

# Vatican and Oxford libraries announce joint digital conversion of some manuscripts, books

April 14 2012, By Tish Wells

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More world literature just got its door kicked open digitally. For the first time scholars will be able to compare material kept in the separate collections for centuries.

The Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana and the Bodleian Libraries of the University of Oxford have announced a 4-year project to convert some of their important holdings into digital form for all to see - even if readers can't understand the Medieval Latin, ancient Greek or Hebrew the documents are written in.

Among the items to be digitized will be ancient Greek [manuscripts](#), 15th century printed [books](#), Hebrew manuscripts and astronomical writings.

Owen M. Smith, associate professor of Philosophy and Classical Studies at Stephen F. Austin State University in Texas, says it would be "absolutely fantastic. Right now a professional scholar has to spend the time and money to visit dozens of different libraries and do meticulous copying of the passages involved and then (take the) comparisons back home and it can take years to put out a critical edition.

"Now that these things are online, they can be accessed from a desktop that would greatly increase the availability of these works and decrease the time and expense involved in having access to them."

The \$3.17 million project was made possible by the Polonsky Foundation, headquartered in London, whose aim is "to support international development in higher education" as well as the arts.

The libraries estimate that the new digitization project will result in roughly 1.5 million pages online.

Among the printed books to be scanned will be "De Europa" by 15th century Pope Pius II, and Johannes Gutenberg's Latin, or 42-line, Bible printed between 1451 and 1455. Other items are New Testaments and texts from the Church Fathers, complete with Byzantine miniature paintings.

The Vatican will digitize the "Sifra," the oldest Hebrew codex in their collection written between 800 and 950 A.D. and an Italian Bible written sometime around 1100 A.D.

The Bodleian collection of Greek manuscripts will include testimonies on works by Homer, Sophocles, Plato, Hippocrates and others. Smith defines "testimonies" as "when a later author alludes to, or summarizes, or comments on, the works of earlier philosophers."

The director of the World Digital Library, John Van Oudenaren, sees the Vatican and Bodleian project as a good thing.

"More and more libraries are going digital," says Van Oudenaren. "Technology is improving and users are demanding it. People want to see things online."

The World Digital Library, created by the Library of Congress and UNESCO, has 144 partners in 173 countries. They have a non-exclusive deal to pool certain online documents, translate them and add in-depth descriptions.

Van Oudenaren says he would welcome them if the Bodleian and Vatican project chose to participate.

As for the new project, Smith says, "I think, dollar for dollar, this will be of extraordinary value for scholars and undergraduate scholars in these fields."

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