

The 'IsIAO Library' – African and Oriental collections room of the Rome National Central Library: activities January-December 2020

Since March 2020 activities concerning the function of the 'IsIAO Library' have been affected by the Covid-19 health emergency. After a period of remote working, the closure of the Rome National Central Library (BNCR) to the public has made it necessary to establish a free document delivery service to meet users' needs. In September it became possible to allow access to the reading room to a limited number of users, in compliance with the directives issued by the BNCR, managing requests for access and consultation via email.

1. Reading room

Closure to the public in the early months of the year provided an opportunity to carry out reorganization and shelf-mark updating for both sections of the reading room, both African and Oriental. Some periodicals that are no longer updated were moved into storage, so as to make room for the periodicals chosen for reactivation and recently acquired monographs.

2. Storage

Rearrangement of the library's two storage facilities has begun and is still in progress; all the documents of the Italian-African Institute, IsMEO and IsIAO have been gathered together. The 'large formats' section has been rearranged and reorganized and houses documents which due to their physical characteristics require particular attention with regard to their conservation.

3. Purchases

While the 2019 purchasing budget was mainly used for updating periodicals, in 2020 the focus was on monographs, with the completion and updating of various series. The funds available permitted the acquisition of about 300 volumes, consisting of works pertinent to both Oriental and African studies.

4. Cataloguing

In addition to new purchases, certain significant sections belonging to the historical 'IsIAO Library' collections have also been catalogued.

The reorganization (already under way) of important portions of the African section was continued, with the primary objective of allowing these to be searched for via OPAC. The work, begun in September 2019 and still in progress, concerns in particular bibliographic material regarding documents related to Italian Africa, which comprises a wide variety of document types – monographs, periodicals (often single issues), unpublished documents, typescripts and manuscripts of documentary or archival nature (e.g. confidential reports by various institutions) and geographical maps.

The reorganization of the African section unearthed a considerable number of documents originating from the Central Colonial Affairs Directorate of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, an office which (together with its predecessor, the Colonial Office) operated from 1890 to 1913. The corpus consists of printed documents (pamphlets, extracts, official acts, monographs), typescripts and manuscripts. Research conducted on the origin of this document collection suggests it represents the original nucleus of what was to become the Colonial Library of the Central Colonial Affairs Directorate, an unfulfilled project dating back to 1911. This material (about 1400 documents) was catalogued, placed on the shelves and made available for consultation in the reading room.

The retrospective SBN cataloguing of the modern printed works in the Tucci Endowment, for which very little OPAC-SBN bibliographic information was already present, continued: currently about 2300 items have been catalogued (including modern monographs, ancient books, miscellaneous items and periodicals).

5. Internships

In October 2020 ISMEO signed an agreement with JobSoul to allow the activation of internships with students of Rome Sapienza University. The first internship begun concerns a student at the School of Specialization in Archive and Book Heritage engaged in a project involving the design and construction of a 'virtual bookshelf' (an annotated and illustrated bibliography that may be consulted via the Web) on the theme of travel literature, which also includes the cataloguing of the relative volumes present in the library collection.

6. Digitization of the Emilio Dubbiosi manuscript collection

March 2020 saw the completion of the project to digitize the Arab-Yemeni manuscripts collected by Emilio Dubbiosi. The scans were sent for cataloguing to the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) in Princeton, which finances the digitization and description project (Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, ZMT) under an agreement between the National Central Library of Rome, IAS, Accademia dei Lincei and ISMEO – International Association for Mediterranean and Oriental Studies.

7. Photo Library

In 2020 Prof Federico Cresti and the library's collaborators concluded an examination and archive description of photograph albums and folders of large-format photographs mounted on cardboard that relate to Libya.

In the first months of the year, the collaborators coordinated an initial survey of the prints and negatives on glass plates kept in the Photo Library, a part of the photographic collection of which a specific inventory had never been made. The survey yielded a rough estimate of around 20,500 items, including clichés, film negatives and a small number of prints stored with the plates. The operation constitutes a collaboration between BNCR, ISMEO, the MEDA Foundation – Mediterraneo Antico ONLUS, Roma Tre University, the Museum of Origins (Rome Sapienza University) and L'Erma di Bretschneider, aimed at launching a semantic and participatory cataloguing project, as well as the digitization of plate images relating to Italian archaeology in Libya. The project, entitled *Storie di vetro. Sistema tecnologico per il trattamento e la catalogazione semantica del patrimonio fotografico della 'Biblioteca IsIAO' attualmente depositata presso la BNCR* (Stories on glass: a technological system for the treatment and cataloguing of the 'IsIAO Library' photography collection), is currently under evaluation.

The reorganization of the stored photographic collection has also led to the emergence of at least three important groups of material: 1) a series of seven volumes containing photographic documentation of the activities promoted by the Italian Institute for the Middle and Far East (ISMEO) in the period 1948-1989; 2) the substantial photographic collection of Sabatino Moscati, eminent archaeologist and historian of the Phoenician and Punic civilizations, which consists of 15 folders of transparencies, 40 photograph albums and 11 boxes of loose photographic prints; 3) about 20 boxes of large-format photographic prints and exhibition material with Colonial Museum inventories.

8. Map Library

During the first part of 2020 a considerable number (197 sheets) of cartographic documents that were uncatalogued (and thus absent from the volume by Claudio Cerreti, *La raccolta cartografica dell'Istituto Italo Africano: presentazione del fondo e guida alla consultazione*, Roma: IIA, 1987, the

only extant reference for those wishing to consult the collection) came to light. The reorganization work made it possible to add to the Map Library various documents relating to it that were previously located elsewhere.