



LIGUE DES BIBLIOTHÈQUES EUROPÉENNES DE RECHERCHE
ASSOCIATION OF EUROPEAN RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Manuscript Librarians Group

Vatican City – Backgrounds

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Vatican Library

The [Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana](#) or [Vatican Library](#) (established in 1451) is located in the [State of the Vatican City](#) (established in 1929). Its territory consists of a walled enclave within the city of Rome. The Vatican Library preserves one of the largest collections of manuscripts in the world. Excluding the volumes of an archival nature, there are about 80,000 manuscripts, in large part from the medieval and humanistic eras, with a few significant pieces from late antiquity and a number of others from the modern period.

The Latin codices, as they are called, those written in the Latin alphabet (and in many languages: Latin, Italian, French, English, Spanish, German, Provençal, etc.), number about 62,000, those written in the Greek alphabet about 5,000, in Hebrew about 920, in other Eastern alphabets about 9,000, among which are Arabic, Coptic, Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic, and about 2,000 rare works from the Far East in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

This enormous collection is the result of the continual growth which has occurred over the course of the more than five centuries of the modern history of the Library, and with it is a sizable patrimony of rare printed books (incunabula, 16th-century books), of prints, drawings, coins, medals, and modern printed volumes.

Founding of the library

It was Pope Nicholas V (1447-1455) who decided to open a public library in the Vatican, which would have as its focus “the common convenience of learned people”, making accessible to outside readers a library which, until that point, had been for the exclusive use of the pontifical curia. The books that he found were no longer those of the ancient library of the Popes, that had been dispersed, but only those few, around 350, collected from his immediate predecessors. The Pope, concerned with enriching that endowment, added his own private library (about 150 codices) to it, arranged for the purchase of numerous volumes in all the Eastern and Western markets and had books copied that could not be acquired, so that samples could reach Rome.

He had an adequate space prepared within the Vatican Palace, and began collecting books in such a way that would allow for the construction of a truly universal library, according

to humanistic criteria: the library collected books written in the two languages of learning and culture, Greek and Latin (a very innovative decision, if we recall that the previous papal library of Avignon did not have even one Greek manuscript) and books which pertained to every field of knowledge. It was not a library which specialised in theology or in law, for example (as were the great university libraries of that time), but all areas of knowledge, including literary (with collections of non-Christian Latin classics and Greek writings), and scientific (medicine, astronomy, mathematics, and natural sciences) texts.

The efforts of Nicholas V were a success: from the inventory compiled at the time of his death in 1455 and from other lists, there were more than 1,200 manuscripts, one third of which were in Greek, and two thirds in Latin. It was one of the richest libraries in Europe in both quality and quantity of texts.

His cultural policy was carried on by his successors, who continued to increase the number of manuscripts. In 1475 there were just over 2,500 and by 1481, about 3,500, undoubtedly the largest collection then in existence. In order to accommodate the increase in volumes, it was also necessary to enlarge the size of the structure of the Library. In 1475 Pope Sixtus IV provided for a larger site of the Library (four rooms) and established stable revenues for it and adequate staffing. The Library was opened for the lending of books and the registers from 1475 to 1547 are still preserved (and published).

New buildings

In the course of the 16th century the collection continued to be enriched with manuscripts and with many printed books, which had by then become the normal means of cultural diffusion in the West. The Vatican Library was the richest in the West, and its space was no longer sufficient. For this reason, Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590), between 1587 and 1589, commissioned the architect, Domenico Fontana, to build a new, larger site. Today, this building, with some successive changes, is the site of the Vatican Library. Up to the first decades of the 20th century, the manuscripts were preserved in the 'Gallerie' (Galleries) which today are part of the Vatican Museums in the 'Salone Sistino' (Sistine Hall). The manuscripts were first transferred to other locations and since 1984 have been preserved in the underground vault. The Sistine Hall will soon be returned to the use of the Vatican Library in order to be available to scholars.

Collections: *Vaticani*, *Palatini* (1622), *Urbinati* (1657), *Reginensi* (1689), *Ottoboniani* (1748)

All of the manuscripts which were added to the patrimony of the library became part of one large series. Today they constitute the *Vaticani* collections, which are called 'open collections' because new material continues to be added to them. There are 18 *Vaticani* collections, subdivided into Latin (more than 15,300 manuscripts), Greek, (more than 2,600), Arabic (more than 2,000), Musical (more than 670), Syriac (more than 650), Hebrew (more than 720), Turkish (more than 400), Ethiopic (more than 300), to which can be added the more than 700 *Vaticani* Persian, Coptic, Far Eastern, Indian, Slavic, Armenian, Romanian, Samaritan, Iberian, and Mandaean manuscripts.

In the course of the 1600s large collections began to arrive in the Library, often entire libraries of princely or private origin, which were maintained as collections and are now called 'closed collections', since, obviously, nothing new is added to them.

Of greatest importance was the arrival of the some 2,500 *Palatini* (Latin and Greek), originating from the library that the Palatine prince electors had collected at Heidelberg in Germany and which was donated to Pope Gregory XV by the Duke of Bavaria, Maximilian I in 1622. Some decades later, in 1657, Pope Alexander VII acquired the very rich collection of manuscripts of the library of the Duke of Urbino, Federico di Montefeltro: this included about 2,000 manuscripts, now called *Urbinati* (Latin, Greek, Hebrew). Another 2,300 manuscripts can be found in the *Reginensi* (Latin and Greek), which bear the name of Christina, Queen of Sweden who renounced the throne, converted to Catholicism and moved to Rome, bringing along her own private library, which, after her death, was acquired by Pope Alexander VIII in 1689.

