

The History of the Library of the Assembly of the Republic

The Library of the Assembly of the Republic is the ancient Library of the *Cortes* founded "to serve the legislative body".

The first Constituent *Cortes* of the Portuguese Nation in 1821 were hosted at the Convent of Nossa Senhora das Necessidades, where a small number of printed publications and documents started to be gathered. These holdings drew the attention of MP José Portelli, who submitted the «José Portelli's Memoir or the First Guidelines on the Foundation of the Library of the *Cortes*» to the Committee on Public Education, in February 1821.

An ordinance dated 17 August 1826 established that the Chamber of the Honourable Peers would be located at the Regency Palace, in Rossio, and the Chamber of Deputies in the High Court of Justice, in Terreiro do Paço, because the Necessidades Palace was too small to house both chambers. The chambers were located in Rossio and in Terreiro do Paço until 1828. Which of the two buildings housed the small collection of the Library of the *Cortes* remains unknown.

On 27 August 1833, an ordinance established that the Monastery of S. Vicente de Fora, which housed a valuable library, would host the *Cortes*. Some months later, an ordinance of 4 September 1833 defined that both legislative chambers should be relocated to the ancient Convent of São Bento da Saúde or Convent of the Negroes, which was officially named Palace of the *Cortes*.

On 22 October 1836, a dictatorial decree of Minister Manuel da Silva Passos countersigned by queen Maria II, founded the Library of the *Cortes*. However, as the initial collection was small, the same decree created a committee responsible for choosing the bibliographical contents and the location of the Library. The members of the committee were António Nunes de Carvalho da Costa Monteiro de Mesquita, librarian of the Royal House, chief guard of the Tombo Tower and director of the Deposit of the Libraries of Extinguished Convents, João Vicente Pimentel Maldonado, bachelor of law and archivist of the Chamber of the Honourable Peers, and counsellor Diogo Augusto de Castro Constâncio, major officer and director of the secretariat of the Chamber of Peers.

The General Deposit of the Libraries of Extinguished Convents granted 7,300 volumes to the Library chosen by the above mentioned committee. The bookplates indicate that the volumes came from the Alcobaça Library, the Private Library of Friar Jacinto de S. Miguel, chronicler of the Jerónimos Order, the Belém Community, etc..

The committee also had powers to prepare draft rules of procedure for the Library, to choose the staff of the Library and to request the acquisition of publications. The Library was established in the choir of the Convent church.

Before the rules of procedure were drawn up, the «first provisional instructions» were produced. The rudimentary library was directed by Diogo Augusto de Castro Constâncio who, aware of the urgent need to take measures concerning the books, in January 1838, submitted draft regulations to the Chairman of the

Administrative Committee of both chambers, regulations that were not well accepted.

The lack of interest in the development of the Library and in its suitable location is expressed by what happened on the occasion of the election of king Pedro V in 1855. As the election took place in the same room where repairs were being undertaken (the present Hall of Honour of the Palace), the repairs were moved to other premises and the bookshelves were covered in order not to disturb the magnificent ceremony. The repairs were badly placed, or more precisely, piled up in an improper room and there they stood, abandoned and forgotten for some years. The situation became public knowledge on 14 March 1863, when a newspaper of the time, "The September Revolution", published an article describing the condition of the Library of the *Cortes* in detail.

Afterwards, during the session held on 19 June 1863, the Honourable Peer Marquis of Niza presented this situation to the Chamber of Peers and requested authorisation for the Bureau to appoint a temporary librarian, in accordance with the Chamber of Deputies. The Marquis of Valada made some considerations concerning this application and proposed that the librarian vacancy should be filled by competition. Nevertheless, the books would yet remain neglected for a longer time, as well as the manuscript documents that composed the archives of both chambers, since, on 3 February 1864, the Marquis of Niza changed his opinion and withdrew his proposal. During the same session, the Honourable Peer Silva Ferrão, on behalf of the committee in charge of examining the Marquis of Niza's proposal, explained the reasons why the committee had not examined it and submitted a new proposal requiring the appointment of a librarian to the Bureau.

However, the situation had not been forgotten and during the session held on 25 May, the Marquis of Valada insisted on his previous proposal. On 9 January 1866, the same committee issued opinion no. 17, published in the *Diário de Lisboa* on 1 February 1866.

