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One Library at a Time: The Vatican Apostolic Library

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Fig.1. 2010 booklet titled “Reopening of the Vatican Apostolic Library.” Stamp affixed to booklet features a medallion depicting Pope Sixtus V. [Sc1451]

In this second installment of “One Library at a Time,” we will talk about one of the most important and historical libraries in the world—the Vatican Apostolic Library. There are many philatelic issues and related material produced in honor of this institution. In this article some of them will be shown.

The Vatican Apostolic Library (fig 1), more commonly known as the Vatican Library, or informally as the Vat, is the library of the Holy See, located in Vatican City. Formally established in 1475, although it is much older, it is one of the oldest libraries in the world and contains one of the most significant collections of historical texts. It has 75,000 codices from throughout history, as well as 1.1 million printed books, which include some 8,500 incunabula.

Historical periods

Scholars traditionally divided the history of the library into four periods, Pre-Lateran, Lateran, Avignon,

and Vatican.

Pre-Lateran (fig 2) The Pre-Lateran period, comprising the initial days of the library, dated from the earliest days of the Church. *cont. on pg 4*



Fig.2. Vatican City 1984. With the decline of the empire, Roman libraries were largely destroyed. Preservation passed to religious institutions. In the 4th century Pope Damasus founded a library in Rome, transferred in the 7th century to Laterano. [Sc751]

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Only a handful of volumes survive from this period, though some are very significant (fig 3, right).



Fig.4. Italy 1924. Archbasilica of Saint John Lateran, adjacent to the Lateran Palace. [ScB21]

Lateran (fig 4) The Lateran era began when the library moved to the Lateran Palace and lasted until the end of the 13th century and the reign of Pope Boniface VIII



Fig.5. Vatican City 1998. Pope Boniface VIII, se-tenant with a label featuring his papal coat of arms, from "The Popes and the Holy Years, 1300-1525" series. [Sc1065]

(fig 5), who died in 1303. By that time he possessed one of the most notable collections of illuminated manuscripts in Europe (fig 6, right). However, in that year, the Lateran Palace was burned and the collection plundered by Philip IV of France.



Fig.7. Vatican City 1998. Clement VI, an Avignon Pope, se-tenant with a label featuring his papal coat of arms, from "The Popes and the Holy Years, 1300-1525" series. [Sc1066]

Avignon The Avignon period was during the Avignon Papacy (fig 7), when seven successive popes resided in Avignon, France. This period saw a significant growth in book collection and record keeping by the popes in Avignon (fig 8) between the death of Boniface and the 1370s when the Papacy returned to Rome (fig 9, right).



Fig.8. France 2010. Fort Saint-André, near Avignon, containing the Benedictine Abbey of Saint-André. [Sc3796]

Vatican In 1451, bibliophile Pope Nicholas V (fig 10, right) sought to establish a public library at the Vatican, in part to re-establish Rome as a destination for



Fig.3. Cassino 10.6.1988. Cancel: Abbey of Montecassino. Many manuscripts have reached the Vatican Library from the Abbey of Montecassino.



Fig.6. Papal States 1869, Anagni to Rome. "Anagni the city of the Popes" is the location of the Boniface VIII Palace and is also famous for the "insult of Anagni." With Boniface VIII the library became increasingly enriched with illuminated manuscripts, so much so that the pontifical collection was considered the most important in Europe at the beginning of the fourteenth century.



Fig.9. Vatican City 1977. The 600th anniversary of the return of Pope Gregory XI from Avignon to Rome. [Sc613-614]



Fig.10. Vatican City 1998. Pope Nicholas V, se-tenant with a label featuring his papal coat of arms, from "The Popes and the Holy Years, 1300-1525" series. [Sc1069]



Fig.11. Vatican City 1972. Two stamps from the set of five marking International Book Year. L.90, Second Epistle of St. John, c. 14th century [Sc523], and L.130, Letter of St. Paul to the Romans, c. 14th century. [Sc525]



Fig.12. Vatican City 1975. Maximum FDC card marking the 5th centenary of the Apostolic Library and featuring Pope Sixtus IV. [Sc583]

scholarship. Nicholas combined some 350 Greek, Latin and Hebrew codices (fig 11, previous page) inherited from his predecessors with his own collection and extensive acquisitions, among them manuscripts from the imperial Library of Constantinople. Pope Nicholas also expanded his collection by employing Italian and Byzantine scholars to translate the Greek classics into Latin for his library.



