THE Oriental material housed in the three Library Departments of the old British Museum and the Science Reference Library which now constitute the Reference Division of the British Library is much larger and more comprehensive than is generally realized. It is by no means limited to printed books only but includes extensive collections of manuscripts, maps, charts, personal papers, and objects as diverse as oracle bones, palm leaves, copper plates, and ivory boards. Taking a wider view one can divide it into material written in Oriental languages (not necessarily connected with the Orient) and material about the Orient written in Western languages. Both have their place in the field of Oriental studies, but they require an entirely different kind of attention – the second may be dealt with by librarians, the first can only be handled by appropriately trained scholars.

Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books

The history and function of the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books have been discussed at some length in an article published in *The Treasures of the British Museum* (ed. by Sir Frank Francis, Thames and Hudson, London, 1971: pp. 238-60). For the purpose of this essay it is enough to say that the initial move was made in 1867 when the Trustees of the British Museum decided that the growing number and the increasing importance of Oriental manuscripts in the Department of Manuscripts needed the attention of qualified scholars. In consequence a special Department of Oriental Manuscripts was created. In 1891 Oriental printed books were transferred from the General Library and thus the Department of Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts came into being. Since manuscripts have always been one of the most vital parts of the collection the name of the new Department has often been considered a misnomer and Dr. Martin Lings, the last Keeper, succeeded in changing it, more appropriately, to the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books. There can be little doubt that the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books is the largest and most important library department of its kind in the world. This claim rests mainly on three factors:

1. With some 40,000 manuscripts and over 400,000 printed books, many of them unique, in Oriental languages, the Department covers the whole range of Oriental and (literate) African culture, spanning a period of over 3,000 years.
2. No other Department of this kind has an academic staff who are not only librarians but also all-round scholars in their particular and peripheral fields. In practical terms this means that a scholar who wishes to study a special aspect of Buddhism can find material related to India, Sri Lanka (Ceylon), South East Asia, China, and Japan together with experts to advise him, in one and the same Department.

3. The printed language catalogues of the Department (for information see The Catalogues of the Oriental Printed Books and Manuscripts, published by the British Museum in 1959 and Guide to the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books of the British Library, in print) are standard works and have always been accepted as authoritative by Oriental scholars. The first catalogue of Oriental manuscripts was begun by Friedrich August Rosen in 1838 and completed by the Revd. Josiah Forshall and others in 1871. According to contemporary custom the catalogue was written in Latin and it covered such diverse fields as Arabic, Syriac, and Ethiopic. This was the only attempt at a general catalogue: subsequent catalogues (of books as well as manuscripts) have been devoted to one language or group of related languages. Up to now the Department has produced nearly fifty different catalogues covering all major languages of Asia and Africa and new catalogues are being prepared at regular intervals.

Oriental Manuscripts

Writing has been in existence for the last five thousand years. For the greater part of this period it was almost completely restricted to the Orient. It is all too often forgotten that up to the sixteenth century Europe was, in comparison with certain parts of contemporary Asia, North Africa, and Central America, an under-developed continent. Oriental manuscripts in the Department are written in every conceivable form of script, from the abstract perfection of Arab calligraphy to the purely pictographic drawings used by the Moso of South-western China (fig. 1).

Fig. 1. Magical invocation and prayers in the pictographical script of the Moso (Na-khi) people of South-western China. Nineteenth century. Or. 11423 A. fol. 6a
Writing material includes vellum, leather (various skins), papyrus, palm-leaf (talipat and palmyra), wood, metal (gold, silver, copper, brass), different types of bark, cloth, cotton, silk, lacquer, paper (European and Oriental), bamboo, bone, and ivory. At present the collection represents about eighty-six major Oriental and African languages. Minor languages are entered under the main group to which they belong. Bi-lingual or Western materials closely related and necessary to the study of Oriental manuscripts form a category of their own.

During the last century scholarly interest was to a large extent centred around material connected with Islam, Christianity, and Judaism. This has at times created a somewhat distorted impression of the collections. Recent research by the staff of the Department into holdings from South Asia, South East Asia, and the Far East has greatly helped to balance the picture.

