



BETH

BETH Bulletin 2026

No. 04

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The BETH Archives: Preserving the Memory of European Theological Librarianship

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Why Archives Matter for an Association's History

BETH (Bibliothèques Européennes de Théologie) has for decades served as a meeting point for professionals who share a common goal: making theological knowledge accessible across Europe.

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of BETH's documents and archives. The change in the Presidency (and then in the secretarial staff, following the consistent and significant work carried out by Matina Curic) has once more highlighted the need to preserve a record of the work she undertook, as well as of those who were involved with the Association before her.

Due to the complex history of BETH, there is no single archive containing all the documents produced by all the presidents and secretaries over the years.

In 2023, an archival reconnaissance and description project was undertaken for two collections of BETH documents, now held at two locations at KU Leuven: namely at KADOC (Documentation and Research Centre on Religion, Culture and Society), and at the Maurits Sabbe Library. This article presents the results of that work, with the hope of making the archive better known to the BETH community and of stimulating further research into the association's history.

Reconnaissance and Description

The starting point of this project was to reach an understanding of the existing archive. The BETH archival holdings, distributed between KADOC and KU Leuven, present the association's working archive; that is, material accumulated over decades of activity, reflecting the organic growth of an organisation rather than the deliberate management of a collection. The documentary material, particularly the one held at the Maurits Sabbe Library, has not been organised in its entirety, and is intermingled with other material. This is partly due to the fact that much of the collection is made up of informal deposits. The community of BETH is indebted to Etienne D'Hondt, who generously left this material as a record of his work for BETH.

The first task was to identify the main series and sub-series that structure the fonds. For BETH, this meant distinguishing between records of governance (general meetings, board meetings), records of communication (newsletters, correspondence), and records documenting the association's relationships with its member organisations and with other bodies and entities in the wider world of theological librarianship.

The result consists of an inventory that currently covers almost three hundred archival units, spanning from the early 1980s to 2001, or the period during which the "Conseil International des Associations de Bibliothécaires de Théologie"

gradually transformed itself into the organisation we know today. The inventory comprises two main sections that correspond to the two archival locations: the BETH Archives at KADOC, and the BETH Archives at KU Leuven.



[Image 1] Archival Materials
(photo provided by Stefano Malaspina)

The BETH Archives at KADOC

The KADOC holdings represent an

important portion of the archive, comprising records of general meetings, board meetings, newsletters from the Conseil itself, and an extensive collection of newsletters and bulletins from BETH's member associations and “sister” organisations. It mostly comes from the archive of Isolde Dumke, former secretary of BETH.

General Meetings

The General Meetings series documents the annual assemblies that served as BETH's principal governing events. Ten archival units cover the meetings from the 19th General Assembly (London, 1990) through to the 28th General Meeting (Montpellier, 1999). For each meeting, the documentation typically includes the invitation and agenda circulated in advance, the minutes of the proceedings, the list of participants, and the annual reports submitted by member associations. Reading through these records gives a sense of BETH's membership and the international character of its gatherings. The London meeting of 1990 brought together reports from ABEF (France), AKThB (Germany), CIB-Maredsous (Belgium),



[Image 2] Archival Materials (photo provided by Stefano Malaspina)

VKWB (Germany), VRB (Netherlands), ABTAPL (United Kingdom), the library of the Conseil Oecuménique des Églises (Geneva), and VTB (the Netherlands), alongside minutes from the Selly Oak Colleges in the United States. The 1991 assembly in Vienna added reports from Austria, while the 1992 meeting in Strasbourg included remarkable documentation from Eastern Europe, which included reports from the Bibliothek der Päpstlichen Theologischen Akademie in Krakow, letters concerning monastic libraries in Lithuania, notes on a new department of religious literature in Moscow, and a presentation of the Higher School of Religions and Philosophy in St. Petersburg, demonstrating how BETH was engaging with the newly accessible world of theological libraries in Central and Eastern Europe.

The Cologne meeting of 1997 featured a substantial text on the Special Collection of the Tübingen University Library, and documents marking the 50th anniversary of AKThB. Finally, the Montpellier meeting of 1999 includes a reflective contribution by André Geuns, one of the key figures in BETH's history, asking, as the title directly puts it, "What shall we do with the Conseil?"

Board Meetings

The Board Meeting series covers the smaller, more frequent gatherings of BETH's executive body between 1990 and 1998. Nine units document meetings held primarily in Leuven (BETH has a rather special connection with Leuven; it is – if I may say so – the city where BETH feels 'at home'), one meeting held in Cologne (1997), and one combined meeting of the Board and the ETHERELI Commission (1998). These records are particularly valuable for understanding the day-to-day management of the association, such as through financial accounts, address lists, correspondence with publishers, and discussions about specific projects such as the ETHERELI project.

The 1998 meeting documents include financial reflections on the Conseil's capabilities and a detailed account of the ETHERELI Commission's work.

Newsletters of the Conseil

The Newsletters series preserves the issues of BETH's own newsletter from 1991 to

1998, covering ten archival units. For several issues, both the final published version and the draft are preserved, together with the accompanying correspondence between the newsletter's editors, particularly the exchanges between André Geuns and Isolde Dumke, whose collaboration was clearly central to BETH's communications during this period.

Member Associations and Other Organisations

Perhaps the most immediately useful section of the KADOC holdings for researchers is the extensive collection of newsletters, bulletins, and other serial publications from BETH's member associations and other organisations in the wider world of theological librarianship. This section alone accounts for the majority of the archival units in the inventory.

ATLA (now Atla, the American Theological Library Association) is represented by a substantial body of material: newsletters from 1997 to 2001, annual conference proceedings, program notes dating back to 1989, summaries of proceedings from the 50th through 55th Annual Conferences, and a copy of the commemorative volume published to celebrate ATLA's fiftieth anniversary.