Fig.13 Vatican City 1975. Maximum FDC card marking the 5th centenary of the Apostolic Library and featuring the investiture of the first librarian Bartolomeo Sacchi by Pope Sixtus IV. [Sc582]

The knowledgeable Pope already encouraged the inclusion of pagan classics. Importantly, during this period Nicolas saved many Greek works and writings he had collected while traveling. In 1455 the collection had grown to 1200 books, of which 400 were in Greek. Nicholas died in 1455. In 1475 his successor Pope Sixtus IV (fig 12) founded the Palatine Library. *cont. on next page*



Fig.14 Vatican City 1997. Latin and Greek classics: L.500 Aristotle's De Historia Animalum; L.750 Bacchus riding dragon from Metamorphoses by Ovid; L.1250 General haranguing his soldiers from Iliad by Homer; L.2000 Hannibal leaving Carthage from Ab Urbe Condita by Titus Livius. [Sc1041-1044]

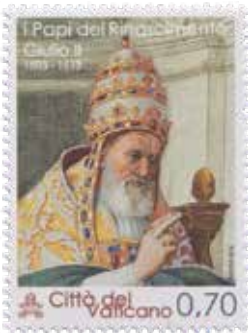


Fig.15. Vatican City 2013. Pope Julius II from "The Popes of the Renaissance" set. [Sc1539]



Fig.16. Italy 1985. Pope Sixtus V (1520-1590). [Sc1627]



Fig.17. Vatican City 1984. Apostolic Library from the Cultural and Scientific Institutions of the Holy See set. [Sc735]



Fig.20. Vatican City 2010. Pope Leo XIII (1810-1903), bicentenary of his birth. [Sc1445]

During Pope Sixtus IV's papacy, acquisitions were made in theology, philosophy and artistic literature. The number of manuscripts is variously counted as 3,500 in 1475 or 2,527 in 1481, when librarian Bartolomeo Platina (Sacchi) (fig 13, previous page) produced a signed listing. At the time it was the largest collection of books in the Western world (fig 14, previous page).

Pope Julius II (fig 15) commissioned the expansion of the building. Around 1587, Pope Sixtus V (fig 16) commissioned the architect Domenico Fontana to construct a new building for the library, which is still used today (fig 17). After this it became known as

the Vatican Library. During the Counter-Reformation (figs 18/19, right), access to the library's collections was limited following the introduction of the Index of banned books. Scholars' access to the library was restricted. Pope Leo XIII (fig 20) formally reopened the

library to scholars in 1883.

Location and Building

The Library is located inside the Vatican Palace, and the entrance is through the Belvedere Courtyard (fig 21, right). When Pope Sixtus V (1585-1590) commissioned the expansion and the new building of the Library, he had a three-story wing built right across Bramante's Cortile del Belvedere, thus bisecting it and changing Bramante's

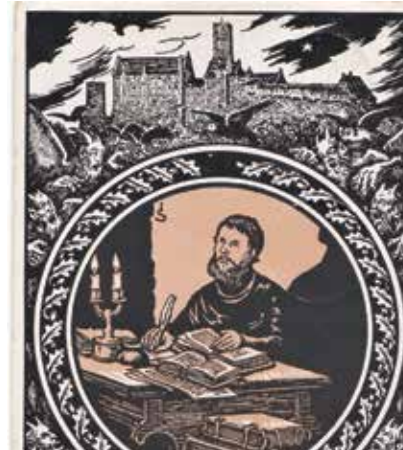


Fig.18/19. Left and below. German Martin Luther postcard, printed to private order. Imprint on address side of card, at upper left: Official Postcard of the Wartburg City of Eisenach for the Luther Memorial Fair 4 & 5 May 1921. Cancel on 30pf Germania is accompanied by image of Luther. Bottom purple imprint: The Association of the Wartburg City Eisenach.



Fig.21. Above. Vatican City 1978-Postal stationery: Courtyard of the Belvedere.

