

The Ethics of Archivists and Libraries in the Western World

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DANIELSON, Elena S. *The Ethical Archivist*. Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2010. 8vo. Softbound. vi, 437pp. **\$49.00.**

STAIKOS, Konstantinos Sp. *The History of the Library in Western Civilization: From Constantine the Great to Cardinal Bessarion—Imperial, Monastic, School and Private Libraries in the Byzantine World*. Translation by Timothy Cullen and David Hardy. New Castle, Del.: Oak Knoll Press, 2007. 4to. Clothbound, dust jacket. xxxi, 571pp. Numerous color illustrations. **\$75.00.** Deluxe full leather edition **\$275.00.**

In the interests of broadening horizons, this column often reviews titles outside the mainstream autograph collecting category—most notably specialized forensic handwriting manuals usually far off the radar of the vast majority of collectors and even dealers. I've always said the best collectors are those who read broadly and educate themselves, and the only way to stretch and grow is to move outside your "comfort zone" and tackle what might seem out of the ordinary titles.

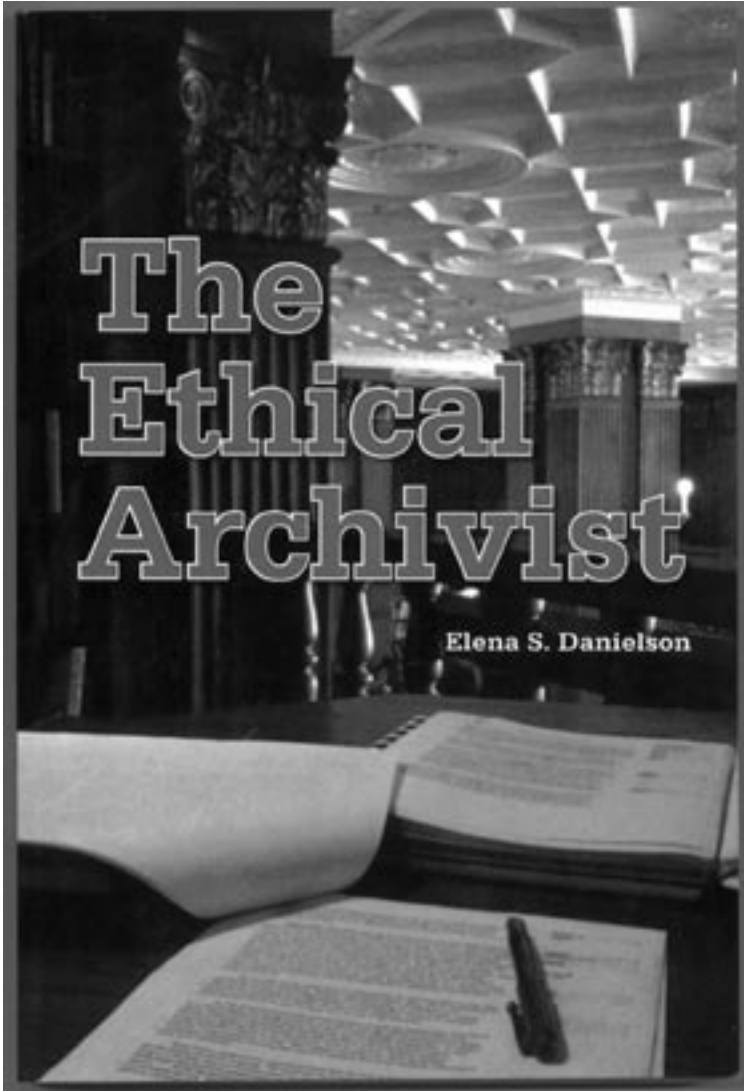
Hence Elena S. Danielson's *The Ethical Archivist*. Archivists (akin to special collections or rare book librarians), it seems to me, are considered an exotic species in the manuscript world

and one of the least understood for the simple reason that most collectors know none and have no interaction with any. Tales about them are plentiful: Did you hear about the archivist who refused a donor who wanted to give him So-and-So's original manuscript of Such-and-Such? Did you hear about the archives of So-and-So? They ended up in a *dumpster* (or *getting pulped* or *buried in the basement*)! And so on. Such urban legends, which may have some isolated germ of long-ago truth buried in them—or just as often none whatsoever—tend to morph with each retelling.