The growth in the number of manuscripts continued in the next century and, alongside the numerous codices that increased the *Vaticani* collections, in 1748 about 4,000 *Ottoboniani*: Latin and Greek codices that belonged to the family of Cardinal Pietro Ottoboni, the younger, were acquired. They were the fruit of a long-time policy of collecting manuscripts.

French Revolution

In the years 1797 and 1809, the troops of the French Republic, and then those of Napoleon Bonaparte transferred a number of the Library's manuscripts (in addition to many works of art and archival documents) to Paris, from whence they were recovered, though with some losses, only after the Conference of Wien in 1815. Still today, one can see the seal of the National Library of France on many precious manuscripts of the Vatican Library, put there during their stay in France.

Modernisation of the library

During the Pontificate of Pope Leo XIII (1878-1903) there was a great impulse toward the modernisation of the Library. In addition to the construction of new reading rooms, it is important to remember that the Prefect Franz Ehrle adopted modern scientific rules for cataloguing the manuscripts, which are still in use today and which have made famous throughout the world of scholars the numerous catalogues that have been produced in just over a century. In the fervor of renewal of that time, the manuscript collections also began to grow again.

Collections: *Borghesiani*, *Neofiti*, *Cappella Sistina*, *Borgiani*, *Barberini*, *Rossiani*, *Chigiani*, *Ferraioli*, *Patteta* (1891-1945)

In 1891 the *Borghese* collection was acquired which includes many manuscripts that came from the scattered Papal Library of Avignon, and the *Neofiti* Collections, rich with Hebrew manuscripts, and a little later 1,200 manuscripts of the Sistine Chapel, which are very important for the history of Western music. In 1902 the *Borgiani* collection of manuscripts entered the Vatican Library, which are important for the awareness of the Near East, including over 2,500 codices in 20 languages, among which are found over 500 Chinese manuscripts.

In those same years in the beginning of the 20th century, the great *Barberini* library was acquired from one of the major Roman families. The collection was started during the 1600's by Cardinal Francesco Barberini, nephew of Pope Urban VIII (1623-1634), and was enhanced with great care by some of its librarians, such as Leone Allacci and Lucas Holstenius. Along with the manuscripts, the printed books and the wooden cabinets in which they were stored were acquired and can today still be admired in one of the rooms of the Library. The manuscripts now make up the *Barberini* (Latin, Greek and Oriental), a collection of almost 12,000 codices, the most conspicuous after the *Vaticani*.

Since the end of 1921 the some 1,200 *Rossiani* manuscripts, for the most part medieval, collected in the 1800s by Giovanni Francesco de' Rossi, have also been part of the Library. In 1923, the Italian government gifted the Library with the Chigi family library, collected in the 17th century for the most part by Fabio Chigi (who later became Pope Alexander VII); and thus the additional 3,500 *Chigiani* (Chigi) manuscripts arrived in the Vatican. A few years later, (1926) the *Ferraioli* collection arrived, comprising over 1,000 manuscripts and about 100,000 autographs. Of great importance was the arrival of another 400 manuscripts of the Archive of the Chapter of St. Peter's collection in 1940, almost 1,300 musical codices of the Julia Chapel in 1942 and almost 4,700 manuscripts of the *Patetta* collection in 1945.

Recent acquisitions

Even in recent times the Vatican Library has increased the collections of the manuscripts, enlarging, albeit very slowly, both the *Vaticani* collections, and acquiring other collections, among which should be kept in mind the collection of Persian poetry and Ethiopic texts of the Cerulli: Persian and Ethiopic collections, the collection of the Autographs to Paul VI, and the *Comboniani* and *Raineri* collections with Ethiopic manuscripts

The 21st century opened with an extraordinary acquisition, the Bodmer Papyrus XIV-XV, which contains large parts of the Gospel according to Luke and the Gospel according to John, a witness of absolute importance dating back to the end of the 2nd century and given to the Library by an American benefactor after it was put up for auction by the Bodmer Foundation of Coligny (Geneva) in Switzerland.

Rich collections

The Vatican Library now preserves its manuscripts subdivided into a total of about 130 collections. In addition to the more significant ones already cited, others also hold very ancient manuscripts, such as the approximately 170 pieces on papyrus, or important collections of autographs, parchments originating from monasteries, churches or families, papers of famous scholars, musical scores and collections of drawings.

As well can be imagined, the enormous quantity of manuscripts preserved in the Vatican Library covers practically every field of human knowledge: literature and history, art and law, astronomy and mathematics, natural sciences and medicine, liturgy, patristics and theology. Biblical codices also hold a remarkable place in the Vatican Library. Some are of particular importance for the texts they transmit, sometimes absolutely unique, beginning with very ancient manuscripts up until the first translations in the numerous languages of the Christian East and West, testimony of the progressive spread of Christianity; and there are others notable for the quality and beauty with which they were made, rendering them true works of art.

Manuscript Department

- Consists of three sections:
 - Manuscript Section: preserves, studies and makes available the [manuscript collections](#) of the Vatican Library (around 80,000 volumes);
 - Archival Section: is entrusted with the preservation of the [archival collections](#) (around 75,000 volumes of documents);
 - Reading Room and Stacks Section.
- Inventories, indices and catalogues: range from hand-written inventories and indices from the 17th century and later (some of which came to the Vatican Library together with the collections as they were purchased) to typewritten inventories from the 20th century; from printed catalogues (starting with the 18th-century catalogue of Assemani and continuing with the series begun under Leo XIII [1878-1903] and still progressing today) to the current [electronic catalogue](#).