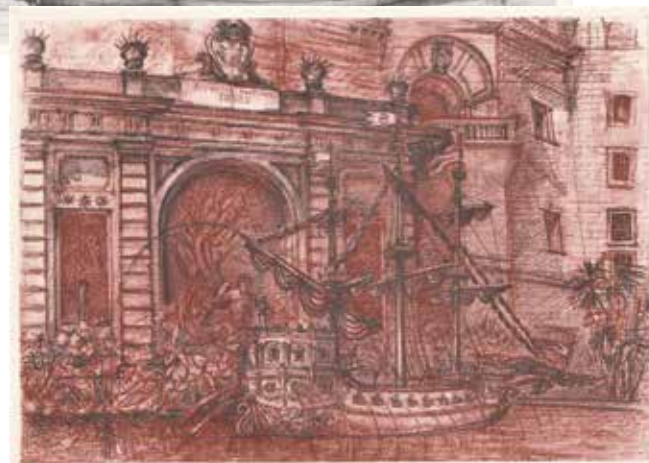


Fig.22. Right. Vatican City 1978-Postal stationery: Fountain of the Galea.

work significantly. At the bottom of a grand staircase, a statue of Hippolytus decorates the La Galea entrance hall (fig 22, previous page). In the first semi-basement there is a papyrus room and a storage area for manuscripts. The



Fig.24. Vatican City 2009. World Book Day: € 0.60 Old books. [Sc1415]



Fig.25. Top, USA 1982. Library of Congress 20 cent. Bottom, same stamp with off-center perforations. [Sc2004]

1939, using the Library of Congress (fig 25) card catalogue system. Ehrle also set up a program to take photographs of important or rare works (fig 26, right). The library catalogue was further updated by Rev. Leonard E. Boyle when it was computerized in the early 1990s (fig 27, right).

Collections

While the Vatican Library has always included Bibles, canon law texts and theological works (fig 28, right), it specialized in secular books from the beginning. Its collection of Greek and Latin classics was at the center of the revival of classical culture during the Renaissance age. The oldest documents in the library date back to the first century. The library was founded primarily as a manuscript library, a fact reflected in the comparatively high ratio of manuscripts to printed works in its collection (fig 29, right).

first floor houses the restoration laboratory, and the photographic archives are on the second floor. The Library has 42 kilometers (26 mi) of shelving. The Library closed for renovations on July 2007 and reopened September 2010. The three year, 9-million-euro renovation involved the complete shutdown of the library to install climate-controlled rooms (fig 23).

Catalogue

The collection was originally organized through notebooks used to index the manuscripts (fig 24). As the collection grew to more than a few thousand, shelf lists were used. The first modern catalogue system was put in place under Father Franz Ehrle between 1927 and



Fig.23. Vatican City 1986. UNESCO Vatican world heritage city. [Sc773]



Fig.26. Vatican City 2002. 150th anniversary of papal states stamps. Antique prints from the Vatican library: € 0.52 Via Cassia [Sc1222]; € 1.30 Vatican walls. [Sc1223]



Fig.27. Vatican City 1986. Vatican Library meter stamp.



Fig.28. Vatican City 2008. Postal stationery: Synod of Bishops. Gospel according to Mark. The image is taken from the illuminated manuscript "Evangelario di Federico da Montefeltro" from the 15th century.



Fig.29. Vatican City 1981. Maximum FDC, L.600 Bimillennial of the death of Virgil. [Sc686]

cont. on next page

Such printed books as have made their way into the collection are intended solely to facilitate the study of the much larger collection of manuscripts. The collection also includes 330,000 Greek, Roman, and papal coins and medals. Every year about 6,000 new books are



Fig.31. Belgium 1959. Semi-postal set with surtax for the Royal Library of Brussels: f.1.50+0.50 Maximilian I. [ScB649]



Fig.32. Liechtenstein 1970. Manesse Codex. [Sc471c].