Sequestered as they often are in off-limit areas removed from the public, it's no wonder the work of archivists is highly misunderstood. In my own limited but growing interaction with them, I've found archivists to be enthusiastic, dedicated conservators who diligently protect the treasures under their care, see to it they're properly utilized, and seek to enlarge their holdings, often with limited or nonexistent budgets. The public perception of archivists—so far as they've pondered them at all—is that archivists file away documents, period.

Such could hardly be further from the truth, of course. Serious ethical issues of all sorts face archivists on a daily basis, and the table of contents of *The Ethical Archivist* gives a quick overview of the hairy issues at hand: "The Ethics of Acquisition," "The Ethics of Disposal," "Equitable Access," "Archives and Privacy," "Authenticity and Forgery" and "Displaced Archives" are some of the archivist challenges Danielson addresses. "Like archives themselves," she writes, "archival ethics are unique—uniquely perplexing in many ways and uniquely rewarding in other ways. Archivists, museum curators, and record managers in general contend with ethical dilemmas that are distinct from those of otherwise closely allied professions such as library science or history. Knowingly or unknowingly, archivists encounter ethical issues that are not amenable to easy answers, and they do so on a regular basis...." Like any book debating often unanswerable ethical issues, she also hastens to caution that *The Ethical Archivist* "will raise more questions than answers."

Ethical issues do face autograph dealers regularly, autograph collectors much less so—but neither of us face such issues as often as archivists. Notes Danielson, "What should one do, for



example, when donors want to control access to their papers? It happens frequently. It was once common for donors to continue to assert the prerogatives of private ownership after transferring their papers to a repository. They sometimes... barred particular

ethnic groups from using ‘their’ papers.... American archivists now generally agree that even donors cannot impose discriminatory access policies on archives.... Over time, the rights of readers have gained ground over arbitrary requests from even the most valued donors. Once the principal of equal access became more universal, basically in the late twentieth century, implementing it became much easier for each practicing archivist.”

Danielson’s explanation of how archivists differ from librarians really brought home for me the opposing nature of these fields. “Librarians facilitate use of materials that the authors intended to have circulated as widely as possible. Books... are created and published with the unambiguous expectation that they can be freely sold and openly read by the general public. Archivists also facilitate use of materials, but the authors may not have expected their texts to be read by others at all.... Archivists promote the use of papers that contain unfiltered information that may be private, libelous, proprietary, or erroneous.... Opening these materials to a wide readership creates dilemmas that can be finessed or balanced, but they often cannot be solved definitively.... the archival profession is faced with ethical dilemmas that are intrinsic to the nature of the work.”

The Ethical Archivist presents no easy cut-and-dried answers, as you can imagine—these issues are far too complex for something so straightforward. “Instead of solutions,” Danielson points out, each challenge offers “an array of possible strategies.” If you like your ethics straight up, you may find *The Ethical Archivist* rather—well, ambiguous.

The “Codes of Ethics” chapter that opens *The Ethical Archivist* is an intriguing overview of attempts to “construct universal principles that apply to government archives, manuscript repositories, and private business as well as religious archives.” Danielson’s paragraph by paragraph dissection of the 1955 “Archivist’s Code” of Wayne C. Grover (Archivist of the U.S. from 1948 to 1963 and cofounder of the Society of American Archivists) will be eye-opening to any non-archivist. So too the 1980 SAA Code of Ethics for Archivists, a rewrite aimed at expanding and refining Grover’s pioneering effort.

The Manuscript Society, I’m pleased to report, appears sev-

eral times in *The Ethical Archivist*. In discussing the ethics codes of various archives-relates societies, Danielson notes that “The Manuscript Society... has strict provisions against the sale of stolen manuscripts or forgeries. When they pay their dues, they commit themselves to the society’s code. Because the Manuscript Society’s social events bring together buyers and sellers, the need to promote honest transactions is self-evident. According to its website, the Manuscript Society’s board of trustees can investigate violations of the code and expel members if there is a two-thirds majority vote. The threat of expulsion no doubt serves as a deterrent to shoddy business practices. Because the membership reflects the interests of dealers, it has a strong interest in maintaining the rights of private ownership of manuscripts and archives.” Elsewhere, the thirteen articles of the Society’s Code of Ethics (adopted 1999) are printed in their entirety.

