

LOCAL

Minnesota monk Columba Stewart rescues ancient manuscripts from modern threats

By Jean Hopfensperger

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RENEE JONES SCHNEIDER

The Rev. Columba Stewart is racing worldwide to digitize sacred manuscripts before they are destroyed.

As extremists destroy ancient churches and cultural sites across the Middle East, a Minnesota monk has emerged as a global defender of the sacred documents often hidden inside.

The Rev. Columba Stewart offers a safety net to religious leaders across the globe who are struggling frantically to safeguard their heritage, often hiding their fragile, yellowed books behind secret walls of churches, monasteries and family homes.

Against the odds, Stewart's team brings digital photography stations to these fragile lands. The photos of manuscripts taken by local crews are sent electronically 6,000 miles away — to the safety of St. John's Abbey in Collegeville, where they are permanently preserved for the world to see.

"Before my very eyes, in real time, we are seeing the disappearance of an ancient Christian culture from its homeland," said Stewart, executive director of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library at St. John's University. "Their manuscripts, moved often in search of safety, are a powerful demonstration of the depth of their history and intellectual culture."

Stewart is a soft-spoken monk who has been executive director of the Hill library since 2003. It holds the world's largest digital collection of ancient manuscripts, with 150,000 handwritten

books and 50 million handwritten pages. Launched in 1965, its founder traveled to European monasteries offering to microfilm books to preserve them from possible Cold War violence.

Today preservation teams work at 16 sites in 11 countries in Africa, the Middle East, South Asia and Europe. The texts face destruction not just by Islamist extremists bent on obliterating artifacts of other faiths, but by civil wars and the simple ravages of time.



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Stewart held a 14th century book of hours from France at St. John's University in Collegeville, Minn.

It can be a dangerous, and urgent, mission.

In Syria, a collection of centuries-old sacred books that had been removed by local leaders from war-torn regions are now being digitized in an undisclosed location.

In northern Mali, the advance of Islamist troops prompted local scholars in Timbuktu to pack up more than 1,000 boxes of rare Islamic manuscripts and smuggle them south to the capital city of Bamako. They made contact with Stewart, who now has 12 camera stations there.

In northern Iraq, where the Hill museum had digitized manuscripts from the monastery Mar Behnam, the race against time was most apparent. Stewart pulled up a photo on his desktop computer and showed an image of the monastery today — a pile of stones and rubble.

While the monks there managed to hide many manuscripts, others now exist only virtually, Stewart said.

The urgency of the work is among the reasons that the National Endowment for Humanities (NEH) has donated more than \$2 million to the project over the years, including more than \$400,000 this year to advance technology in its virtual library.

"It's one of the most significant investments this agency has made in terms of world heritage," said Jon Parrish Peede, senior deputy chairman of the NEH. "The Hill museum is a particularly special grantee. For Father Columba and the monks, this work is a sacred calling."

Global attention

Stewart, who holds degrees from Harvard, Oxford and Yale universities, oversees this intense global operation from a small office on the serene campus of St. John's University. But his work

has attracted global attention, including international media coverage and a recent segment on CBS' "60 Minutes."

Sitting at his computer, he pulls up images of ragged-edged documents written in Arabic, Syriac, Coptic — languages most people will never know. He sees the pages as presenting mysteries to be unlocked by scholars, offering new insights into the religion, culture and literature of distant eras.

But getting those manuscripts from the Middle East to Middle America takes work, he acknowledges.

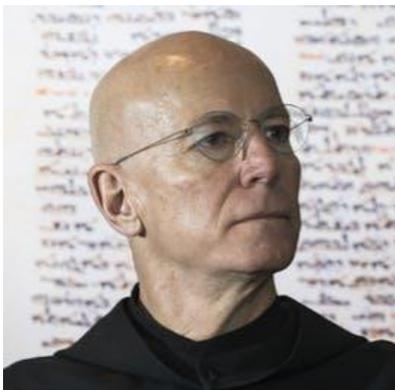
Preserving them requires, first, knowing they exist. Collections in larger monasteries and libraries are typically established. But many manuscripts have been safeguarded by individual churches, scholarly families and other preservationists who prefer to remain off the radar of possible looters.

The next questions: Are they in danger? Are they important? Can they be accessed?

If so, the next challenge is to dispel fears of local residents that Stewart and his partners will steal their precious religious heritage, said Stewart. During the colonial era, historic documents and artifacts were whisked to museums in Europe. Even today, the cultural heritage of countries such as Iraq — from books to art — can be purchased on the black market.

"When we establish first contact, they are very suspicious and closed," said Walid Mourad in an e-mail from his office in Lebanon, where he oversees the Hill Museum's Middle Eastern work. "So we kind of nurture our relationship to get them to know us better in person, and know our institution more."

To help allay their fears, Stewart presents himself first and foremost as a Benedictine — a religious order well known for its role in copying and preserving books in Europe during the Dark Ages. His dark brown robes are a reminder that he is a monk.



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Urgent mission The Rev. Stewart is racing worldwide to digitize sacred manuscripts before they are destroyed.

Building trust takes time, and Stewart does some serious coffee and tea drinking with local residents as they come to know one another. He also presents them with small gifts, such as wooden crosses made by the monks at St. John's — which now can be found across the world.

Stewart explains to the document-keepers that the photo copying will be done by local residents who will be trained and paid for their work. And that the documents' owners will get copies of the images and retain publication rights.

While originally focused on Christian documents, the work has progressed to include Islamic manuscripts as well. Stewart's team digitizing Islamic collections recently has been active near Temple Mount in Jerusalem.

"You don't know the safety of the place," said Stewart. "Tempers run high."

All the images are eventually backed up on hard drives in Minnesota, and copies are put on archival tape and stored inside a mountain in Utah.

Stewart jokingly calls it "our apocalyptic strategy."

That such a remarkable undertaking has its roots in a monastic community in rural Minnesota is impressive to Peede of the National Endowment for Humanities.

"There's an inner calm and a matter-of-fact delivery when talking about these extraordinary things they've done," said Peede. "There's a humbleness."

As for Stewart, he is thrilled that future generations of scholars will be able to "unlock the secrets" behind this ever-growing archive of priceless manuscripts.

"What excites me the most about this ... is the knowledge that for centuries people will be reading these manuscripts," Stewart said. "They'll know about St. John's Abbey. They'll know about Collegeville, Minnesota, because of HMML and because of what's in these documents."

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