Fig.34. Finland 1990. Queen Regina. [Sc815]

library (mostly amassed by her generals as booty from Hapsburg, Prague and German cities during the Thirty Years' War) was bought by Pope Alexander VIII on her death in 1689. It represented, for all practical purposes, the entire royal library of Sweden at the time. If it had remained where it was in Stockholm (fig 35, right), it

acquired. The library was enriched by several bequests and acquisitions over the centuries. In 1623, the hereditary Palatine Library of Heidelberg (fig 30, right) containing about 3,500 manuscripts was given to the Vatican by Maximilian I, Duke of Bavaria (fig 31), who had just acquired it as booty in the Thirty Years' War. The gift was in thanks for the adroit political maneuvers of Pope Gregory XV that had sustained Maximilian in his contests with Protestant candidates for the electoral seat. A token 39 of the Heidelberg manuscripts were sent to Paris in 1797 and were returned to Heidelberg at the Peace of Paris in 1815. A gift from Pope Pius VII of 852 others was made in 1816 to the University of Heidelberg, including the Codex Manesse (fig 32). Aside from that, the Palatine Library remains in the

Vatican Library to this day. In 1657, the manuscripts of the Dukes of Urbino (fig 33, right) were acquired. In 1661 the Greek scholar Leo Allatius was made librarian. Queen Christina of Sweden's (fig 34) important



Fig.30. Germany 1932. Postcard printed to private order. Upper left: Heidelberg with bridge over the Neckar and castle; text: 9th Federal Day, 38th German Philatelic Day, Heidelberg 29 July - 1 August 1932. Special cancel at top right: Heidelberg with castle view; text: 9th Federal Day, 38th Philatelic Day. Vertical text reading up: Meeting of the international postage stamp dealer club. Same text in French reading down.



Fig.33. Italy 2008. Urbino, a UNESCO World Heritage Site OFF CENTER. [Sc2908]



Fig.35. Sweden 1998. Stockholm Royal Palace. [Sc2287]



Fig.36. Vatican City 1972. Stamp from the set of five marking International Book Year. Gospel of St. Matthew, c.13th century. [Sc521]



Fig.37. Vatican City 2002. Pontifical academy: € 0.77 Clement XI. [Scott.1214a]

would all have been lost in the destruction of the royal palace by fire in 1697. Among the most famous holdings of the library is the *Codex Vaticanus Graecus* 1209, the oldest known nearly complete manuscript of the Bible (fig 36, previous page). *The Secret History of Procopius* was discovered in the library and published in 1623. Pope Clement XI (fig 37, previous page) sent scholars into the Orient to bring back manuscripts, and is generally accepted as the founder of the

Oriental section.

From 1700 to today, many other important collections have entered the Vatican Library,

which we will possibly discuss on another occasion. A School of Library Science is also associated with the Vatican Library (fig 38, right).



Fig.39. Vatican City 1984. Cultural and scientific institutions of the Holy See: L.450 the Vatican Apostolic Archive, known until October 2019 as the Vatican Secret Archive. [Sc734]

Vatican Secret Archives (Vatican Apostolic Archives)

The Vatican Secret Archives, located in Vatican City, (fig 39) is the central archive for all of the acts promulgated by the Holy See, as well as the state papers, correspondence, papal account books, and many other documents which the church has accumulated over the centuries. In the 17th century, under the orders of Pope Paul V, the Secret Archives were separated from the Vatican Library, where scholars had some very limited



Fig.38. Vatican City 2001- Meter Stamp BAV 2.



Fig.40. Vatican City 1980 Aérogramme. Vatican Secret Archive. L.220 (Ini AG18).

access to them, and remained absolutely closed to outsiders until 1881, when Pope Leo XIII opened them to researchers, more than a thousand of whom now examine its documents each year (fig 40).

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- La Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana*. Jaca Book 2012.
- Various Authors – *Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana* Firenze, Nardini 1985
- Wikipedia
- Claudio Grande. “In the Library” (*Thematic Philately*, ECTP Verona 2019)

New Issues of Graphic Interest

Joseph Sullivan

1. Australia, 20 August 2020: Centenary of the Princess Highway is celebrated by a set of four stamps featuring vintage travel posters that celebrate locations along the Highway: Mount Gambier (designed by John C. Goodchile, c.1930), Geelong (designed by James Northfield, c.1930), Melbourne (designed by Percy Trompf, c.1940) and Sydney (designed by Richard Ashton, c.1940). Multicolor.

