

A challenging move for the manuscripts of the National Library of Greece

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The National Library of Greece holds one of the largest collections of Greek manuscripts worldwide, comprising of approximately 5,500 bound volumes and scrolls from as early as the 9th century AD. Housed since 1903 in an imposing historic building at the centre of Athens, the National Library of Greece is currently undergoing a challenging transition to a new era and a necessary move to a new home. Following a massive development project at the Athenian coastline funded by the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, new facilities have been constructed for the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center that hosts the National Library, the National Opera and the Stavros Niarchos Park. The library is fully engaged in a complex programme to achieve this transition.

By the end of 2017, the manuscript collection, along with the majority of the other library collections, will be transferred to the new 22,000 m² facilities that aim to provide suitable conditions and modern infrastructure for the preservation, digitization and use of the collection. The transition of the library has provided a unique opportunity for the Conservation Department to restructure, to employ new staff, to upgrade its services and to equip a state-of-the art conservation lab, through which the preservation and conservation of the manuscript collection can be achieved at higher standards and to meet current demands.

This paper discusses the challenges that were faced by the Conservation Department of the National Library of Greece towards moving its manuscript collection. It further describes the planning and actions that were followed by the Conservation Department to ensure the safe and successful transfer of the collection. This included a wide range of activities that attend to preservation, such as preparatory actions, risk assessment management, remedial and preventive conservation actions, packing and finally the transfer and reorganization of the collection at the new facilities.

In preparation for the move, a condition survey of the entire manuscript collection was carried out in order to document and to assess the particular condition of each manuscript as well as the overall state of preservation of the collection, as this would influence decisions related to their move. In parallel, a working methodology was implemented for the cleaning, measuring, wrapping and selecting items for anoxic treatment or isolation as needed, before they were moved to the new premises. Based on the accumulated survey data, the Conservation Department in collaboration with the library manuscript curators used a multi-criteria system to select and prioritize a number of manuscripts that would have their shelving position changed from vertical to horizontal, as is most appropriate for Greek-Byzantine binding structures. What is more an overview of the binding structures that are included in the collection has been accumulated and has helped to understand the immense possibilities and value for future research in the history and making of the manuscripts in this collection and their bindings.

The benefits of the experiences gained through the processes of moving the collection are invaluable. Beyond providing a safer and more appropriate housing for the collection, the knowledge of its contents is

depended and the ability of the Conservation Department to support the collection in the long term is enhanced.