It has often been said that the time for the acquisition of spectacular manuscript collections is over. This, however, does not mean that manuscripts will play a less important part in the work of the Department. Even if new items cannot be purchased as frequently and as regularly as during the last century, the exploitation of the existing collections alone is a task which will occupy many decades.

It would be impossible to give any accurate account of the importance or the value of the collections. Some manuscripts are in the handwriting of their authors (e.g. Beschi, Maimonides (fig. 2), etc.); some are manuscripts of works which have been printed but of which all the printed editions have been lost; a great number, if not most, are unique and not available anywhere else in the world (e.g. items from the Stein collections etc.); some are in languages no longer in existence (e.g. Sogdian etc.); some are in scripts no longer in existence (e.g. Kharoṣṭhī etc.). Special categories are manuscripts which are translations from European into Oriental languages (e.g. Bibles etc.); from one Oriental language into another (e.g. Sanskrit into Chinese, Arabic into Urdu, Persian, Turkish, Malayalam, etc.); or translations of Oriental texts into European languages. Subjects cover an extremely wide field, ranging from religion, philosophy, history, and literature to traditional science and technology, from law and genealogies to copies or rubbings of inscriptions in various parts of Asia and Africa. Much space could be devoted to the question of illuminated and illustrated manuscripts and block prints. The question of manuscript illustrations is a diverse one, full of seemingly contradictory elements. Most major religions seem to have had iconoclastic tendencies at some time in their early history. Yet to add a visual representation to the austerity of the actual text seems to have fulfilled some basic human need. There is hardly any culture where religious restrictions have succeeded in seriously inhibiting the art of manuscript illustration. Even the Arabs who in their own environment voluntarily limited themselves to calligraphy and illumination soon lost their inhibitions when, in the course of war and conquest, they came into touch with alien elements. Though the Qur’an – as the Hebrew Bible – is never illustrated, countless Persian, Turkish (fig. 3), and Indian miniatures of extreme beauty adorn manuscripts of a more secular nature. In 1973 the Department held an exhibition of Oriental Manuscripts in the King’s Library of the British Museum and a small booklet
Fig. 2. Responses of Maimonides. Arabic in Hebrew characters interspersed with Hebrew words and phrases. The answer, occupying the last seven lines, is written by Moses Maimonides (A.D. 1135–1204) and bears his signature. Or. 5519
Fig. 3. A seventeenth-century Turkish manuscript written in fine large Nesli describing the wonders of nature and art in the manner of the Persian Mirabilia mundi. Harl. MS. 5500, fol. 98b

entitled Oriental Manuscripts, published by the Trustees of the British Museum for this occasion, provides a short introduction to the question of manuscript illustration in relation to different cultural areas.

Department of (Western) Manuscripts

As far as Africa and Asia are concerned, a wealth of information can be found in many of the personal papers deposited in the Department. These include, to give just a few examples, items like the Rippon Papers (Add. MSS. 40862–77, 43510–644), the Warren Hastings Papers (Add. MSS. 28973–29236), the Napier Papers (Add. MSS. 40018–27,
49086-172), the Calthorpe Papers (Add. MSS. 48000-196), the John Marshall Papers (Harl. MSS. 4252-6, 7199, Add. MSS. 7037-9), the Engelbert Kaempfer Papers (Sloane MSS. 2910, 2929, 3061), Hans Sloane's Personal Papers (Sloane MSS. 4036-69), the Harleian Papers (Harl. MSS. 790, 1589, 2334, 4188), etc., etc. The list could easily be expanded over several pages. Dividing the material into subjects will perhaps provide a clearer picture of the situation:

1. Correspondence and other papers relating to the purchase, administration, etc., of Oriental manuscripts, previous to the foundation of OMPB, e.g. the Shapira papers.

2. Manuscripts relating to the theological, linguistic, and ethnological work of European missionaries and administrators, e.g. Grammar of the Prakrit language by Dr. Leyden, Add. MS. 26589; Verzeichnis der Malabarischen Bücher by B. Ziegenbalg, Tranquebar 1808, Sloane MS. 3014.

