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Manuscript lost during Nazi era will be returned to Italy, Culture Minister Ed Vaizey confirms

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A 12th Century manuscript thought to have been lost during the chaos that followed the allied bombing of southern Italy in 1943 will be returned to the city of Benevento, Culture Minister Ed Vaizey announced today.

The Beneventan Missal is the first item to be returned under the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009. It was bought by a British soldier from a second hand book-seller in Naples in 1944, acquired at auction for the British Museum in 1947, and later transferred to the British Library.

Today's announcement confirms a 2005 ruling by the Spoliation Advisory Panel, the group of experts set up to advise the Secretary of State on the loss of cultural property during the Nazi era.

Ed Vaizey said:

"We should all be incredibly grateful that the Missal has benefited from the highest possible standards of care during its time at the British Library. I am very grateful to the British Library for their co-operation with the Panel and for their good stewardship of the Beneventan Missal. The city of Benevento will once again be custodian of this unique and culturally valuable manuscript, bringing to a close another chapter in its fascinating history."

The manuscript, a 12th century Missal written in 'Beneventan' script, known as Benevento VI 29 or Egerton 3511, was bought by the British Museum in 1947 before being transferred with the British Museum Library's collections to the British Library on its foundation in 1973.

The Spoliation Panel's 2005 report concluded that the Missal was most probably looted from the Metropolitan Chapter of the Cathedral City of Benevento between 1943 and 1944, but found no connection with this manuscript and the Holocaust. The Panel recommended its return but at the time this was not possible under the terms of the British Library Act (1972), which established the UK national library.

In November 2009 the Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act was passed, providing a statutory mechanism for the removal of any legal bar to deaccessioning the 12th century manuscript from the British Library Board's collections.

Following Royal Assent for the 2009 Act, the Metropolitan Chapter of Benevento resubmitted its restitution claim for the Missal, leading to the publication of today's report by the Spoliation Advisory Panel confirming the Missal's return.

Dame Lynne Brindley, Chief Executive of the British Library, said:

"The British Library accepted the Spoliation Advisory Panel's recommendations in 2005 and, following today's announcement, we are now in discussions with the Chapter Library in Benevento to make arrangements for the return of the Missal.

"I understand that the Chapter Library will continue to provide international scholars with the levels of access to the manuscript that they have enjoyed up to now, and that the item will continue to benefit from the highest standards of care and stewardship."

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Notes to Editors

1. The Spoliation Advisory Panel's report is available at: <http://www.culture.gov.uk/publications/7412.aspx>
2. The British Library is the national library of the United Kingdom and one of the world's greatest research libraries. It provides world class information services to the academic, business, research and scientific communities and offers unparalleled access to the world's largest and most comprehensive research collection. The Library's collection has developed over 250 years and exceeds 150 million separate items representing every age of written civilisation. It includes: books, journals, manuscripts, maps, stamps, music, patents, newspapers and sound recordings in all written and spoken languages. www.bl.uk

3. The Holocaust (Return of Cultural Objects) Act 2009 now allows 17 national collections in England and Scotland to return items lost during the Nazi era, where this follows a recommendation by the Panel and Ministers accept such a recommendation.