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## **CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN THE PRESERVATION OF MANUSCRIPT AND DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY IN SOFIA**

### **Abstract**

The St. St. Cyril and Methodius National Library of Bulgaria preserves unique collections of manuscripts, archival documents, rare and valuable old books. The structural unit that performs these functions is "Preservation of Manuscript and Documentary Heritage" division. The division is composed of four departments – Manuscripts and Old Printed Books, Bulgarian Historical Archives, Oriental Collections and Restoration centre. Among the strengths of our division are: it is the largest collection of Slavic manuscripts and old printed books in Bulgaria; of Bulgarian old printed books and periodicals from the epoch of the National revival; of arabographic manuscripts and incunabula. Our Ottoman archives are the third most significant ones in the world. We preserve a unique and very impressive collection of Bulgarian archival documents and photographs. We have prominent professionals and researchers in the field of diplomatics, palaeography, book studies, Oriental studies, restoration and conservation. There are also challenges – the insufficient number of staff, need of providing better storage conditions for library documents, the new normative documents for the development of the academic staff in Bulgaria do not correspond to the specifics of the work in the National Library. In response to the challenges we appoint more specialists; involve trainees and volunteers, as well as external project specialists. The report treats the history, the present and the possibilities for development of the special collections in the National Library of Bulgaria.

**Keywords:** manuscripts, old printed books, archival documents, archival photographs, Bulgaria, Ottoman Empire, St. St. Cyril and Methodius National Library (NBKM), "Preservation of Manuscript and Documentary Heritage" division – NBKM, Manuscripts and Old Printed Books Department – NBKM, Bulgarian Historical Archives – NBKM, Oriental Collections Department – NBKM, Restoration centre – NBKM

## 1. HISTORY

The St. St. Cyril and Methodius National Library is the largest library in Bulgaria. It was founded on December 10, 1878, in the same year when the country was liberated from the Ottoman rule. Thus, the library became the first cultural institute created by the modern Bulgarian state.

The main aims of the library since its establishment was to collect manuscripts, old printed books, and all books in Bulgarian language or by Bulgarian authors written in a foreign language. Later a fund of Slavic and foreign language manuscripts was formed. It was kept in a special cabinet in the office of the Director of the Library. Among the first entries were the rich personal libraries of the historian Prof. Marin Drinov and the poet Petko Slaveikov, as well as collections from different churches and monasteries.

Two collections were formed in the National Library – consisting of Bulgarian and of Oriental documents respectively. Since its very beginning, the institution acquired the character of historical archives. The library collected materials from the Bulgarian state institutions and it played the role of a national state archive until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. After the Second World War, a special state archive was created. Since 1951 the library ceased to perform this function.

The laboratory for restoration and conservation in the library was established in 1956. The following year, a disinfection chamber for the documents was created. Not long afterwards, a special leaf-casting machine was made for the library.

In the beginning of 1960s the “Preservation of Manuscript and Documentary Heritage” division was created<sup>1</sup>.

The National Archives Fund Act<sup>2</sup> states that the St. St. Cyril and Methodius National Library stores historical documents. Under the Public Libraries Act<sup>3</sup>, it maintains unique collections of Bulgarian, Slavic, Oriental and other foreign-language manuscripts, archival documents, rare, valuable and old printed books. The library performs restoration and preservation of manuscripts, archival documents

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- 1 About the history of the National library:  
*Йорданов, Велико.* История на Народната библиотека в София: По случай 50-годишнината и 1879-1929. София: Държ. печатница, 1930.  
*Трашлева, Любомира.* Български исторически архив при Народната библиотека „Св. Св. Кирил и Методий“ - история и съвременност - Известия на държавните архиви, т. 80, 2001, 31–58. <http://electronic-library.org/articlars/Article%200036.html>  
*Калайджиева, Константинка.* Материали за историята на Народната библиотека: 1944-1978. София: Нар. библ. Св. св. Кирил и Методий, 2003.  
*Симеонова, Ружа.* Българската национална библиотека и нейните директори (1879-2009). София: ИК Христо Ботев, 2009.
  - 2 ЗАКОН ЗА НАЦИОНАЛНИЯ АРХИВЕН ФОНД. В сила от 29. 12. 2009 г., чл. 33, ал. 1. <http://www.archives.government.bg/images/1262688644.pdf>
  - 3 ЗАКОН ЗА ОБЩЕСТВЕНИТЕ БИБЛИОТЕКИ В сила от 06. 07. 2009 г., чл. 13, ал. 1, чл. 16 [www.lib.bg/docs/ZOB.doc](http://www.lib.bg/docs/ZOB.doc)

and old printed publications. Its employees conduct research in the field of book science, archives, restoration and preservation of book materials.