3. Royal letters and decrees, e.g. An Order of the Privy Council concerning two ships which were fitted out for India and Guinea, in 'Acta inter Angliam et Belgium, 1570-1574', Cotton MS. Galba C. IV. f. 24, now f. 22; Letter of James I to an Eastern prince, 1610, Add. Ch. 56456 (fig. 7).

4. Documents relating to the presence of the Dutch, Portuguese, French, etc. in the Orient and in Africa, e.g. Copies of royal letters and ordinances, and other official documents, relating to the Government of the Portuguese possessions in the East Indies, 1559-1761, Add. MSS. 28163 and 28164.

5. Documents relating to voyages of discovery, e.g. Robert Thorne's Account of the Discovery of the Spice Islands, with his exhortations to Henry VIII to attempt discovery northwards, 1527, Lansdowne MS. 100, no. 7; A true discourse of our voyage bound for the North West Passage and so by Japan, from May to October 1631, in the ship Charles from London, by Captain Luke Fox, Add. MS. 19302.

6. Maps, charts, town-plans, works on history, botany, geography, etc., e.g. Coloured chart of the coasts of Africa, Persia, and India, with parts of the coast of America, showing the relative position of the Portuguese settlements, by J. Teixeira, 1655, Add. MS. 17938C; A legendary account of Palestine, Ethiopia, India, etc. in Welsh with rough coloured drawings, 16th century, Add. MS. 14921.

7. Bible studies and related subjects.

8. Manuscripts relating to the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem.

Printed Books in Oriental Languages

A number of rare books were already part of the foundation collections. Since then the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books has steadily increased its holdings of contemporary material and antiquarian books by purchase, donation (the reputation of the British Museum tempted many a bibliophile to consider this as the best way to avoid a later fragmentation of his collection), and more recently, by exchange. From time to time the purchase of whole collections has suddenly raised the importance of various language sections. Today the collections cover all subjects related to Geisteswissenschaften ('humanities' is much too limited a term), traditional science and technology,
politics, creative writings, and all subjects reflecting the change of social patterns and attitudes in a particular society. The number of languages has often been given as 200 but this includes only the major language groups. A complete breakdown of all the languages dealt with by the academic staff would show that well over 1,000 is a much more realistic figure. The term ‘book’ has quite different connotations in the East and in the West. Printing started in Asia many centuries before Gutenberg. By the middle of the sixth century A.D. the Chinese were beginning to develop considerable skill in the use of wooden blocks; in the eleventh century they had begun to experiment with movable type made of earthenware. Together with Buddhism the art of printing spread over Korea to Japan.

The Department has one of the richest collections of early Asian imprints. In the course of his expeditions to Central Asia at the beginning of the century, Sir Marc Aurel Stein brought back many rare items. Among them were several thousand printed paper rolls, including 380 fragments of block prints covering the period between A.D. 406-995. One of Stein’s great discoveries was what is now called ‘the oldest dated book in the world’ (fig. 4), a Chinese version of the Diamond Sutra consisting of 6 sheets of text and 1 sheet with wood-cut illustration, all neatly pasted together to form a single roll 16 feet long. It is dated 11 May A.D. 868.

Fig. 4. Chin-kang pan-jo-po-lo-mi ching. A Chinese translation of the Diamond Sutra (Vajracchedikāprājñāpāramitāsūtra) dated 11 May A.D. 868: the Buddha preaching to his aged disciple Subhūti. Or. 8210 (P. 2)
This is just one example. But it gives some indication of the many problems connected with the concept of printing in Asia. Whereas in Europe the term incunabula can conveniently be applied to all books printed before A.D. 1501, in Asia such a line of division would vary considerably according to language areas. It could in fact cover any period between the ninth and the eighteenth century. Block prints and early printed books demand the same treatment as manuscripts and are often of equal value from the point of scholarship. University series, series published by special manuscript libraries, State Departments – and learned institutions in general – form another important part of the collection. A breakdown made in 1959 lists about 3,000 journals relating to Asian studies in the different language sections. But this figure is by now certainly out of date. Periodicals are entered in the individual language section. The number of newspapers in Oriental languages currently received is c. 1,000 according to figures given in the Oriental Reading Room. This, however, does not include extinct series of newspapers which often contain invaluable material for the student of political history. The Department has certain rights to obtain one microfilm copy of every valuable manuscript that is to be taken out of the country. Negatives of scheduled manuscripts which have been filmed at the request of scholars using them for some research project are being kept for further use. The Department is also acquiring microfilms of foreign collections which are not easily accessible in the normal manner, as for example the Leningrad collection of Hebrew manuscripts.

The Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books has its own Conservation Studio and the Conservation officers work largely on an experimental basis. Several times their experiments have led to new discoveries which have been copied by museums and libraries abroad.

Department of Printed Books

At present the Department of Printed Books has without doubt the finest collection of English books in the world. As far as publications from other countries are concerned it has always pursued an acquisitions policy which guaranteed comprehensive coverage. In the case of Asian and African material, books printed in Britain in English and other languages reach the Department by the terms of the Copyright Act. Books from and about Asia and Africa in English (and other Western languages) are acquired at the discretion of the various specialists working in this particular field. This is not always an easy task. In countries where regular National Bibliographies are not easily available (e.g. African countries like Nigeria, Ghana, Rhodesia, etc.) the Department concentrates mainly on university series. Books from the Middle East and from some African countries (e.g. Kenya) are at present chosen from the American PL480 book list. However, some countries, like Israel, have already discontinued their co-operation with the PL480 scheme and others are about to follow this example.

In recent years PL480 (The Agricultural Trade Development and Assistance Act of 1954) has received a good deal of criticism and even American scholars are beginning to doubt the usefulness of the scheme. One of its main weaknesses lies in the fact that it greatly sacrifices quality for the sake of quantity. Since in addition all American libraries receive the
same titles, chosen not by their own staff but by remote offices in the countries producing the books in question, missing publications, and there are many, are practically lost for good.

The largest collections of non-Western material come from South Africa and India. In addition to her continuously growing output in vernacular languages India still produces a fairly large amount of English language material and will perhaps continue to do so for some time. There can be no doubt, however, that national languages are going to play a more and more dominant part in the countries of Asia and Africa. Malaysia, for example, is in the process of replacing English by Malay and will soon no longer be covered by the Department of Printed Books.

**Periodicals** related to Oriental subjects fall into two categories:

1. Periodical publications from Asia and Africa in non-Oriental languages.

Newspapers in Western languages related to Oriental subjects are listed in the *Catalogue of Newspapers in Colindale*. This is at present a card index arranged according to titles (e.g. *Hong Kong Daily Press* – Hong Kong, *Himalayan Times* – Kalimpong, etc.) which will be published in the near future. The Department of Printed Books has always made an attempt to pay as much attention to official documents as to commercial publications. Early international exchanges were negotiated in earnest during the 1880s and 1890s with the United States of America, New South Wales, Queensland, Canada, etc. Later exchanges, particularly since the end of the Second World War, have been negotiated – with the consent of the Foreign Office – with the most important Western and Asian countries. British official publications were supplied on the British Museum's behalf by H.M.S.O. At present about twenty-seven major Asian languages are received and processed.

African material in the Department of Printed Books falls mainly into two categories: government publications from what used to be French, Spanish, and Portuguese Africa (c. 70 titles) and government publications from countries which were once under British rule (c. 480 titles). In 1975 the Oriental Exchange Unit, formerly administered by the Department of Printed Books, became part of the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books.

The Philatelic Division of the Department contains the most comprehensive institutional collection of stamps in the world. The nucleus, the famous Thomas K. Tapling collection of over 100,000 stamps which illustrates the first fifty years of their existence, includes African and Asian material. Other important private collections which found their way into the Department are the Row Collection of Siam (1885–1920) and the Mosley Collection of stamps of British Africa (1847–1935). Most Oriental material comes from British India (fig. 5).
Map Library

In 1844 the large collections of maps in the British Museum were arranged in a separate administrative unit called the Department of Maps and Charts. Forty-eight years later the section known as the Map Room became a sub-division of the Department of Printed Books. With the establishment of the British Library the official designation changed once more and the department is now called the Map Library.

