

For Immediate release

Landmark collaboration between the Bodleian and the Vatican Libraries will bring ancient texts into the digital era

- **1.5 million pages from both collections to be digitized**

Oxford, 11 April 2012. The Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford and the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (BAV) are announcing a new collaborative digitization project with the aim of opening up repositories of ancient texts and making a selection of their remarkable treasures freely available online to researchers and the general public worldwide.

The initiative has been made possible by a £2 million award from the Polonsky Foundation. Dr Leonard Polonsky whose passion, interest and commitment is to democratize access to information, sees increasing digital access to these two library collections, among the greatest in the world, as a significant step in sharing the wealth of resources on a global scale.

Dr Polonsky, said: ‘21st-century technology provides the opportunity for collaborations between cultural institutions in the way they manage, disseminate and make available for research the information, knowledge and expertise they hold. I am pleased to support this exciting new project where the Bodleian Libraries and the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana will make important collections accessible to scholars and the general public worldwide.’

Driven by the same vision of opening up their collections, the two institutions have recently established a partnership brokered by the Bodleian’s Centre for the Study of the Book. The digitization project builds on the existing relationship between the two institutions.

The digitized collections will be in three subject areas: Greek manuscripts, 15th-century printed books (incunabula) and Hebrew manuscripts and early printed books. These areas have been chosen for the strength of the collections in both libraries and their importance for scholarship in their respective fields. With approximately two-thirds of the material coming from the BAV and the remainder from the Bodleian, the digitization effort will also benefit scholars by uniting virtually materials that have been dispersed between the two collections over the centuries. The project will span four years and will result in approximately 1.5 million pages being made available in digital format.

Sarah Thomas, Bodley’s Librarian, said: ‘Transforming these ancient texts and images into digital form helps transcend the limitations of time and space which have in the past restricted access to knowledge. Scholars will be able to interrogate these documents in fresh approaches as a result of their online availability. Today’s world (and tomorrow’s) is one of global connectedness. The Bodleian Libraries are pleased to have the opportunity to work closely with Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana in this cross-cultural collaboration.’

The Chancellor of the University of Oxford, Lord Patten of Barnes, said: ‘We are very grateful to Dr Polonsky for his insight into the importance of widening access to the fundamental texts

which have had a major impact on the development of civilisation. By making these collections available online we give the wider public access to a small, but significant part of the world's heritage.'

Monsignor Cesare Pasini, the Prefect of the Vatican Library, said: 'Thanks to the far-sighted and generous support of the Polonsky Foundation, two of the oldest libraries in Europe will join forces in an innovative approach to digitisation driven by the actual needs of scholars and scholarship. With this joint initiative, the two Libraries continue to accomplish their mission for the benefit of science and culture; it represents a great step forward in the Vatican Library's entry into the digital age, and the Library is particularly grateful to Dr Leonard Polonsky for giving us this extraordinary impetus.'

Cardinal Raffaele Farina, Librarian of the Holy See, said: 'The service to Humanity which the Vatican Library has accomplished over almost six centuries, by preserving its cultural treasures and making them available to readers, finds here a new avenue which confirms and amplifies its universal vocation through the use of new tools, thanks to the generosity of the Polonsky Foundation and to the sharing of expertise with the Bodleian Libraries.'

- ENDS -

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NOTES TO THE EDITOR

About the Bodleian Libraries

- The Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford form the largest university library system in the United Kingdom. They include the principal University library—the Bodleian Library—which has been a library of legal deposit for 400 years; major research libraries; and libraries attached to faculties, departments and other institutions of the University. The combined library collections number more than 11 million printed items, in addition to 45,000 e-journals and vast quantities of materials in other formats. For additional information see www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk.
- Another recent major project made possible by contributions from the Polonsky Foundation is the digitization of the Bodleian's exceptional collection of over 280,000 Cairo Genizah fragments. For the first time, the Bodleian manuscripts can now be consulted, browsed and read online at <http://genizah.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/>

About the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana

- The Vatican Library was founded in 1451 by Pope Nicholas V 'for the common convenience of the learned'. The humanistic spirit has remained unchanged in the

Library of the Holy Father, which today is still a private institution and one of the most important research libraries in the world, without, however, being attached to a university or other academic institution. At present the Vatican Library preserves over 180,000 manuscripts (including 80,000 archival units), 1,600,000 printed books, over 300,000 coins and medals, and 150,000 prints, drawings and engravings. For additional information see www.vaticanlibrary.va.

SUBJECT AREAS TO BE DIGITIZED

1. *Early printed books (incunabula)*

BAV

With almost 8900 incunabula, the Vatican Library possesses the fourth largest such collection in the world. The Vatican Library in its early days played an important role in the development of early printing in Rome and surrounding area, together with members of the Roman curia, many of them otherwise known as distinguished humanists. Many of the first books printed in Rome between 1467 and 1473 are still preserved in the Vatican Library.

BODLEIAN

In terms of size the Bodleian's collection of incunabula is probably the fifth-largest in the world, and the biggest collection held by a university library. This digitization project will focus on the incunables printed in Italy, since the choice of Italian decorated books and those with Italian provenances would provide a close link with the collections in the Vatican. Some 45% of the Bodleian's fifteenth-century printed books (the largest percentage for any single country) come from Italy.

2. *Greek Manuscripts*

BAV

The exceptional importance of the Vatican Library's collection of Greek manuscripts is due not so much to its size — though its collection of about 5,000 Greek volumes is rivaled in this respect by only a handful of other libraries — as to the quality of the materials it preserves. Examples: works by Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Hippocrates, manuscripts of the New Testament and of the Church Fathers, many of them richly decorated with Byzantine miniatures.

BODLEIAN

The collecting of Greek manuscripts by the Bodleian goes back to its founder. By the end of the 17th century the Bodleian was already established as the most important repository of Greek manuscripts in the British Isles. However, the majority of the Bodleian's manuscripts of Greek classical authors date from the 15th and 16th centuries, some of them written in Italy by immigrant Greek scribes.

3. *Hebrew Manuscripts and Early Printed Books*

BAV

The collection of Hebrew manuscripts in the Vatican Library is one of the most important in existence, even though it is not one of the largest. Except for a few dozen items, all the manuscripts were written in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance from the 9th to the 16th centuries. Examples:

- a manuscript that is probably the earliest Hebrew codex in existence, a copy of the Sifra written towards the end of the 9th century or in the first half of the 10th century
- copy of the entire Bible written around 1100 in Italy
- In addition there are large numbers of volumes of texts in the fields of Biblical commentary, Halakhah, Kabbalah, Talmudic commentaries, liturgy and liturgical commentaries, philosophy, medicine, astronomy and other sciences as well as both Jewish and Christian polemical texts.

BODLEIAN

Hebrew books and manuscripts have been central to the Bodleian's collections since 1601 – when Thomas Bodley, the Library's founder, took a personal interest in them – and remain one of its great strengths.