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FROM SAINT CLEMENT TO THE DIGITAL AGE: THE DEVELOPMENT OF LIBRARIES IN NORTH MACEDONIA

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Abstract
Libraries have always been fundamental to preserving and promoting cultural heritage, serving as key institutions for the transmission of knowledge across generations. In Macedonia, this role dates back to the 9th century with St. Clement of Ohrid, who established one of the first known Slavic scriptoria and laid the foundation for Slavic literacy and librarianship. Since that time, libraries in North Macedonia have developed from medieval manuscript collections into modern digital repositories, adapting to new technologies while preserving their essential role as guardians of national identity. Today, Macedonian libraries safeguard historical manuscripts, literature, and folklore, serving as cultural hubs that connect the country with the broader European intellectual landscape. Despite their significance, North Macedonian libraries face challenges such as limited funding, outdated infrastructure, and the need for enhanced professional development opportunities for librarians. Addressing these issues requires strategic investment in modernization, digital literacy, and governmental support to ensure that libraries remain vital institutions for cultural preservation and European integration.

Keywords: *Libraries, cultural identity, European context, European integration, cultural programs, Macedonia.*

Introduction

Throughout history, libraries have played a crucial role in cultural development and the transmission of knowledge, and this is particularly evident in the case of North Macedonia. The foundations of Macedonian librarianship can be traced back to the 9th century, when St. Clement of Ohrid established one of the first Slavic scriptoria, laying the groundwork for literacy and the preservation of Slavic heritage. From their medieval beginnings to the present day, libraries in North Macedonia have undergone continuous transformation, moving from manuscript collections to digital repositories while retaining their central role as custodians of national identity.

In the modern European context, Macedonian libraries act as active cultural hubs, participating in international collaborations, digitization projects, and cross-border research initiatives. Partnerships with European institutions—such as through the Europeana digital platform or Erasmus+ programs—allow them to share their collections globally, fostering intercultural dialogue and strengthening their role in European cultural networks. Furthermore, libraries contribute to cultural diplomacy by organizing book fairs, joint exhibitions, and scholarly conferences that showcase Macedonian literary and historical achievements.

Digitization initiatives, in particular, provide greater accessibility to rare manuscripts, ensuring their preservation and making them available to researchers worldwide. At the same time, challenges such as limited resources, outdated infrastructure, and insufficient opportunities for professional development continue to be pressing issues. Addressing these challenges is crucial for strengthening the role of libraries as cultural mediators within Europe. This study aims to examine the historical and contemporary role of libraries in North Macedonia, with a particular focus on their contribution to cultural heritage preservation, European integration, and cultural diplomacy. Specifically, the paper seeks to analyze how libraries balance their national identity-preserving function with their integration into the broader European cultural space. Accordingly, the central research question is: *In what ways do libraries in North Macedonia preserve national cultural identity while simultaneously contributing to European cultural integration and intercultural dialogue?*

Historical Development of Libraries in Macedonia

The origins of librarianship in Macedonia are closely tied to Saint Clement of Ohrid, one of the most notable disciples of Saints Cyril and Methodius and a successor of their groundbreaking work. Saints Cyril and Methodius created the first Slavic alphabet, consisting of 38 letters, which was understandable to the people and helped spread Christianity. They were brothers from Thessaloniki who preached the faith and baptized many. They translated numerous books, mainly theological texts, from Greek into Slavic. Interestingly, Saint Cyril served as a librarian in the Church of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople. Glagolitic manuscripts from the Ohrid Literary Center include the Zograf Gospel, the Sinai Psalter, the Sinai Euchologion, and several Glagolitic manuscripts from the later-discovered Sinai collection (Crvenkovska, 2016). The Glagolitic script was widely used in the Principality of Moravia, which stretched across Central Europe, covering areas of several current countries, including the Czech Republic, Slovakia, parts of Poland, and regions reaching the Danube in the south.

Therefore, Saint Clement of Ohrid is regarded as the founder of librarianship in Macedonia, and many primary and secondary schools, faculties, and universities are named in his honor. Additionally, in North Macedonia, the most prestigious award in the field of librarianship is the Clement Charter for Lifetime Achievement, presented by the Library Association of Macedonia every two years. This award represents the highest recognition for contributions to Macedonian librarianship today.

The earliest libraries in Macedonia were monastic, preserving, copying, and translating numerous books and valuable manuscripts. Notable monasteries in Macedonia, recognized for their rich cultural and manuscript heritage, include:

- The Monastery of Saint Naum, founded in the 9th century;
- The Monastery of Saint John Bigorski (Debar region), founded in the 11th century, houses an extensive library with numerous religious books, manuscripts, and icons;
- The Lesnovo Monastery, an essential medieval literary center where books were copied and many old manuscripts were preserved;
- The Monastery of Saint Panteleimon – Nerezi (Skopje), dating back to the 12th century, is renowned for its manuscript books and liturgical texts;
- Marko's Monastery (14th century), a spiritual and literary center where books were copied;
- The Treskavec Monastery (Prilep region), known for preserving Old Slavic manuscripts and books;
- The Monastery in Matejche (Kumanovo region), which preserved significant manuscripts from the medieval period.

Many other monasteries in Macedonia also represent true treasures of books, manuscripts, and significant libraries. Thus, monastic libraries were the first places where books were preserved, copied, and translated, playing an invaluable role in safeguarding Macedonia's cultural and literary heritage.

With the development of society, new faculties, reading rooms, and libraries were opened. The first modern library was established at the Faculty of Philosophy in Skopje. Due to a shortage of library staff in Macedonia, the role of the librarian was often performed by prominent youth and students. Decisions were made to establish training programs for librarians to enhance their professional skills.

