The British Library's Coptic manuscripts collection[*]

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Abstract

An overview of the British Library's Coptic manuscript holdings, providing snapshots of recent initiatives that have included digitisation of Coptic material, and collaborative research.

Keywords

Manuscripts, Papyri, Coptic papyri, Palimpsests

The British Library's Coptic collection comprises approximately 1,600 manuscripts written in the Sahidic and Boharic dialects, with some going as far back as the early centuries of the Christian era. The collection was one of the earliest to reach Europe, and includes a broad range of texts, on papyrus, paper, leather and vellum.

For additional information on the Library's Coptic holdings, please refer to the collection guide: [https://www.bl.uk/collection-guides/coptic-collections]

Coptic papyri

Invariably written in the Sahidic dialect, the Coptic papyri constitute about a third of the entire collection, and abound in religious texts as well as lay material, including financial and legal documents, and letters. The collection was assembled over many years starting in the 19th century. Among its staunch builders was Sir Ernest A.T. Wallis Budge, who in the late 19th century acquired

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a large share of the library of the White Monastery of Shenoute at Atripe (Athribis), along with substantial material from the monasteries of the Wadi al-Natrun and the Fayyum. Undoubtedly, Budge's most valuable acquisition were the papyri manuscripts he obtained in 1895 and 1906, in the monastery at Deir-el Bahri near Jeme (known in Arabic today as Medinet Habu), an ancient Coptic enclave near modern Luxor, Egypt. Another significant input of Coptic papyri came from Reverend Henry Stobart who in 1857 presented the collection he had acquired during his time in Egypt to the British Museum.

Noteworthy Coptic papyri holdings:

- Or 4926 (known also as Or 4920) – Egypt, 4th century A.D.; contains fragments of early Christian Gnostic texts
- Or 9271 – Egypt, 4th or 5th century A.D.; the oldest extant Coptic papyrus of Didache 10. 3 b-12. 2 a
- Or 7558 [89] [93] [150]) – 3 papyrus fragments, Egypt, 6th or 7th century A.D.; belong to the earliest known manuscript of the Coptic Life of Aaron.

Digitisation

Only a very small number of manuscripts with Coptic texts (some held in the Library's Western Heritage Collection) have so far been digitised and are accessible to users and researchers. These include:

Papyrus 32, Official notice and accounts, Greek and Coptic
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=21&ref=Papyrus_32]

Papyrus 98, Greek and Old Coptic Horoscope with Hyperides' Funeral Oration over Leosthenes
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=24&ref=Papyrus_98]

Papyrus 1442, containing a tax register from early Arab Egypt, Greek and Coptic
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?ref=Papyrus_1442]

Papyrus 1728, Arbitration and Anthology of poems, Greek and Coptic
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=41&ref=Papyrus_1728]

Papyrus 1745, Arbitration and Anthology with miscellaneous poems, Greek and Coptic
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=42&ref=Papyrus_1745]

Papyrus 2544, Letter to Paieous Concerning a Debtor, Greek and Coptic
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=49&ref=Papyrus_2544]

Or 6801, Miscellany in honour of St Mercurius
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=19&ref=Or_6801]

Or 7029, Miscellany including the Life of Aaron of Philae
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=20&ref=Or_7029]

Or 5525, Lists in Coptic, fragments from the Cairo Genizah. Egypt (part of the Hebrew collection)
[http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=16&ref=Or_5525]

Or 5526, Fragments in Arabic and Coptic from the Cairo Genizah, Egypt (part of the Hebrew collection) [http://www.bl.uk/manuscripts/FullDisplay.aspx?index=17&ref=Or_5526]

Heritage Made Digital

In 2017, the British Library launched Heritage Made Digital (HMD) – a major programme aimed at digitising parts of its collection that have never been made available online before, or are underrepresented in its online collections. With Heritage Made Digital the British Library started to fill in gaps in its digital resources, and to make what is available online more reflective of the breadth of its collections overall. As part of this noteworthy initiative, it was decided to include a small selection of Christian Orient manuscripts, i.e. Armenian, Coptic and Syriac items.

The first phase of the Christian Orient strand began in spring 2019 when 18 Coptic manuscripts mostly codices were scoped for the project. Among these was Or 7594, a manuscript dated 350 A.D. that contains the biblical books Deuteronomy and Jonah, and Or 9271 mentioned earlier. To-date, the conservation assessment of the material has been completed. Imaging began in January this year however, due to the Corona pandemic it has been suspended until the British Library's building at St Pancras in London re-opens. The total number of digital images to be obtained from the Coptic tranche is expected to be 3722.

Recruitment of a cataloguer to create records of selected material, and to scope additional Coptic manuscripts (including papyri) for digitisation, has been unsuccessful. Due to the present situation, recruitment has been deferred until 2021.

Research on Coptic manuscript holdings

Between 2015 and 2018, Dr Serena Ammirati, Assistant Professor of Palaeography at the University of Roma Tre, Rome, Italy, paid several visits to the British Library in order to examine and research specific Coptic manuscripts. At the time, she was collaborating on an ERC project called "REDHIS, Rediscovering the hidden structure. A new appreciation of Juristic texts and Patterns of thought in Late Antiquity", coordinated by Professor Dario Mantovani from the Department of Law in Pavia. Among other lines of investigation, the project pursued the study of the writings of Roman jurists (Latin or Greek-Latin) transmitted via papyrus and parchment fragments of archaeological provenance, dated to the period between the 2nd and 6th centuries A.D.

Dr Ammirati was particularly interested in the British Library manuscript Or 4717 (4) and (5), also published as P. Lond. Copt. 48 and 55. Manuscript Or 4717 (5) consists of Coptic Gospel fragments that were found in Fayyum, Egypt, and date from 400-599 A.D. Among these fragments housed in glass panels, are several palimpsests bearing, under the Coptic script, Greek and Latin scripts and texts that had been previously unedited.

In order to decipher and transcribe the Latin texts hidden beneath the Coptic script, the British Library's Imaging Scientist carried out multispectral photography on fragments 5b (left and right) and 5c belonging to Or 4717. Thanks to this advanced technology it was possible to prove that Or 4717 (5) was amongst the most important pieces in the corpus of researched texts, since it contained previously unknown works of Latin jurists, or only known through later compilations. Dr Ammirati's publication on the project can be found at the following link:

[https://www.academia.edu/40480258/New_developments_on_Latin_legal_papyri_the_ERC_project_REDHIS_and_the_membra_disiecta_of_a_lost_legal_manuscript]

Collaboration with researchers working on the Coptic Old Testament project at the Göttingen Academy of Sciences and Humanities in Germany, has resulted in the creation and uploading earlier this year, of a significant Coptic collection item on the British Library website.

This relates to British Library Add MS 17183, a manuscript dating from around 7th century A.D. containing Coptic biblical texts of the Old Testament. Three centuries later, the manuscript had Syriac text written over the original script. In the summer of 2019, a small section from this palimpsest manuscript underwent multispectral photography in the Library's multispectral studio, in order to unveil the concealed Coptic text from the Book of Ruth. This novel imaging technology has enabled Ms Theresa Kohl, the researcher of the manuscript, to extract new information and to transcribe the text. The collection item she has since created contains spectral images as well as a transcription. It is accessible at this link: [https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/coptic-old-testament-book-of-ruth]