue for readers.

The first bibliographic reference of a private donation can be traced in 1836, when the mayor at the time appealed to the era's intellectuals to reinforce the newly-founded Library with their offerings. Konstantinos Nikolopoulos, resident of Paris, was one of the most generous benefactors. The greek composer, musician, writer and philologist served as a librarian at the French Institute.

Subsequent donations are testified in 1898, of which the most significant was that of Anestis Konstantinidis. He was a member of the City Council, a publisher, translator and typographer of the 19th century.

A prominent historical figure that significantly contributed to the Municipal Library's early years of operation was Grigorios Maraslis. The Russian merchant and politician of greek descent made numerous donations to Odessa and Greece. In 1897, he founded the "Maraslis Library" in Odessa, tasked with translating foreign scientific writings in greek. Archival research unearthed proof of his donation of books from the Maraslis Library to the Municipal Library in 1900.

In the 20th century, the course of the Municipal Library was marked with the donation of two dignitaries. The first one was effectuated by G. Charitakis in 1943. He was an economist, Professor of the Higher School of Economics and Commercial Sciences, while he served as Minister of Agriculture, Trade and Industry, and as President of the Library of Greece. The second one, dating back to 1959, regards the personal library of D. Kampouroglou. He was a litterateur, scholar, lawyer, poet and member of the Academy of Athens, mainly occupied with historical discovery and Historiography. His research was focused on the Ottoman Occupation and concerned only the area of Athens, hence his nickname "the Athenograph".

The 1970s are filled with private donations of scientists, journalists and politicians. A prominent example can be found in the Tsirimokos donation of 1972, offered by Ilias Tsirimokos, a politician that also served as Prime Minister of Greece. It contained around 3.000 political and literary works.

3. Book purchases

Purchasing books as a means of adding to the Library's collection has been the Municipal Library's primary source of material. The first mention of acquiring books for the Library can be found in 1878, when, at the suggestion of editor Sp. P. Lampros, DPhil, there is talk of "all writings concerning the history of the city of Athens under the Ottoman Occupation in the property of the Municipal Library of Athens", resulting in the Municipality's contribution to the publication of the "Collection of unpublished writings of the Metropolitan bishop of Athens Michael Akominatos (1182-1205)".

There was no set policy for book purchasing. The institution's course in time is being revealed through the choices of the City Council. In the Library's first years of existence, under City Council operation, it served as an information medium on the subjects the Councilors were called to debate and decide upon. Therefore, books were bought with the purpose of assisting them and other areas under the Municipality's jurisdiction, such as local police, church preservation and primary school education.

Great variety of content can be witnessed in the purchased works, even before the Library's accessibility by the public. The range of subjects included historical writings, studies on the

archaeological monuments of Athens and scientific works (medical, agronomic, architectural, mining). Following its introduction to the public, books on pharmacy, chemistry, theater etc. were bought, in order to respond to the needs of the readers, consisted mostly of students.

Aside from utility to the target audience (originally Councilors, primary school education etc.), purchasing served early on the additional purpose of expressing social politics, as a means of indirectly offering financial support to specific writers and publishers. This activity is rendered evident by the fact that credit for buying books has been provisioned in the chapter of charitable work of the annual Budget since 1853.

Nevertheless, this purpose was put into question from the beginning, since, by 1906, the charitably bought books were seen as “rarely, if ever, of true value” and use to the Municipal Library. In fact, multiple such books were accumulated in the storage rooms and subsequently offered to third parties. The existence of a surplus is testament to the absence of a pragmatic book acquisition plan reflecting legitimate requirements.

Another aspect emerging from archival research is the use of books in public affairs. For example, they were offered as wedding gifts (towards the royal family) or souvenirs to official guests (kings of Greece and England). In periods of historical and political turmoil (the Occupation and the Civil War), books were presented as a diplomatic offering (to Italian representatives of the conquerors), but also as a means of exercising national and foreign policy.

