

The National Library's
Manuscript Collection
170th anniversary

Founded June 5th 1846



Exhibition opened May 17th 2016

The history of the manuscript collection

The origins of the manuscript department can be traced back to the reverend Jón Halldórsson (1665–1736) of Hítardalur. Jón was a great scholar, collected manuscripts and official documents. Following the death of Jón, his son Finnur (1704–1789) inherited the manuscript collection, and later Finnur's son, Hannes (1739–1796). Finnur and Hannes, both bishops in Skálholt, were also scholars and added to the manuscript collection.

Hannes' wife, Valgerður Jónsdóttir (1771–1856) was 32 years his junior. When she became a widow at the age of 25, she inherited the entire manuscript collection. Valgerður's second husband was Steingrímur Jónsson (1769–1845), bishop in Laugarnes. He took good care of the manuscripts and expanded the collection considerably.

After Steingrímur's death, Valgerður and her son offered the manuscript collection for sale to the authorities, a total of 393 manuscripts. On June the 5th 1846, the king of Denmark authorized the purchase. This date marks the establishment of the manuscript department within the National Library (est. 1818).

The manuscript collection grew gradually with gifts and purchases from various individuals. At first, many official documents were preserved with the manuscripts in the National Library but in 1882 the National Archives were established. The official documents were then transferred to the National Archives.

In 1879 the library purchased the manuscript collection of Jón Sigurðsson (1811–1879). Jón, the leader of the independence movement in Iceland, served as the president of the Icelandic Literature Society and was an active manuscript collector. The collection, a total of 1.342 items, include Jón's own manuscripts along with many others. In 1901 the National library bought the manuscript collection of the Icelandic Literature Society, 1.610 items from the Copenhagen branch and 289 from the Reykjavík branch.

Housing

In the beginning, the manuscript collection was preserved in the National Library's premises in the loft of the Reykjavík Cathedral (Dómkirkjan). In 1881 the Library was moved to the Parliament building and in 1909 to the Culture House (Safnahúsið). During the Second World War the collection was moved to Flúðir, about 100 km south of Reykjavík, for security reasons. In 1962 the manuscript collection was placed in it's own hall in the Culture House and at that point it became a special department in the Library – the manuscript department. The

Library was situated in the Culture House until 1994 when it was combined with the University Library and moved to a new building (Þjóðarbiblíótekið).

Collections

The Library's manuscript collection is one of the largest collections of paper manuscripts and private collections from the 16th to the 20th centuries in Iceland. In total, 14,658 manuscripts and documents have been registered and given their own shelf mark. These manuscript and documents vary in size and form. Around 1,000 private collections are also preserved in the Library. The collection has very few whole vellum manuscripts, but there are over one hundred vellum fragments, the oldest of which are believed to be from around 1100. Most of the vellum fragments were used as cover for younger manuscripts and therefore, many of them are damaged and hard to read.

Examples of material

Psalms

Sagas

Icelandic ballads

Annals

Travel stories

Secular poetry

Folktales

Sermons and prayers

Medicine

Natural science

Philosophy

Language and grammar

Magic and spell

Law books

Genealogies

Memoirs

Diaries

Letters

Musical notes

Hand-drawn pictures



Documents of associations and clubs

Documents of authors and poets

Documents of scholars

Documents from the public

Documents from emigrants

Daily tasks

Daily tasks in the department are varied but the main tasks consist of registering the collections. Work is underway to make the collections more accessible by registering it online. Manuscripts are being published on the website www.handrit.is and are documented on www.einkaskjol.is. The department has also worked on a number of special projects concerning the registration of special collections, often in collaboration with other institutes, both Icelandic and foreign.

The curators work also consists of answering various inquiries, attend to guests in the reading room, take care of manuscript loans and supervise their use. Daily tasks also include receiving new collections and promoting the department's work. The curators take care of the department's Facebook page. They also work on exhibitions in the Library where their main tasks are to choose manuscripts for display, write the exhibition texts and place the manuscripts in the display boxes.

Publication

Since there is a lot of unpublished material in the manuscript collection it has been quite popular for publication in recent years, especially letters and diaries from the 19th and 20th centuries. Furthermore, the collection has been important for various biographies and other academic publications.

Collecting of manuscripts

The National Library is constantly receiving new collections. Most of the material that we receive today are personal collections from all social groups. In that way, the collection aims to reflect the community.

Even though the Library now mostly receives private documents from the 20th century there are still some manuscripts from previous centuries being delivered.



NATIONAL AND UNIVERSITY
LIBRARY OF ICELAND

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