The “Preservation of Manuscript and Documentary Heritage” division is the structural unit that performs these functions according to the Library’s regulations. Various catalogues, descriptions and the Digital Library of the National Library website present the content of the collections.

I will briefly present to you all the four departments, which form the division – Manuscripts and Old printed Books Department, Bulgarian Historical Archives Department, Oriental Collections Department and Restorations Centre Department.

## **2. I BEGIN WITH THE MANUSCRIPTS AND OLD PRINTED BOOKS DEPARTMENT**

because the oldest documents in the Library are kept there. Our earliest dated manuscript is the Armenian Gospel from 966<sup>4</sup>. Enina Apostle was composed at the end of the 10<sup>th</sup> century or at beginning of 11<sup>th</sup> century. The Etropole Gospel from 1658 is distinguished by its precise calligraphy and the exquisite ornamentation.

About 1700 manuscripts are kept there. These are mainly books of ecclesiastic-dogmatic content intended for liturgical use and the everyday needs of monastic life. There is secular and educational literature, translated and in source language, including writings from Antiquity, the middle Ages, the Bulgarian Revival (historical works, textbooks, and dictionaries). The Slavonic handwritten collection contains Bulgarian, Serbian, Wallachian, Moldovan and Russian literary treasures.

In 2016, the International Exhibition “The World of Serbian Manuscripts” was presented at the Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts in Belgrade in the framework of the International Congress of Byzantine Studies. The National Library of Bulgaria was the only foreign institution that participated in the exhibition with its written heritage. *Serbian Illustrated Alexandria* or *Illustrated Alexandria of Sofia* dates back to the first half of the 15th century and tells a story about the life and conquests of Alexander the Great. This is the only preserved Slavonic copy of the ancient novel which includes numerous miniatures. The manuscript is part of the miscellany, which also contains the story of the Trojan War and fortune-tellings<sup>5</sup>.

The collection of Greek manuscripts, the majority of which were created for the needs of the church, shows the relationship between the Bulgarians and the Patriarchate of Constantinople.

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4 [http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page\\_id=252](http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page_id=252).

5 <http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?p=1936>.

The *Old printed, Rare and Valuable books* fund includes about 17,000 volumes of books and periodicals<sup>6</sup>.



Miladinov, Dimitar and Konstantin, ed. *Balgarski narodni pesni* (Bulgarian Folk Songs). Zagreb: Jakich, 1861

The fund is organized in the following collections:

I. Slavonic Cyrillic printed books of the 15<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> century, among which are the *Chasoslovetz* – (Book of Hours) of the printer Jacov Kraykov or *Јаков из Камене реке* (1566) and the first printed book containing new Bulgarian language elements – *Abagar* by Bishop Philip Stanislavov (1651),

III. Bulgarian rare and valuable books published after 1878,

IV. Foreign old printed, rare and valuable books,

V. Miniature editions.

The richest collection is Bulgarian Old printed books and Revival periodicals in the period 1806–1878. The earliest of them is *Nedelnic* of Bishop Sofroniy Vrachanski. The collection includes 1,670 titles in 8,486 volumes and thus fully reflects the total number of publications during the specified period.

So far we have digitized all the periodicals of the National Revival period and almost 30% of the Bulgarian old printed books.

<sup>6</sup> [http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page\\_id=254](http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page_id=254).

### 3. THE ORIENTAL COLLECTIONS DEPARTMENT

of the National Library in Sofia keeps the world's third most important archive collection of Ottoman documents, as well as exquisite Arabic, Ottoman and Persian manuscripts. A major task for the Oriental Department since its foundation has been the preservation of *arabographic* written heritage.

The archival documents have about 500,000<sup>7</sup> archive units. The collection of documents and manuscripts from the waqf libraries in Samokov, Sofia and Kyustendil stand out. The judicial archives, tax and property registers from Vidin's sanjak probably come from the library of the famous separatist Pasha Osman Pazvantoglu.

A huge amount of *arabographic* materials, chronologically and territorially diverse, entered the department from the archives in Istanbul in the late 1920s. They were sold to be used as scrap paper by the government of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk and were purchased by Bulgaria.

The majority of the Ottoman documents are organized into funds, which are named after the name of the settlement, connected with the document. The largest fund is of course the Fund of Constantinople. The documents refer to all provinces of the Empire for almost the entire period of its existence. They cover many subjects of political, civil and economic history.

Of great interest is the collection of tax registers called "Defterler".

The collection of Oriental handwritten books includes about 3800 volumes. About 80% of the manuscripts are transcripts in Arabic, the rest are in Ottoman and Persian languages. Islam studies in law and grammar predominate.