Endowment to third parties

Numerous City Council decisions concern the donation of surplus material to third parties. This practice, as showcased by archival sources, started in 1940, with the donation of 200 volumes to the library of the governmental organization “National Youth League” (EON) of the Metaxas dictatorship. It is an offering with a purely political connotation, aligned with the state of affairs at the time. The same holds true for the following donation, made in 1947, during the Civil War, to patients of military hospitals. A donation of surplus “for national purposes” can also be found towards the library of the Municipality of Pafos in Cyprus.

From the following year onwards that practice was ratified by the City Council’s conviction that the Library’s mission “is not restricted to the satisfaction of the intellectual cravings of the public, but extends in all directions, furthering the municipality’s aspirations towards the elevation and advancement of the cultural and intellectual state of the citizens”. Mass distribution of books to third parties involved local authorities, regional libraries, hospitals and associations. Between 1951 and 1954, the Library donated 7.457 books towards that cause, of which 4.884 were intended for soldiers’ entertainment. Emphasis was placed on the more remote areas, on the grounds that the Municipal Library of Athens ought to “shed light not only on Athens but beyond”. Ultimately, aside from customary etiquette, local interests and personal acquaintances, the donation to third parties served an extra practical objective; the storage rooms’ decongestion.

Contribution to the citizens’ education

Despite infrastructural setbacks, the Municipal Library rose to its purpose of establishment. The series of Proceedings from the 1940s onwards, compiled by each of its Curators, fully

document its function as an auxiliary educational center, providing collections that could prove useful to college students of impoverished post-war Athens.

Books, school and university textbooks or supplementary foreign literature have not always been readily available at the educational institutions. What is more, students from the greek province needed a quiet place to study the material. In fact, the acquisition of a book even for entertainment and informative purposes was not a financial given, at least for the lower social ranks. Thanks to the Municipal Library, however, despite adverse conditions or restrictions of the times, there was an opportunity of disseminating the ever-increasing knowledge throughout the entire city population. Therefore, it can be claimed that, in this way, the Library ensured a democratic process in terms of the public's access to education and information.

At the same time, the attendance and composition of the audience reveal the interest of a large proportion of the readers in technical, rural or other type of practical information, concurrently with breakthroughs in the methods and equipment of the respective professional fields, in their attempt to keep up with international standards. It is indicatively mentioned that, in 1950, and, while housed in the Town Hall, the Library daily catered to the needs of 60-70 readers, most of whom were students of the University of Athens and other higher institutions. According to the Proceedings report, 16.758 readers visited that year.

With the operation of a third reading room and the Library's enrichment, a 20% increase in traffic was observed, compared with previous years. The increase was even greater when the Library was transferred to the rented building on Kratinou Street. With the introduction of the continuous working hours, the audience further expanded to include citizens previously unable to study during the work week. A total of 43.200 visitors (college students, school children), out of whom 8.700 were women, was recorded. A minority was occupied with honing technical skills, while writings on Law were in high demand. Predictably, 1977's audience consisted of Law, Medical, Industrial and working college students, followed by high school students and journalists.

The above statistics allow for multiple readings for the society, the economy, the educational avenues and orientation, not only of the city of Athens but of the entire country. Considering the crucial role of formal and informal education in shaping and preserving a personal and social identity, the Municipal Library strived for knowledge dissemination with all means at hand.

The Central and other Municipal Libraries of Athens

The metropolitan role of the Municipality in the 1930s was a dominant ideology of the municipal authority. At the time, care was taken to establish, organize and operate libraries in other municipalities of the Attica region, under the general coordination of the Ministry of the Capital. However, small-scale libraries were also formed within the municipality.

The "Youth Center", founded in 1938, on the Metaxas dictatorship, aimed at instilling the regime's political ideal of national pride in the youngsters. This model of operation persisted throughout the 1940s, including the World War II, the German Occupation and the Civil War (1946-1949). Eventually, a Children's Library Department was set up in the building. Recorded archival material includes monthly reports on traffic, age, gender and reader preferences. As an example, it can be mentioned that in 1947 11.476 children visited, of

which 9.291 were boys, with an average daily attendance of 40 children, aged 7 and over. Available books for that year amounted to 656.

The Youth Center proceeded to develop in a decentralizing manner, with the creation of smaller annexes in Athenian neighborhoods. The venues essentially functioned as neighborhood centers, where youngsters could read and borrow books, play board games and perform music, theater and dance. Their use was officially terminated in the 1990s.