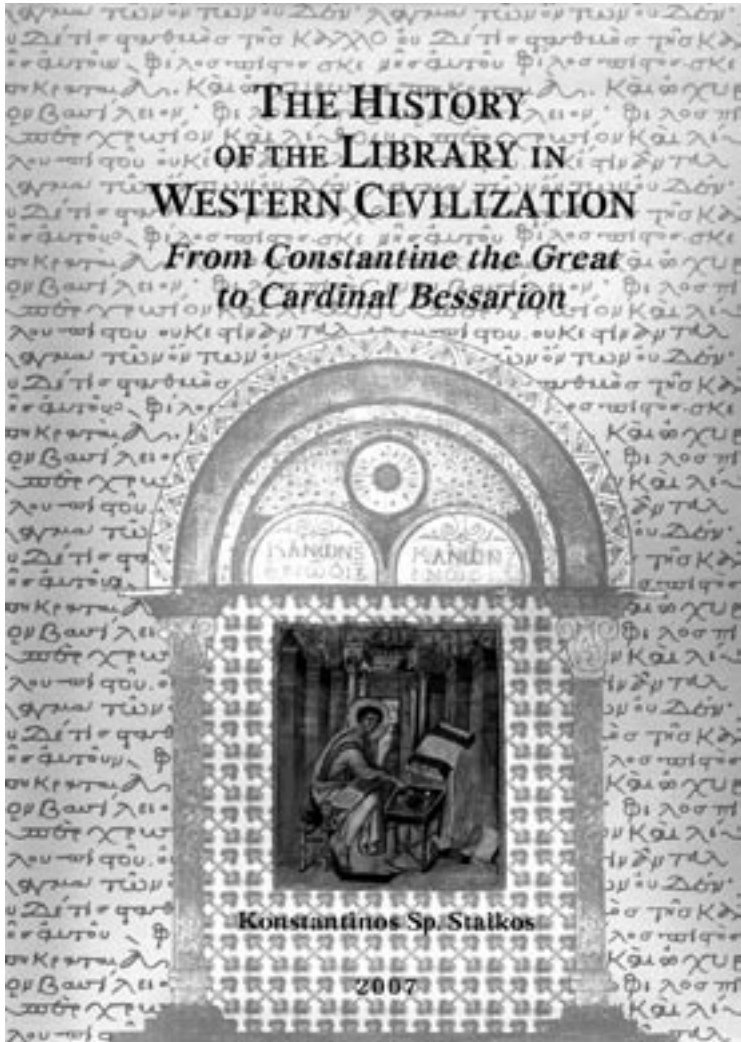
Unless you work in academia, your spouse or friends may look at you sideways (as did my wife) as you peruse *The Ethical Archivist*. This couldn’t be further from routine reading matter—the latest thriller, celebrity bio or whatever your normal fare may be. But what a refreshing change, this provocative discussion of what’s right and wrong in this profession’s workaday world.

The Ethical Archivist gives us non-archivist’s a revealing look into this whole other side of the manuscripts world. Most of us think of documents as *physical objects* with a certain *monetary value* and certain *historical significance*. Ethics plays precious little part in the equation. It’s good to be reminded that there are large issues of right and wrong at play as well. As the jacket copy on the book’s verso notes in a moment of rare jocularly, “Do the right thing and read this book!” I strongly second that.

Libraries of Western Civilization

In the better-late-than-never category, Konstantinos Sp. Staikos continues his impressive *History of the Library in Western Civilization* series, the first two volumes of which were reviewed here in the Fall 2006 issue.

The third volume, subtitled *From Constantine the Great to Cardinal Bessarion—Imperial, Monastic, School and Private Libraries in the Byzantine World*, continues Staikos’s epic stroll (slated at five volumes total) through library history. Lest the subject seem off-



the-wall for autograph collectors, let me quote my 2006 self:

The history of early libraries should intrigue autograph collectors as much as bibliophiles. After all, the contents of these early libraries for roughly two millennium—prior to Gutenberg and the invention of moveable type—consisted entirely of handwritten manuscripts: texts in the

form of papyrus rolls, clay tablets and somewhat later codices. The history of early libraries might be viewed as the history of how early peoples sorted and stored their manuscript collections.