Timur-nama, Persian language, Poetry, NBKM OP 994

<sup>7</sup> [http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page\\_id=258](http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page_id=258).

The collection of *arabographic* books in the Oriental Department of the Library includes about 2000 volumes published in Europe and the Ottoman Empire and 48 titles of periodicals in Ottoman language published in the Bulgarian lands.

#### **4. BULGARIAN HISTORICAL ARCHIVES DEPARTMENT - SO CALLED BIA**

Today more than 900 personal and public archive funds are kept at BIA. Approximately 1 300 000 documents<sup>8</sup> have been processed and are accessible to researchers and to the public.

The “Portraits and Photos” collection in this department consists of over 80,000 photographic documents that illustrate not only specific periods of the Bulgarian history, but also follow the development of the photographic art in Europe and in the Balkans.

BIA preserves many historical sources about the development of Bulgarian education and culture.

They are a particularly important for the study of the economic development of the Balkans in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

A part of these historical evidences reflects the establishment of the third Bulgarian state after 1878. Among them are the archives of the National Assembly and of Prince Alexander I Battenberg.

BIA is key archives for the history of the liberation struggles of the Bulgarians in Macedonia and the Adrianople region.

It also preserves the personal archive funds of prominent Bulgarian writers and poets such as Ivan Vazov, Zahari Stoyanov, Pencho Slaveikov.

The revolutionary movement for national liberation is brilliantly reflected in these documents.

Vasil Levski, known as the Apostle of Freedom, is one of the most respected Bulgarian national heroes.

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8 [http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page\\_id=256](http://nationallibrary.bg/wp/?page_id=256).



Vasil Levski in the Second Bulgarian Legion (1867–1868) in Belgrade. NBKM C II 64

Almost all the documents written by him are stored at BIA. One of the most important documents written by Vasil Levski is known as Nareda – a statute of the workers for the liberation of Bulgaria from the sultan’s power. The document describes why and how Bulgarians could prepare a successful national revolution.

## 5. RESTORATION CENTRE DEPARTMENT

Among the main tasks of the structural unit are: a) Preservation and restoration of written heritage of scientific, historical and educational value. b) Conservation and restoration of archival materials.



In the Restoration centre. Photo by Ivayla Bogdanova

c) Introduction of new methods, technologies and materials, participation in international and national conferences, projects and programmes for restoration and conservation. d) Consultancy service for libraries, archives, community centres and museums about the preservation, conservation and restoration of movable monuments on paper and parchment.

The Anoxia system has recently become a priority in the activity of the department. It is a non-toxic disinfection and disinfection in a controlled oxygen-free environment. The oxygen is extracted to levels below 0.5% and replaced by inert gas (in this case nitrogen). At the same time, the temperature and relative humidity levels are controlled. Anoxia eliminates parasites by dehydration and suffocation. The method can be applied not only to paper, but also to other materials such as textiles, wood and leather.

## 6. THE READING ROOM NUMBER 1 “PROF. MARIN DRINOV”

is the place where the readers use the archive materials from the collections of the Department.



Photo by Lyubomir Georgiev

After this short presentation of the “Preservation of Manuscript and Documentary Heritage” division, I would like to highlight some challenges and opportunities ahead of us.



## **7. AMONG THE STRENGTHS OF OUR DIVISION ARE:**

It is the largest collection of Slavic manuscripts and old printed books in Bulgaria; of Bulgarian old printed books and periodicals from the epoch of the National Revival; of *arabographic* manuscripts and incunabula. Our Ottoman archives are the third most significant ones in the world. We preserve a unique and very impressive collection of Bulgarian archival documents and photographs.

We have:

Prominent professionals and researchers in the field of diplomatics, palaeography, book studies, Oriental studies, restoration and conservation.

Our disinfection and disinsection system – the Anoxia chamber – is the only one in the country.

Our division has representative function – we organise exhibitions, materials from our fund are displayed at public exhibitions and shown to prominent guests.

We also have educational functions – we deliver specialized lectures to students and guests of the Library.

## **8 THERE ARE ALSO CHALLENGES:**

The insufficient number of staff – we need an arabist, specialists in the fields of restoration of photographs and disinfection.

Need of providing better storage conditions for library documents.

The new normative documents for the development of the academic staff in Bulgaria do not correspond to the specifics of the work in the National Library.

There are no air conditioning exhibition showcases.

## **9. IN RESPONSE TO THE CHALLENGES:**

We appoint more specialists; involve trainees and volunteers, as well as external project specialists.

We implement the digitization programme and the Anoxia system as our priorities.

We place emphasis on research and scientific development.

We are looking for opportunities to improve the regulatory framework

We participate in joint projects to acquire funds for exhibitions and display cabinets.

With our team-focused efforts we can fulfil these goals.