From 1892 to 1893 the librarian was Clemente José dos Santos, Baron of S. Clemente, Head of the Division of Stenography and a remarkable historian of the General *Cortes* of the Portuguese Nation. His private library, containing 670 volumes of precious works, was acquired by the State to the Library of the *Cortes*.

Nevertheless, the Library was not reaching the expected development regarding repairs and cataloguing.

In 1941, the librarian Álvaro Neves mentions in his report that «in 1863, placed in provisional premises, we could find 1,700 volumes in the bookshelves and the rest of the volumes were piled up in two small rooms, constantly removed in haste as happened in 1911, «clumsily in a fortnight» and in 1919, when the volumes were removed to the northwest wing of the building even in fewer days. As soon as the Library was established in new rooms and the books in the bookshelves, a new order to relocate the Library would arrive.»

In fact, the previous argument would serve to justify the impossibility of cataloguing for several years. In 1920, the above mentioned Secretary of the

Administrative Committee, wishing «that the Library of the Congress would become a working body», chose the location at the Palace where, twenty years later, the Library would be inaugurated, and tried to create a technical organisation to improve the efficiency of the Library. In 1921, “the bibliotecomnomic organisation plan suitable for the provisional and definite installation” was produced.

The Library was established in four rooms in the north wing which remain its present location.

The bookshelves and the galleries of the Library are made of oak wood from the north.

The bust of Passos Manuel (Manuel da Silva Passos), by sculptor Camels, was placed in the Reading Room on a proposal by MP Mendes Leal, during a session held on 20 January 1862.

In 1936, to celebrate the centenary of the creation of the Library, an exhibition of 15th and 16th century publications with the respective catalogue was held and the work *Books of São Bento* by Joaquim Leitão was published.

Joaquim Leitão is also the author of the book *The São Bento Palace*, which with his two others works composes the «documentary triumvirate» of the steps taken from the opening of the Library of the *Cortes* to the creation of the Library of the Assembly of the Republic.

In 1986, during the celebrations of the 150th anniversary of the foundation of the Library by Passos Manuel, MP Raúl Rego gave a speech on the most important steps in the history of the Library, requesting its modernisation and opening to external citizens, and stressing the fact that the computing era had begun.

In 1989, the Library began to computerise the catalogue with the acquisition of the Documenta software. In 1994, the Library implemented the management of periodicals with the Kardex module and developed a module of acquisitions in Access. In the same year, since the shelves could no longer support the growth of the collections, works from the 15th to the 18th century were withdrawn from the bookshelves of the rooms in the noble floor and placed in a space with proper security and preservation conditions.

In 1997, as the software applications were somewhat limited, a working group was appointed to study migration conditions of Documenta databases and to present an integrated model of information management. In the same year, the Secretary-General of the Assembly of the Republic submitted to the Ad-Hoc Committee for the Valorisation of the Historical, Physical, Cultural and Artistic Heritage of the Assembly of the Republic a report, produced by the Head of the Library, wherein the fundamental issues to the modernisation of the Library were presented. The issues were essentially related to the need of suitable places for publications and technical services, software updating and retrospective reconversion of all holdings not yet computerised.

In 1999, the Library acquired the Aleph software – an integrated system for library management – which allowed the standardisation in document handling, the access to the catalogue on the Intranet in October 1999 and on the Internet in February 2001, as well as the beginning of the retrospective reconversion that is expected to be concluded at the start of 2002.

Once the above mentioned project is concluded, the Library will be able to deepen the connection with internal users and will have better conditions to further improve the relation with external users.

As Raúl Rego would say, "... if we dare put our shoulder to the wheel and undertake the task of modernising the Library, we will honour the memory of Passos Manuel, of all *vintistas*¹, septembrists, *patuleias*² and republicans, even better than if we had built their statue in a big public square".

São Bento Palace, 14 March 2001

The Head of the Library

José Luís Tomé

* **Bibliographical References**

- REGO, Raul. *À Biblioteca da Assembleia da República*, Lisboa: Assembleia da República, Divisão de Edições, 1986, 24p.

- SILVA, Maria das Dores Lopes da. *Resumo histórico da Biblioteca, do Arquivo e do Museu da Assembleia da República*, Lisboa: Secretária-Geral da Assembleia da República.

¹ Vintista – A supporter of the Portuguese political ideology of the 1820s.

² Patuleia – A member of the popular party *Patuleia* founded in Portugal in 1846.