

Call for HEI Partners/Academic Supervisors

Research Theme 1: Investigating the origins and development of the Cotton Collection at the British Library

British Library Co-Supervisors:

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Context & Summary

The library put together by Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631) and his descendants was once described as ‘the most important collection of manuscripts ever assembled in Britain by a private individual’. It contains more than 1,400 medieval and early modern manuscripts and over 1,500 charters, rolls and seals, among them items of international heritage significance, such as the Lindisfarne Gospels, Beowulf and two copies of the 1215 Magna Carta. The Cotton collection was presented to the nation in 1702 and is one of the foundation collections of the British Library. In 2018, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Memory of the World UK Register.

There has been no detailed investigation of how Sir Robert Cotton and his son and grandson assembled their library. This Collaborative Doctoral Partnership project aims to address this gap, investigating for example when and from whom Cotton acquired his manuscripts, what his collecting principles were, whether there were specific networks of patronage or patterns of previous ownership, and how the creation and use of the collection can be situated within a wider historical context. Valuable information can be deduced from inscriptions in the manuscripts themselves, from the early handwritten catalogues of the collection, and from Cotton’s own correspondence, all of which are held at the British Library.

The Library’s curators are experts in book history and manuscript culture, but would be keen to collaborate with academics specialising in late Elizabethan and early Stuart politics and cultural history, and in the book collecting practices of this period. This project will also offer significant opportunities for wider outreach and engagement, ranging from blog posts for more general audiences and content creation on the Library’s website to resources or events for specialist researchers.

Research Areas

The main research conducted into the formative years of the Cotton library is by the late Colin Tite, in his book *The Early Records of Sir Robert Cotton’s Library* (2003), in his British Library Panizzi lectures (1993), and in a series of journal articles. Tite’s research focused on the early users of the library, primarily on who had access to the manuscripts in the 1600s. There is huge scope for going beyond these findings. Examples of possible innovative research include a detailed examination of the correspondence Robert Cotton maintained with other European scholars, and investigation of how the Cotton library grew on a year-by-year basis.

The principal materials to be drawn upon are held at the British Library, specifically the Cotton manuscripts and charters themselves, and the handwritten catalogues compiled by Sir Robert Cotton and his successors. Some manuscripts that belonged originally to Sir Robert are now held at other institutions – for instance, he made a significant gift to Sir Thomas Bodley for the foundation of the Bodleian Library, Oxford – and these volumes could form part of the research remit.

The research will not only situate the Cotton collection within its wider historical, political and social context, but also conduct a thorough investigation of its provenance and underlying collecting principles. Key research questions are likely to include:

- To what extent is the Cotton library distinctive, compared to other libraries assembled in Europe at the same time, and what characteristics does it share with similar contemporary collections?
- What role did the library play in the scholarly, cultural and political life of the nation? Early users of the Cotton collection included key figures such as Francis Bacon, Inigo Jones, and James Ussher, bishop of Armagh. Sir Robert Cotton was an MP and advisor to King James I, and his library was often the focus of parliamentary scrutiny, since it contained state papers and other items of national significance.
- Who consulted the Cotton library in its formative years? The research undertaken by Colin Tite revealed the names of contemporary scholars and politicians who had access to the manuscripts. Cotton was also renowned for lending his volumes, some of which were never returned. To what extent did the Cotton library function as a national library in the 1600s? From whom did Sir Robert Cotton, his son and grandson acquire their manuscripts? Sir Robert received some manuscripts by bequest (such as the library of William Camden, his schoolmaster and author of *Britannia*), and he obtained volumes from other prominent collectors. Were significant parts of the collection acquired from sources that are undocumented?
- When did the Cotton family acquire their manuscripts? There is evidence that Robert Cotton obtained his first manuscript in 1588, aged 17, and there are indications that others arrived later in the 1600s. What proportion of the collection had been acquired by 1631?
- By what methods did the Cottons acquire their manuscripts? There are instances of donations and of items being swapped between Robert Cotton and his contemporaries, but there is surprisingly little evidence at present that the Cotton family typically paid for their books.
- What were Cotton's collecting principles? Which types of work are not represented and which were included in larger than average numbers?
- Is there any evidence that women had access to the Cotton library or made donations to it?

Benefits & Training Opportunities for the CDP Student

This project will allow the student to combine their academic training with research experience in the context of a national library and major cultural institution, to undertake innovative research into one of the British Library's founding collections and to contribute to the wider understanding and appreciation of this collection.

The student will be hosted by the Library's Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts section and benefit from behind-the-scenes access and extensive hands-on consultation of the Cotton manuscripts, as well as regular discussions with and advice and support from the Library's curators, cataloguers and other specialist staff. This will enable them to enhance their ability to read medieval

and early modern handwriting, develop significant insights into the ways that early books were collected, obtained and used and by whom, and to further contextualise their understanding of this type of material.

The Ancient, Medieval and Early Modern Manuscripts section at the Library has a strong record of public engagement, through curating exhibitions and producing online content about collection items. The student will be able to gain experience in writing about the Cotton manuscripts for a wide range of audiences, to present and discuss their insights internally and externally, and to undertake further research into items to help inform the Library's planning for future displays or digitisation projects.

Additionally, the student will have the opportunity to meet and learn from other professionals across the Library, such as for example the Conservation or Digital Scholarship teams, to connect with the Library's wider postgraduate cohort and to access an extensive internal training offer.

Application Deadline

Completed application forms and brief CVs must be submitted to Research.Development@bl.uk by **Friday 10 December 2021, 5 pm**.

Late applications cannot be accepted.

Before submitting your application, please ensure you have read the *Information for HEI applicants* on the British Library website and are aware of the specific characteristics of the AHRC CDP scheme, the selection criteria and the envisaged timetable.

Contact for Queries

For questions on the application form and process:

British Library Research Development Office
Research.Development@bl.uk

For queries regarding the research theme:

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