

The Libraries of the Sacro Speco and Santa Scolastica in Subiaco: dispersals and transfers¹

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With the libraries in Subiaco, as for many others, it is possible to reconstruct their history by using archival sources and by examining the marks and other evidence found in the surviving copies themselves – bindings, ownership inscriptions, sequences of shelfmarks.

The barbarian invasions which overwhelmed the monasteries between the 7th and 10th centuries led to the devastation and abandonment of the Sacro Speco and Santa Scolastica, and the dispersal of their book collections. There was also probably a huge fire which burnt down the monastery at some point in the 10th century². It is also widely believed that many codices went with the monks when, in 1089 and again in 1418, they moved to Melk in order to replace the local Benedictine community there.

From the 11th century onwards, thanks to a number of enlightened abbots, the library was enriched with numerous acquisitions and came to contain about 10,000 volumes. By the end of the 14th century the two monastic libraries held a remarkable number of manuscripts, which drew the attention of famous personages and excellent scholars, who also came to see the collection in person³.

From the 15th through to the 19th century, the library received many gifts to increase its collections but there were dispersals too, also as a result of the neglect or removals of books carried out by certain commendatory abbots, actions which went unpunished. One 16th-century example is the Benedictine scholar Costantino Caetani⁴ who filched entire codices, fragments and copies of the books found in Subiaco which today can still be seen in the collection of the Caetani family, now held by the Biblioteca Alessandrina in Rome. We also know of several copies originally in the Subiaco collections which became part of the Chigi family collections and the library of the Propaganda Fide in Rome⁵.

¹ Maria Antonietta Orlandi, *Cultura e spiritualità a Subiaco nel Medioevo. La produzione libraria sublacense nei secoli X-XIII*, Subiaco, Tipografia Editrice Santa Scolastica, 2007, pp. 41-45.

² *Regesto sublacense del sec. XI*, ed. L. Allodi-G. Levi, Roma 1885, doc. 17, 46-47.

³ On Pietro da Noceto (1397-1467), see M. Accarini, *Pietro da Noceto segretario di papa Niccolò V*, in "Parma nell'arte", 15 (1983-84), pp. 13-20.

⁴ *Relazione*, Arca LXIII, 9. Costantino Caetani was a Benedictine scholar (Siracusa 1560 - Roma 1650). He was the Custodian of the Vatican Library and wrote prolifically on religious subjects. He founded the Biblioteca Aniciana, whose collections were later, in 1666, absorbed into those of the Biblioteca Alessandrina in Rome.

⁵ V. Federici, *La biblioteca e l'archivio*, in: I monasteri di Subiaco, II. Roma, Ministero della Pubblica Istruzione, 1904, p. XII.

Even the monks, pressurised by the demands of daily life, contributed to the neglect and partial dispersal of the library's holdings⁶. During the Roman Republic of 1798-99 the French plundered the collection⁷ and the two monasteries were left abandoned for more than a year⁸.

The collections suffered further serious losses following the nationwide suppression of religious institutions undertaken by the French government during the years 1810-1815⁹. Father Andrea Panhans, the sacrestan appointed by the French as overseer of the Subiaco monasteries, was accused of having removed the best manuscripts and books from the libraries of the Sacro Speco and Santa Scolastica¹⁰.

In around 1867, the monks were forced to conceal the surviving library treasures in a secure and hidden place out of sight and reach of Garibaldi's volunteer troops who, travelling through the Roman countryside on their way to Rome, represented a constant threat to church property¹¹.

We have no way of ascertaining accurately the scale of the losses; what is certain is that the copies which survive today in the library of Santa Scolastica can only be a small proportion of the holdings of the two libraries during the centuries when they flourished as institutions.

An inventory compiled at the beginning of the 20th century from the library of the collector and antiquarian Costantino Corvisieri, the first president of the Società Romana di Storia Patria, listed 193 codices of value from the Santa Scolastica collections, several of which can no longer be traced¹².

Later in the 20th century the responsibility for the running of the library of Santa Scolastica was RE-entrusted to the monks and in 1929 given the status of a State library annexed to the 'National Monument'. Today it comes under the Ministry for Cultural Affairs and Tourism

⁶ V. Federici, *Documenti*, in: I monasteri di Subiaco, II. Roma, Ministero della Pubblica istruzione, 1904, I, n. Iiii-viii, t. IV, 1784.

⁷ During the Roman (or Jacobin) Republic of 1798-1799, works of art, manuscripts and books belonging to the suppressed convents and monasteries in Rome were for the first time sequestered by French officials. The books in particular were subjected to a devastating dispersal. A. Rita, *Biblioteche e requisizioni librerie a Roma in età napoleonica. Cronologia e fonti romane*, Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 2012, pp. 17-38, 48-49. Federici, *La biblioteca*, p. XIII.

⁸ Federici, *Documenti*, I, mmmmmcccviiii, 1798 febbraio, p. 10 sgg.

⁹ The decree signed by Napoleon Bonaparte on 25 April 1810 authorised the general suppression of the religious orders throughout the Kingdom of Italy. Rita, *Biblioteche e requisizioni librerie*, pp. 39-49.

¹⁰ Federici, *Documenti*, I, mmmmmcccviiii, cc. 233-234.

¹¹ *Relazione dell'abate Casaretto in risposta a quella di Fabio Gori*. Santa Scolastica, Fondo Arca, LXIII,9.

¹² Federici, *La biblioteca*, p. XIV, n. 3. The inventory recorded and described the codices which the compiler considered to be noteworthy for their contents or antiquity.

(MiBACT); containing approximately 30,000 printed volumes, 420 codices, 208 incunabula as well as archival collections (including, after its donation in 2000, the private archive of the Colonna princes), it constitutes one of the most important cultural institutions in the region of Lazio.