
PRESENTING THE COLLECTION

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CHRISTIAN MANUSCRIPTS OF THE EAST IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF RUSSIA*

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The history of the formation of oriental manuscript funds starts with the first days of the existence of the National Library of Russia (NLR, formerly the Imperial Public Library — IPL, and the M. E. Saltykov-Shchedrin State Public Library), which was founded in 1795 by the decree of Catherine the Great [1]. At that time the IPL had 15 manuscripts in oriental languages, previously belonging to the library of the brothers Zaluskiĭ, which was taken from Warsaw by A. V. Suvorov, at the Empress's order. In 1923, all books and manuscripts of this library were returned to Poland, including the only Christian manuscript in Syrian, the contents of which we can only judge by its description given in French in the first printed catalogue of the IPL oriental fund in 1852 [2]. It follows from the description that the manuscript was “La Messe des Apôtres” with Latin translation.

By the time the “Manuscript Depot” was created in 1805, the IPL held, along with the 15 mentioned manuscripts, more than 140 oriental items from the collection of P. P. Dubrovskii, the secretary of the Russian embassy in France. Among them were also several Christian manuscripts: seven Coptic, eight Ethiopian, two Persian, one Armenian, one Georgian, one Syrian and one Arabic, and also four Chinese block-prints with works by Catholic authors. Thirty oriental manuscripts were acquired by Dubrovskii from the library of Saint-Germain Abby. Dubrovskii's collection also contains 900 Western European, 50 old Russian and 20 Greek codices, and a huge amount of archive materials: documents and autographs by historical figures [3]. Dubrovskii did not know oriental languages, and probably did not collect oriental manuscripts specially. The question “Why do around 15% of the codes in his collection materials consist of materials in oriental languages?” should probably be answered as follows. In France at the end of the

18th century, there were a large number of manuscripts of oriental origin in circulation, and Dubrovskii's collection reflected the nature of the book market.

Evidently, we can say the same thing about the Russian book market in the early 19th century. In Russia there are also many manuscripts available from the East (mainly in Arabic script, and also Chinese and Indian). Thus, the collection of the director of the Kolyvano-Voskresenskii factories in Barnaul (Altai), P. K. Frolov bought in 1817 consists of 160 Slavonic-Russian manuscripts, together with four Greek and 65 manuscripts in oriental languages, of which eleven were Christian: five Georgian, two Armenian, two Arabic and two in Tatar [4].

An active role in compiling the library collections was taken by church figures. In 1831, archimandrite Pëtr (Kamenskii), the head of the 10th Russian Orthodox mission in China, was presented with 48 Chinese, Manchurian and Mongolian manuscripts and block-prints. The majority of them contain translations of works by Christian authors, both Orthodox and Catholic.

The IPL funds demonstrate a significant rise of interest in Biblical studies as well as a wide range of issues relating to a thorough investigation of ancient manuscripts. In 1857, German Byzantine expert Professor K. Tischendorf proposed for the library to buy manuscripts that he acquired during travels through the Middle East in 1844 and 1853. By request of the director of the library M. A. Korf, Alexander II allocated funds to buy this collection and finance a third archaeological expedition by Tischendorf in 1859. In total, Tischendorf's collection contains over 200 (often fragmentary) old handwritten books, including palimpsests, in Greek (78), Coptic (39), Syrian (26), Ethiopian (12), Hebrew (59), Arabic (2), Georgian and Slavonic languages [5].

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