With the gradual shift from a declining Rome to Constantinople as the head of the Holy Roman Empire, Staikos chronicles the centuries' long tussle between Christians and pagans as each sought dominance over the other—often destroying each others written works to do so. (Or worse: During the reign of Justinian I, 527-529, “anybody found in possession of such books [that propogate the Manichaeans’ impious errors] on any pretext whatsoever is to suffer the same fate as the books, namely to be burnt alive.”) “The Christians were the worst offenders,” Staikos observes, “for once Christianity had been adopted as the official religion they did all they could to suppress any works of classical literature that challenged Christian doctrine.”

Especially interesting is Staikos’ elaboration of the broader social and economic concerns that altered the way that book collections were formed. The fabled private collections that dotted the Roman landscape withered as the Byzantine era began. Parchment codices were enormously more expensive than papyrus scrolls, and this imbalance was pushed further by the disappearance of the large slave population that made scroll production feasible. The next thousand-plus years after the third century A.D. saw the gradual rise of monasteries with their tradition of maintaining libraries. Writes Staikos, “From then on, emperors, dignitaries and members of the aristocracy supported monasticism and enriched monastic libraries, which came to be intellectual treasure-houses containing nearly every work of Christian literature ever written and such classical works as did not conflict with Christian faith.”

Ironically, this epoch got off to a fitting start with the most book-loving of any Roman ruler ever—Julian the Apostate (332-363). Julian’s determination to school himself in philosophy and to build book collections is legendary, and Staikos’ lengthy account of the ups and downs of Julian’s education shows his astonishing determination. One of the reknowned pagan philosophers Julian supported was Themisteus, who likewise helped found Constantinople’s tradition of library building, which ended all too typically: “What eventually happened to that library;

whether it was subsequently moved to a different location, and if so where; whether Julian added its contents to his own library; what happened to the original manuscripts from which the codices were copied; how many copies were made of each work; all these are questions to which convincing answers will probably never be found.” Staikos also brings out the rise in education in general that coincided with the rise of libraries in the Byzantine Empire. What good a library, after all, with no population able to read and use the books?

Among the many seminal figures Staikos profiles, legendary learned men who insured the preservation of irreplaceable manuscripts, I am struck by the 4th century Syrian cleric John Chrysostum. His advice on books and reading seems timelier than ever: “He laments the fact that books are so much less in evidence than dice and games of chance, and he urges the faithful to take care of their souls by reading books and writing abridgements and anthologies of sacred writings, so that they will not have to do without them when they travel. All in all, John Chrysostum advises Christians to acquire books, the medicines of the soul, and to build up libraries of their own to help them to grasp the deeper meaning of life.” Substitute *internet and video games* for “dice and games of chance” and what have you got?

What comes across clearly over many chapters of *The History of the Library in Western Civilization* is the long, convoluted, often painful evolution of maintaining manuscript texts in libraries—a tradition we take entirely for granted but which was clearly fraught with danger and difficulty at every turn. There was the physical difficulty of crumbling papyrus scrolls, which as early as 357 were being copied onto parchment codices at some sites. Centuries later, in different parts of the empire, this difficulty actually created opportunity. Notes Staikos, “The changeover from the papyrus roll to the codex... meant that people with limited money could now buy rare books and ‘relics’ at affordable prices. Libanius tells us that ‘cartloads’ of papyrus books were brought to Nicomedia, presumably looted from the great libraries scattered throughout the Eastern Roman Empire.... the tattered old rolls may well have made it possible for itinerant grammarians and teachers to build up valuable libraries of works that were then recopied by their students, thus adding to the stock of books in circulation.”

Elsewhere Staikos notes another development that altered the book world in surprising ways: The revolutionary affect in the 8th century of switching from the majuscule script (capital letters) to minuscule script (lower case letters) “had a major impact on the economics of the book trade, because it considerably reduced the number of pages required for a given text.” Somewhat later, papermaking came to the Byzantine world from the Arabs, and this too made book production less expensive.

Absolutely critical to this period was the rise of the monasteries, for it was there that libraries were established (and sometimes archives of documents related to each monastery and book collections of individual monks) and scriptorium for copying texts were built. “From the very earliest days of monasticism,” Staikos writes, “books have been the monks’ unflinching companions and counsellors, whether supporting them in their eremitic solitude, nourishing their hunger for learning and their deeper spiritual yearnings, or supplying them with necessary liturgical texts... books must have accumulated there in ever-increasing numbers, forming the nuclei of the great libraries of the coenobitic monasteries.” Their rise, by the way, sounded the death knell for certain categories of manuscripts. While the Latin and Greek tradition included a flourishing trade in many types of secular works, the Byzantines focused largely on religious literature. The market for poetry, speeches and other formerly popular secular writings almost disappeared.

