

The British Library Greek Collections

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The British Library, which has one of the most important collections outside Greece of material—printed, manuscript and sound—for the study of Hellenic culture, was established in 1972 by an act of Parliament and the Library came into operation from 1st July 1973. The Act brought together a number of different institutions - which included the National Reference Library of Science and Invention, the National Central Library, and the National Lending Library for Science and Technology (the centre for interlibrary lending, located at Boston Spa in Yorkshire). The best known component of the new national library consisted of the library departments of the British Museum.

The British Museum was founded in 1753 and its library collections included the private libraries of great collectors like Sir Hans Sloane, Sir Robert Cotton, as well as the Royal Library, assembled by various British monarchs. Various other collections were later added to these 'foundation' collections, notably the collection of King George III, the 'King's Library', which was given to the Museum by George IV in 1822. The library's already strong holdings of Greek material were greatly enriched in the 1830s by the purchase at auction of manuscripts and printed books from the collection of Frederick North, 5th Earl of Guilford. A great devotee of Greek and Italian culture, Guilford travelled widely in Europe and the Near East, and from 1815 he ardently promoted his scheme for the foundation of an Ionian university becoming, in 1824, the first chancellor when the university was inaugurated on Corfu. After his death, his library was broken up and sold in seven sales between 1828 and 1835. At the main auction of Guilford's manuscripts in December 1830 the British Museum bought thousands of items while at the sale in 1835 it purchased 627 modern Greek printed books and 43 oriental manuscripts. These purchases form by far the largest surviving single group of Guilford's collections, a group augmented by significant subsequent acquisitions.

Over the next hundred years the library grew into one of the largest in the world, acquiring material through legal deposit, donation, and international exchange.

Printed Collections

By 1844 the British Museum was buying recent Modern Greek books through Adolph Asher, its agent in Berlin. The acquisition of Modern Greek printed books has continued to the present.

Today, the Modern Greek Section acquires a wide range of monographs and serials published in Greece and Cyprus. Material is selected in the humanities and social sciences

subject areas to serve the needs of academic researchers and also, more generally, those of anybody with an interest in these countries. When available, English language editions of works are preferred.

The following subjects are collected extensively:

Greek and Cypriot archaeology and antiquities; Ancient Greek history and literature (translations of classical texts are acquired only if accompanied by substantial critical commentaries or if there is no other translation in the British Library collections); Byzantine and Modern Greek studies; Classical and Byzantine art and architecture, Modern Greek and Cypriot art and folk art; Modern Greek language and dialects; Modern Greek literature; Ancient Greek and Byzantine history; Modern history especially works on the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829), Second World War and the Civil War, the Greek dictatorship (1967-74), the Macedonian question; the history and politics of other Balkan countries and their relations with Greece, relations between Greece and Turkey, and Cyprus history; books on politics and international studies are acquired when their subject is the role of Greece in the Balkans, the Mediterranean, as a member of the European Union, and its relations to Turkey; works on the Cyprus question; social history and folklore; library history (especially catalogues of library collections in Greece and Cyprus); ancient and modern Greek theatre and cinema; Greek and Cypriot folk music; the history of education in Greece and Cyprus and its role during the Ottoman rule; English culture and civilization.

Works in the social sciences, including economics and economic history, sociology and education are acquired selectively and preference is given to works related to Greece and Cyprus. Theology and religious studies are also acquired selectively, preference being given to those examining Greek Orthodox Church history and dogma.

The following types of material are generally excluded: science and technology, practical books, especially manuals; low level treatment of any subject; children's books (unless they are reworkings of folk tales or include illustrations of merit); general theology.

Areas of particular strength include:

- the Greek War of Independence (1821-1829);
- the Civil War (1946-1949) and the political history of post-War Greece;
- Modern Greek art and literature;
- material printed in two former British dominions, the Ionian Islands (1814-1864) and Cyprus (1878-1960);
- Cypriot folk poetry (the work of the ποιηταριδες) possibly the best collection in the world, acquired during the colonial period (1878-1960) and also a unique collection of anti-British propaganda pamphlets distributed clandestinely during the 'troubles' in 1955-59.

A catalogue of the Modern Greek printed books in the Guilford collection is currently in preparation.

Manuscript Collections

The British Library's collection of manuscripts of Greek texts range from the third century B.C. to the present. It includes some of the most important landmarks in the history of the book such as the Codex Sinaiticus, the earliest surviving copy of the complete New Testament and parts of the Old Testament (middle of the 4th century), and the Codex Alexandrinus, one of the three earliest manuscripts of the whole Bible in Greek (first half of the 5th century).

The British Library is currently leading a major collaborative project to reproduce the Codex Sinaiticus in digital form. The Project will create a 'virtual' re-unification of the parts of the manuscript held in four different libraries and will offer access to a worldwide audience. For more information about the Codex Sinaiticus see: <http://www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/themes/asianafricanman/codex.html>)

In 1999 the British Library published the first volume of a Summary Catalogue of Greek Manuscripts. It has over 600 entries describing all the manuscripts in the Arundel, Burney, Harley, King's Lansdowne, Royal, Stowe, and Yates Thompson collections, and the Greek MSS added to the Additional and Egerton Manuscripts since 1925. They include codices of Biblical, classical, patristic, and liturgical texts as well as papers of scholars relating to Greek texts and documents in Greek relating to Greek history. When its publication is complete, the catalogue will include all the Library's manuscript holdings in the Greek language, with the exception of the collections of papyri and ostraca.

In 2000-2003 the Library undertook a project to catalogue its holding of over 600 manuscripts from Lord Guilford's collection, making information about the contents of these manuscripts fully accessible for the first time. These catalogue records are now available through the Manuscripts Online Catalogue <http://molcat.bl.uk>.

Sound Archive Collections

Various categories of Greek music are represented in the collections of the Sound Archive. They include over 500 discs of Ancient Greek music, Byzantine hymns, folk music, and 'laika' (popular) songs. Rebetiko, the music of the urban subculture of the first half of the 20th century, and rebetiko in America, developed by the Greek minority, are well represented. There are also early recordings of music in the Asia Minor style and the Café-Aman by singers such as Rita Abatzi, Roza Eskenazi, and the violin player Dimitris Semsis or Salonikios (1883-1950), "the best violin in the Balkans". The later 'bouzouki-centred' rebetiko is also well represented, with the composer and singer Stellakis Perpiniadis, and Vassilis Tsitsanis, the major figure of post-war rebetika. Releases of the immigrants in America since the beginning of the century, which have formed a separate discography and section of rebetiko, are

represented in our collection of 78rpm discs by recordings of Marika Papagika, Victoria Hazan and Virginia Magidou. 'Laiko' and 'entechno' song is featured with discs of Stelios Kazantzidis and music by composers like Mikis Theodorakis, Stauros Xarchakos, and Manos Chatzidakis. Classical composers such as Nikos Skalkottas, Manoles Kalomires, and Demetres Metropoulos are also well represented. The collection also includes unpublished material such as field recordings of Greek folk music and dance recorded in Tsakonia in 1988 as well as field recordings of marriage songs and interviews made on the island of Ios in 1990.

Music Collections

The Music Collections have music scores by Greek composers, ranging from Nikos Skalkottas, Manoles Kalomires, and Demetres Metropoulos, to Mikis Theodorakis, and Manos Chatzidakis.

Greek material can also be found in the Map Library (the major cartographic collection in the British Isles which offers universal coverage), and the Newspaper Library.

The British Library's website provides online access to its catalogues and contains a wealth of information about its collections, reader services, events and exhibitions. See: <http://www.bl.uk/index.shtml>

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