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Wax Tablets in Polish Collections – Issues Concerning the State of Preservation and Restoration

Abstract

Over millennia, wax tablets formed a very popular material to write on. The beginning of wax tablets (*tabula cerae*) dates back to early antiquity. They were used to create government documents concerning administration, judiciary and accounting. They were also used in private life, in education, and for correspondence. The tradition of using wax tablets in Poland was widespread in medieval times, and rare uses can be found as recently as the 19th century.

For the last few years, research regarding wax tablet collections in Poland has been carried out in the Paper and Leather Conservation Department at the University of Nicolas Copernicus in Toruń. In 2005, there were 256 tablets catalogued, including 34 polyptychs (not all complete). These collections are unique in Europe and consist of tablets that are preserved in archives, museums, and libraries in Toruń, Gdańsk, Szczecin, Jawor, Cracow, and Wrocław (the department in Legnica) Elbląg, and Kórnik.

This paper presents the causes of deterioration and reports on the stages of degradation found in Polish collections, regarding differentiation in the wooden support and wax sections. Destructive factors of a mechanical, biological, physical and chemical nature are discussed. The paper stresses the relation between the stage of degradation of wax sections and movement in the wood support.

Aspects related to conservation and restoration of the wax tablets are presented, using as a case sample of a polyptych consisting of 16 wax tablets with a judiciary text from the Teutonic Knight Commander's Headquarters in Gdańsk, dated 1368 to 1416, in the collection of the library of the Polish Academy of Sciences in Gdańsk.