The Dalmaton Monastery was the first, founded around 382 outside Constantinople. Staikos profiles all of these scattered monasteries, their libraries and the fate of each. Most interesting is the 6th century Monastery of St. Catherine at Sinai, which, unbelievably, remains intact and fairly unchanged. Naturally its library contains a great wealth of manuscripts, including “the Sinai codex... one of the 50 (probably) Bibles ordered by Constantine the Great from Eusebius of Caesarea to support the functioning of the ecclesiastical and religious foundations of Constantinople.”

Although surprising numbers of these early volumes still survive, devastation awaited many. Given the dizzying roller coaster ride of Byzantine history, it’s extraordinary that any manuscripts of this period exist today—purges and bookburnings to rid the world of texts considered heretical took a heavy toll over the

centuries. “Little by little, however,” remarks Staikos, “the situation changed with the final suppression of heretical movements and the establishment of a corpus of non-Christian writings that posed no challenge to Christian beliefs.”

To mention one noteworthy example of horrifying losses, the Lavra of St. Sabbas in Palestine, with its famed scriptorium, suffered a typically sad fate. After surviving a thousand years, “a large part of this unique treasure was destroyed by fire in the middle of the 18th century.” The monastery at Mount Athos suffered countless indignities. “Nor was it only through the depredations of international collectors that the Athonite libraries were stripped of so many historic manuscripts, for pirate raids and conflagrations repeatedly did incalculable damage to the monasteries and their libraries full of perishable materials... During the Greek War of Independence the Turks bought manuscripts ‘by the quintal for a few piastres’ for use in the manufacture of cartridges. It is thought that more than a thousand parchment codices were destroyed in this way....” In a footnote, Staikos records parchment codices used to heat ovens, to cover jars of fruit preserves and even to be cut into bits for use as fish bait.

Physically this third installment of *The History of the Library in Western Civilization* continues the high standards of the first two. This tome is, quite simply, breathtaking. Margins that are large—but not too large; handsome typesetting that’s just right—not too large, not too small; ample illustrations flawlessly reproduced. (The full-page illustration of the 5th century “Purple Codex”—“majuscule script written in silver and gold ink,” a gospel text on the funkiest piece of parchment you’ll ever lay eyes on, is not to be believed.) Favorite thing: The quaint archaic practice of including a few summarizing words printed in brown ink in the outer margin of each page I find quite handy in this dense text. I’m sure there’s a word for this bibliographic feature, which you sometimes encounter in early printed texts. Makes you wonder why publishers don’t utilize this useful device more often.

Pet peeve: Is it just me, or does everyone find it irksome when translations aren’t provided for foreign language passages? I’m not just talking about the occasional phrase or word here and there, but lengthy full sentences. Greek is probably beyond the

ken of most readers of this book. I'm baffled why Staikos or the translators would want a huge portion of their readership left in the dark. The ample footnotes are particularly heavy in untranslated material.

Staikos' *The History of the Library in Western Civilization* takes commitment, to be sure. This third volume is as dense and heavily footnoted a text as its predecessors. Add to this the difficulty that, unless you're a scholar of early Christianity with a focus on the eastern scene—foreign turf to our Western Civ bias—you may often feel you're completely out of your element. Get used to it and try to flow with it. Staikos expends much text in setting the scene, giving us the larger political/military/socioeconomic background in order to place the books and library scene in context, so just bear with it. It's a difficult and complex era he's chronicling, so I for one had a steep learning curve to make up in order to properly appreciate the Byzantine library environment. It's well worth it.

Contributions Sought For *Manuscripts*

Members of The Manuscript Society are invited to contribute to the Society's quarterly journal, *Manuscripts*. Articles about unusual documents, collections, or personal experiences in acquiring manuscripts would be appropriate topics. Or you could choose to write on a more general issue such as manuscript preservation, security, insurance, or some particular aspect of collecting. Articles with good possibilities for illustration are given preference. The editor suggests that you write a brief letter outlining your ideas before submitting an article.

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