

## Virtual Vellum

By [Noelani Kirschner](#) | June 5, 2017



Hill Museum & Manuscript Library

Imagine wanting to examine a rare medieval Islamic manuscript housed deep within a library in Damascus. Now, with the launch of the Virtual Hill Museum & Manuscript Library Reading Room, you don't have to book a ticket to Syria in order to see it in high resolution. Eight scholars at Saint John's University in Collegeville, Minnesota, have spent the past 13 years digitizing 10,000 manuscripts, from late antiquity to the present, placing them online for researchers. So far, 540 libraries in the Middle East, Europe, Africa, and India have been scoured, and the goal is to scan and upload hundreds of thousands of manuscripts while exchanging metadata with other libraries. Researchers can

now compare multiple manuscripts side by side—a revolutionary tool. In the end, says Father Columba Stewart, who runs the digital repository, Virtual Hill will be the largest online collection of secular and religious manuscripts in the world.

Next steps involve updating the interface to improve search functions and public access. “The stuff we’ve been digitizing and putting online,” Stewart says, “has been virtually unknown to scholars outside the Middle East. This is going to significantly shift or transform how people view the history of the region, and then we’ll get a fuller picture of what the culture is actually like.”

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