The National and University Library in Skopje was officially opened on November 23, 1944, by the decision of ASNOM (Anti-Fascist Assembly for the National Liberation of Macedonia), while World War II had not yet ended (National and University Library "St. Clement of Ohrid"). Today, in Macedonia, there are libraries in all settlements. Libraries are divided according to their purpose: national, public, school, higher education, university, and specialized libraries. The main difference between national and other libraries (public, local, city, etc.) lies in their founders: national libraries are established by the state, while local and public libraries are under the authority of local self-government.

Libraries as Cultural Centers in the 21st Century

Libraries in North Macedonia today are repositories of a vast literary heritage. Their mission is not only to safeguard books and manuscripts but also to promote cultural heritage by organizing events such as book promotions, lectures, literary evenings, and collaborative projects with other libraries, institutions, associations, and international partners. Libraries support education, culture, and science, serving as meeting points for knowledge exchange and cultural dialogue.

Library staff play a vital role in this process. According to one definition of management, the staff constitute the organization itself. This principle applies to all institutions, including libraries. Following European and global trends, Macedonian libraries have also begun digitizing their collections. Digitization is a successful means of preserving a nation's literary and cultural heritage. According to the Manifesto for Digital Libraries, digitization is the process of converting information into a digital (computer-readable) format, while a digital library represents an online collection of verified digital objects accessible on the Internet.

European libraries are leaders in digitizing cultural, literary, and scientific heritage. The idea of digital libraries dates back to the post–World War II period. The oldest digital library is Project Gutenberg, established in 1971, which created digital versions of books to make them freely available online. Today, Project Gutenberg offers around 60,000 free electronic books available for download and reading.

Among the first digitization projects were:

- The DELOS project, focused on digital library research;
- The Mercury project (1991);
- The CORE project, which scanned over 400,000 pages from 20 chemistry journals;
- The American projects DLI-1 and DLI-2 (1994), funded by the National Science Foundation, NASA, and DARPA;
- The Europeana project, founded by the European Association of Libraries, Archives, and Museums, which has become the leading EU digital platform for cultural heritage, containing over 50 million digitized objects from more than 3,500 European institutions;
- The Million Book Project (2002), which later evolved into the Universal Digital Library;
- Google Books, implemented in collaboration with major global libraries.

Digitization became widely implemented during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, as libraries sought innovative ways to remain relevant by providing online services. Programs developed during this period can now be accessed anytime and anywhere, targeting different user groups such as children, teenagers, students, adults, and seniors. European libraries have created many innovative online programs for children, including interactive stories, educational games, coding courses, and digital reading platforms. For example, the City Library in Prague offers workshops, storytelling events, and a famous "infinity tunnel of books," which fascinates young visitors. In Hungary, the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library in Budapest places great emphasis on children’s and youth programs, offering quizzes, storytelling workshops, puppet shows, art classes, and book clubs for teenagers.

In North Macedonia, libraries also organize projects for children and youth, often funded by the Ministry of Culture and Tourism. For example, the National Institution – University Library "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Bitola organizes the "Teen Summer at the Library" program, which includes workshops such as "Books and Movies for Teenagers" and "Video Games," designed to attract youth during summer holidays. The "Goce Delchev" Library in Valandovo introduced "Social Games for Teenagers, Adolescents, and Adults," which were met with significant interest.

The importance of targeted programs for teenagers is highlighted by IFLA guidelines, which emphasize the need for librarians to address adolescents’ unique developmental stage, when voluntary reading is often neglected. Similarly, in North Macedonia, libraries recognize the importance of

tailoring services to youth, defined by national law as individuals aged 15 to 29 (Law on Youth Participation and Youth Policies).

Digitization of Library Collections in North Macedonia

The National and University Library "St. Clement of Ohrid" in Skopje is the leading institution for digitizing library materials in North Macedonia. It is developing a digital collection of rare and valuable publications—including old books, manuscripts, newspapers, magazines, and other important documents—accessible through its online catalog. North Macedonia also maintains a Digital Library of the Republic of North Macedonia at the National Library "St. Clement of Ohrid," focusing on digitizing rare materials. Several universities, including the University "St. Cyril and Methodius" in Skopje, have institutional repositories where researchers and students can publish papers and dissertations. University libraries also provide access to international research databases such as EBSCO and Springer.

The City Library "Braka Miladinovci" in Skopje digitizes culturally and historically significant materials, including old books, postcards, photographs, and manuscripts. The Macedonian Academy of Sciences and Arts (MANU) has developed a digital database of Macedonian dialects, preserving around 50,000 dialectal lexemes.

The Institute for Macedonian Literature has also created a Digital Library, offering access to out-of-print but still highly demanded publications, such as the collected works *The Life and Work of Grigor S. Prlichev* and *The Works of Aco Shopov* (Trajanova, 2022).

Conclusion

Libraries in North Macedonia have evolved from medieval monastic scriptoria to modern digital repositories, maintaining their central role as guardians of cultural identity while adapting to new technological and social challenges. Their historical roots, deeply connected to the work of St. Clement of Ohrid and the Glagolitic tradition, demonstrate the significance of libraries in shaping Slavic literacy and cultural continuity. In the 21st century, Macedonian libraries actively contribute to cultural diplomacy, European integration, and intercultural dialogue through digitization projects, international collaborations, and innovative programs for children, youth, and adults. However, challenges such as limited funding, outdated infrastructure, and insufficient professional development opportunities for librarians remain obstacles that need urgent attention. Addressing these issues requires a strategic vision that combines state support, European partnerships, and investment in digital transformation. By strengthening their role as cultural hubs and modernizing their services, Macedonian libraries will continue to serve not only as protectors of national identity but also as active participants in the broader European cultural landscape.

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