Among European associations, the one most extensively documented is CIB-Maredsous, the Belgian centre for the documentation of sacred art and religion, whose publication *Interface* is preserved in an almost complete run of 57 issues spanning from 1988 to 2001. ABTAPL (the Association of British Theological and Philosophical Libraries) is represented through 18 issues of its *Bulletin* from 1987 to 2001. The French ABEF (and its successor ABCF) series contain 43 issues of the *Bulletin de liaison*, covering the years 1988 to 2001 with impressive continuity. The Dutch VRB contributed 23 issues of *VRB Informatie* from 1988 to 2000, while ABEI (the Italian association) provided 11 issues of its *Bollettino di informazione* from 1995 to 2001.

Smaller but significant contributions include the German VKWB's *Kirchliches Buch- und Bibliothekswesen* (one issue, 2000) and the journal *Informationen für kirchliche Bibliotheken*, preserved in ten issues between 1988 and 1999. The Spanish ABIE is represented by three issues of its internal bulletin from 1998 to 1999. The Polish

FIDES contributed an issue of Fides Biuletyn Bibliotek Kościelnych from 1996, and AKThB its Mitteilungsblatt of 1997.

The correspondence series (two archival boxes) includes a rich selection of letters to and from BETH's guidance, covering the period from 1990 to 1998.

The BETH Archives at Maurits Sabbe Library (KU Leuven)

The Maurits Sabbe (KU Leuven) section of the archive complements KADOC by going further back in time, with documentation beginning in the early 1980s. Many of the documents preserved here are as the result of the aforementioned work of Etienne D'Hondt.

As far as it can be ascertained, the archival units cover the General Meetings from the 9th (Heverlee, 1980) through to the 21st (Strasbourg, 1992) meetings, including some meetings, such as the 16th, 17th, 18th, and 19th, that are richly documented across multiple sub-units.

The documents of the 16th General Meeting in Maredsous (1987), held at the Benedictine abbey that was also home to CIB-Maredsous, include a document of constitutional importance: the Rules of the Conseil, together with the formal acceptance of the Conseil Oecuménique des Églises as an extraordinary member. The Maurits Sabbe holdings also include Board Meeting records from 1990, three Newsletter issues from 1990, the Brochure du Conseil International (1990), and the 38 archival units that contain an extensive correspondence sub-series documenting the dense network of exchanges between BETH's leadership – primarily Etienne D'Hondt, André Geuns, and Isolde Dumke – and their counterparts across Europe and beyond. Also present is a small but significant series of bulletins from member organisations, including the AKThB's Rundbrief of 1992.

What the Archive Tells Us, and What the Archive Does Not

Even from this first glance alone, it is clear that the archive has the potential to inspire numerous ideas that merit further research. The first is the remarkable coverage of certain figures, such as André Geuns, Isolde Dumke, Etienne D'Hondt, whose names recur across decades of minutes, correspondence, and newsletters, and who clearly provided the personal networks and intellectual energy that kept BETH functioning as an international community during the first 30 years of its existence.

The second apparent theme is the rich world of serial publications, annual reports, correspondence, and meetings that constituted the infrastructure of European theological librarianship in the pre-digital era.

Unfortunately, what the documents fail to convey is the warmth of the relationships that lie behind every name: connections, mutual support, and mutual respect. It is that very same warmth that is still felt today. Stepping into BETH's archive means gaining access to clues about these relationships.

Work in Progress

This inventory is not at all an achievement, but rather, a first step.

The inventory as it stands reflects the holdings currently identified and described at KADOC and at MS Library. It is already clear, however, that a vast number of documents are still missing. Gaps in the sequence of general meetings, incomplete runs of certain serial publications, and the absence of records for some years point to losses that may be irrecoverable, or may yet be found elsewhere. Some oral accounts (now almost legend) tell of the mysterious disappearance of a box of documents more than twenty years ago, on the sidelines of a BETH conference.

Another example are the records for the 24th General Meeting (1995) which is still represented only by distribution lists, with no agenda or minutes. Whether these were never deposited, or were misplaced, remains to be established.

Furthermore, the archive currently lacks a complete photographic record. Images from BETH's general meetings, from the libraries of member associations, or from significant events in the association's history would enormously enrich the documentary heritage. If members or former members hold photographs relating to BETH's activities, their deposit or donation would be warmly welcomed.

The physical arrangement of the holdings would benefit considerably from more systematic reordering and rehousing. Proper archival reordering that establishes a clear and consistent hierarchy of series, sub-series, and individual units would make the fonds more navigable for future researchers. Equally important would be the rehousing of documents in acid-free archival materials: folders, boxes, and enclosures

that meet conservation standards and protect the holdings from further deterioration. These activities require time, resources, and expertise, and they encompass the natural next stage of this project.

Lastly, the inventory is still provisional. Each description was based on a first survey of the holdings and will need to be refined, corrected, and expanded as the work continues. Some units may prove to contain more or entirely different material than what was previously recorded. Relationships between documents that appear in separate units may become clearer on closer examination. The provisional nature of the results should be taken not as a limitation but as an opportunity: the history of BETH is still being written, and there is yet much to discover.

If you or your institution hold documents relating to BETH's history, such as correspondence, meeting papers, photographs, publications, or any other material, we would be very grateful to hear from you. Even copies of items already held in the archive can be valuable for establishing context and filling gaps. A collective effort to recover and preserve the memory of BETH will benefit all of us.

I am personally grateful to the staff of KADOC and of the Maurits Sabbe (KU Leuven) University Library for their assistance, and to Hanne Storm Ofteland, former President of BETH: she approved and encouraged the first stages of the work.



[Image 3] Archival Materials (photo provided by Stefano Malaspina)