Children activities are generally at the core of the local government's actions, since they involve social structures like schools, nurseries, medical clinics and camps. With this in mind, the Central Children's Library was established in Ampelokipi in 1979. It was an initiative of the Athens City Mayor Dimitris Beis, matched with the celebration of the "Year of the Child" by UNESCO. The installment was supported by a donation of the Union of Greek Librarians. The Municipal Library was in charge of building repairs, furnishing and office supplies equipment, as well as book census and classification. Its operation ceased in December 2006, due to infrastructural inadequacy.

The term "Athenian" is directly interwoven with the Municipal Library. Until recently, the impression was that it was a nominal adjective of the Municipal Library of Athens. Research, however, unearthed the fact that the term actually does not refer to the place (of Athens → Athenian) but to the content. There exists a thematic collection, solely comprised of greek and foreign books written about Athens. This conceivably gave a unique edge to the Municipal Library's collections, compared with the other two major capital libraries; the Library of Parliament and the National Library. The idea of a library containing writings on the history of the city of Athens can be traced, as previously mentioned, back to 1878. Despite being considered by several municipal authorities throughout the first half of the 20th century (1920,1940), it was finally implemented in 1973, with the foundation of the Municipal Athens Cultural Center as its seat. Its books of athenian content were transported and accommodated at the Municipal Library at a later time.

Consequently, it ensues that, aside from the Municipal Library, smaller or more specialized libraries were installed in order to cater to the entirety of the municipality's territory or to particular groups. This decentralized character remains to the present day, lest with a distinct organizational or thematic outline, such as the Musical Library and the Ioanneios Cultural Center Library. Hence the Library is oftentimes referred to as the "Central" Municipal Library.

The Municipal Library's present; a bridge from the past to the future

The Municipal Library's portrait, painted by surviving archival records, turns out to be a mirror. Reflected in it is the history of a city and a nation, with all of its political, financial, educational and cultural hues.

After the Ottoman Occupation, the Library participated in the cultural emancipation of a generation of citizens that would be the future of the liberated Greek state. In the 1930s, it became a means of furthering the prevalent national pride of the time, as well as the capital's superiority. Throughout the German Occupation, the Library was the only asset (aside from vehicles) to be secured by the Municipality, providing refuge from the war's misery. During the Civil War and the subsequent dictatorship (junta) its content was tailored to only serve the nationalistic and totalitarian ideologies in power. The following decades of political and

social stability contributed to its reorientation towards the public's educational and cultural growth.

The Municipal Library's presence in the modern greek state is a mixture of all of the above. Its commitment to being of service to the citizens as a beacon of knowledge and inspiration is more relevant than ever before, welcoming not only our compatriots, but also refugees and immigrants. According to employee testimonies, the number of visitors has significantly increased since the onset of the modern financial crisis.

In 2002, when the housing issue was conclusively resolved, a new era was inaugurated. Currently, the Library's collection includes rare publishing material and consists of 65.000 titles in various subjects, a newspaper archive from 1852 to 1999, a 900-title journal collection from 1849 to present day, a Government Gazette (FEK) archive from 1833 to 2007, as well as rich literary and photographic material on the history of the city of Athens. The venue hosts a multitude of educational programs, book presentations, tributes, exhibitions, seminars etc. A commendable effort in modernization includes a study on upgrading the facilities with new reading rooms, reader-friendly spaces, digital infrastructure and public outreach initiative through lectures and thematic presentations.

While the Municipal Library's complex history is not well-known, its current administrative authority has taken steps towards reviving it with what can only be described as praiseworthy initiative. A children's library and an infantile department have been established, while the formation of a collection of material about the city of Athens, a present-day "Athenian Library", is under way. In this manner, the contemporary brushstrokes of the Municipal Library's portrait are the color of memory.

References

Proceedings of the Athens City Council, Historical collection, City of Athens Historical Archives

Παρασκευόπουλος Γ.Π., Οι Δήμαρχοι των Αθηνών (1835-1907), 1907, 76-77