The most important collection of early maps is King George III’s Topographical Collection. Acquired in 1828 and consisting of some 50,000 maps and charts together with atlases, it covers the whole world and is without doubt the finest topographical collection of its day. As far as the Orient is concerned, it is especially rich in material related to areas like India and South East Asia which were linked with British overseas interests. The atlases, maps, and topographical views (printed and manuscript) are listed in a Catalogue of Maps, Prints, Drawings etc. forming the Geographical and Topographical Collection attached to the library of . . . King George the Third. 1829.

Another important item is King George III’s Maritime Collection of (printed and manuscript) atlases and charts which was acquired in 1844. See Catalogue of King George III’s Maritime Collection (c. 1850).

Oriental material is also well represented in the general collections. Maps of the survey of India up to 1947 are perhaps better documented than anywhere else. Other notable items are the many rare maps and atlases published in the vernacular in China and Japan; the most remarkable single item being the earliest Chinese Terrestrial Globe (manuscript). Made in 1623 by the Jesuit Fathers, it is said to come from the Imperial Palace in Peking. In addition the copyright deposit has greatly helped to make British maps and atlases of India, South East Asia, and the Far East an important part of the collection. An exhibition held in 1974 in co-operation with the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books, which concentrated exclusively on Chinese and Japanese maps was an excellent opportunity to show a tiny fraction of the Map Library’s Oriental collection to the public. (See Chinese and Japanese Maps. British Museum Publications Ltd. 1974.)

Music Room

Material related to Oriental music falls into two categories: works expounding theories about Eastern music written in European languages, and Oriental music material itself. Whereas the former can be found either in the Music Room or in the various language sections of Printed Books, the latter is the sole province of the Music Room. We shall have to examine the term ‘Oriental music material’ perhaps a little closer. It is not possible to write all Eastern music in European notation. The Indian tonal system, for example, does not fit the European scale. This problem, however, does not arise in quite the same way in the case of Chinese and Japanese music, and the Music Room has been able to acquire a good collection of such items.
Fig. 7. Letter of James I to an Eastern prince asking ‘for the settling of a factorie’ and sending ‘a small present’ by Sir Henry Middleton (who sailed April 1610, in command of the East India Company’s sixth voyage). 20 March 1610. Add. Ch. 56456

In addition Eastern style popular Oriental music is well represented. This category includes items like the immensely popular Indian film songs and revolutionary operas and ballets written in China in Western notation.

Science Reference Library

The Department has an annual intake of over 2,500 titles in Oriental languages. This number does not include material from South Asia, the Philippines, Ethiopia, and Malaysia. Publications from this area are processed in the European section of SRL. However, at least as far as Malaysia is concerned, this policy will soon have to be changed. Ninety per cent of all Oriental material comes from Japan. The series (monographs in Oriental languages are largely restricted to fauna and flora) are mostly complete. As in
the Department of Oriental Manuscripts and Printed Books, it is impossible to work on the basis of an over-all acquisition policy, the social and economic outlook of each individual country has to be taken into consideration.

A review of this kind cannot possibly hope to give more than the barest outlines of an exceedingly complex and intricate situation. Oriental material is only one of the aspects for which the collections now in the Reference Division have justly gained world-wide fame. However, its extent and scope is at present grossly underestimated. A national library does not collect for the present alone, its main function is to safeguard the intellectual achievements of each successive generation. This is perhaps more true and also more difficult in the case of Oriental material. The British Library has been fortunate in that the Trustees of the British Museum agreed to relinquish control over some of their most important departments. Rarely has any new institution been able to base its existence on such an impressive nucleus of material and expertise. Providing the resources are used in such a way as to create a harmonious balance between the heritage of the past and the demands of the future there is indeed no reason why the British Library should not become the foremost institution of its kind.