
PRESENTING THE COLLECTIONS

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ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF RUSSIA

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On May 27, 1995, the National Library of Russia (formerly the Imperial Public Library) has celebrated its 200th anniversary [1]. The idea of organising a state book storehouse for common people belonged to Catherine the Great. It was Catherine who approved the project after which architect E. Sokolov built the library in St. Petersburg at the junction of Nevsky Prospekt and Sadovaya Street. Even the formation of the library's stocks was connected with Catherine the Great. As early as 1795 she ordered Generalissimo A. V. Suvorov to bring from Warsaw the collection of Zalusski brothers. (Later, in 1923, all the books from this collection were returned to Poland. Most of them perished during the Second World War, among them 17 manuscripts in various Oriental languages).

The manuscript department ("Depot of manuscripts") of the Public Library was established on March 14, 1805. This event was connected with the acquisition of the collection made by P. P. Dubrovsky, a former official at Russian embassy in France. He brought from Europe about 900 Western, 103 Oriental, 50 Old Russian and 20 Greek codices, as well as numerous archive materials. The latter included documents and autographs of many famous people [2].

The Oriental part of the collection acquired by Dubrovsky (later he became the first curator of the "Depot of manuscripts") mainly came from the library of the Saint Germain Abbey. There are some rare and lavishly decorated manuscripts, the most interesting among them being the "Purple Qur'ān" copied in the 12th—13th centuries in North Africa. The text is written in silver ink on purple-dyed paper (the colour of the pigment is close to purple, though its spectral characteristics are different).

The official opening of the Imperial Public Library took place on January 14, 1814, in the reign of Alexander I. Thus, the grandson had realised the idea of his great grandmother. The first considerable acquisition of the new library was the collection of 40 Oriental manuscripts which belonged to P. K. Frolov, director of the factories in Barnaul (Altay). This collection (including, besides Oriental manuscripts, 160 Old Russian codices) was bought by the library in 1817. Among the most important manuscripts of this collection the anthology of Arabic verse made by the order of the Mamluk Sultan Sha'bān II (not later than 1376)

and the *Kulliyāt* by 'Alī-Shīr Nawā'ī with 25 miniatures are to be named.

None of the three manuscript-collectors whose books formed the foundation of the manuscript department of the library, namely, Zalusski (Poland), Dubrovsky (most of his books were acquired in France) and Frolov (Russia) had any special interest in Oriental manuscripts. Nevertheless, the rate of Oriental materials in their collections was comparatively high (Dubrovsky — 10%, Frolov — 20%). It means that at the end of the 18th—beginning of the 19th century numerous Oriental manuscripts — Chinese, Indian, but most of all in Arabic script — were already coming to Europe and in particular to Russia. Many of the subjects of the Russian Empire were familiar with different Oriental languages. At the same time Russia has common borders with a number of Eastern countries and there were constant trade and diplomatic relations between Russia and these countries.

In 1828 a collection of lavishly decorated Persian manuscripts was purchased in Ardabil for the Imperial Public Library by General-Lieutenant P. K. Suchtelen who brought it to St. Petersburg. These manuscripts originate from the *waqf* of Sheikh Šafī Mosque in Ardabil and include 166 literary and historical works which were selected with the assistance of the mosque's *mufī* [3]. It is interesting that the manuscripts acquired by Suchtelen belonged once to Shah 'Abbās I.

Soon after 1829 the library was enriched with 148 manuscripts from Ahaltsihe (Georgia), with 42 manuscripts from Erzerum and 66 manuscripts from Adrianople (Edirne). In 1829 18 illuminated manuscripts were presented to Nicholas I by Khusraw-Mirzā, the grandson of Faḥ 'Alī-shāh, who brought them to St. Petersburg as a reparation for the murder of A. S. Griboedov, Russian ambassador to Teheran.

In 1831 archimandrite Peter (P. Kamensky), the head of the tenth Russian Orthodox mission in China, presented to the library 48 block-prints in Chinese, Manchu and Mongolian languages.

In the mid-19th century it was decided to make a catalogue of the Oriental manuscripts. The project directed by Academician B. A. Dorn resulted in the publication of this catalogue in 1852 [4]. The descriptions of 900 manuscripts