

The Monk Who Saves Manuscripts From ISIS

Why a Christian wants to rescue Islamic artifacts



Father Columba Stewart inspects an ancient manuscript as a Syriac monk looks on at St. Mark's Syrian Orthodox Monastery in Jerusalem. Matilde Gattoni

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Rescuing the world's most precious antiquities from destruction is a painstaking project—and a Benedictine monk may seem like an unlikely person to lead the charge. But Father Columba Stewart is determined. Soft-spoken, dressed in flowing black robes, this 59-year-old American has spent the past 13 years roaming from the Balkans to the Middle East in an effort to save Christian and Islamic manuscripts threatened by wars, theft, weather—and, lately, the Islamic State.

“Given what’s happened in the last years since the rise of ISIS, it’s very clear that things are really endangered,” Stewart said. “It’s imperative to make sure that these manuscripts are safe, because we don’t know what will happen to them.”

As ISIS militants have destroyed countless artifacts, Stewart has attempted to counter them by working with Christian and Muslim communities in hotspots such as Iraq and Syria. He has trained local teams to photograph centuries-old books with the help of the non-profit organization he directs, the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML). Based out of Saint John’s Abbey and University in Collegeville, Minnesota, HMML is dedicated to preserving endangered manuscripts on microfilm and in digital format. So far, it has managed to photograph more than 140,000 complete manuscripts, for a total of more than 50,000,000 handwritten pages, according to the organization’s website.

But digitization is only the last stage in a slow and sometimes frustrating process. Getting in touch with the various religious orders, cultural organizations, and families that hold manuscript collections can require years of traveling and a lot of diplomacy aimed at gaining trust—with no guarantee of a positive outcome.

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Many of the communities Stewart approaches have been scarred by years of war, persecution or displacement, and are wary of outsiders. Some are especially skeptical about granting Westerners access to cultural treasures, given the tens of thousands of manuscripts looted during the colonial period and now housed in various museums and libraries around Europe. This is where Stewart’s reputation as a monk comes into play.

“Everybody knows about the Benedictines—manuscripts and learning, this is part of our identity, a brand which is somehow universal,” he said. Indeed, his involvement with manuscripts began almost accidentally when, in 2003, he was asked to join an HMML preparatory field trip to Lebanon due to his monastic connections. “Being a monk puts me in a very different category. People understand I am not representing a big business or an imperialist cultural agency.”



Technician Shaima Budeiry digitizes a manuscript in Jerusalem. (Matilde Gattoni)

Also crucial to this understanding is HMML’s policy of training local people, who keep total physical control of the manuscripts. “We never touch the manuscripts,” Stewart explained. “They are the ones doing the work and getting paid for it. They feel proud because they can say ‘We did this,’ which is true.”

In Jerusalem, where HMML has been digitizing four Islamic and Christian collections, the process is handled by Shaima Budeiry, who studied manuscript preservation in Dubai. She has spent the past several years photographing thousands of pages, including those of her family’s private collection.

“I feel very proud of what I am doing,” she said, showing me a beautiful manuscript decorated with gold, owned by the Budeiry Library. She wore gloves to avoid damaging the delicate pages. “I like this job because this collection belongs to my ancestors.”

Stewart visits Jerusalem yearly, and it was there that I recently observed him meeting with stern Orthodox Syrian monks, influential Armenian patriarchs, and cosmopolitan Palestinian families. One morning, as the sun shone on the domes of the minarets of the Old City, I followed him through the narrow alleys of the *souq*. Stopping in front of an iron door surmounted by a stone arch, he entered the gate of St. Mark’s Syrian Orthodox Monastery. A group of monks sitting around a white plastic table greeted him warmly. After some small talk and a few sips of cardamom coffee, a frail, bearded man led him upstairs into a dusty room. Waiting in wooden cabinets were rows of priceless manuscripts dating back to the sixth century.

Stewart carefully opened one manuscript, lingering over the elegant calligraphy of its yellowed pages. It was written in Syriac, an ancient Middle Eastern language. “Isn’t it beautiful?” he said.

Many Syriac Christians have been persecuted and forced to flee their homes in Syria and Iraq in recent years. Their manuscripts are one of the remaining embodiments of their cultural identity. So, when Stewart approached the monastery in 2011, the monks saw him as a chance to save their history.

“These books were left by our Holy Fathers,” explained Shimon Çan, the 65-year-old librarian, calligrapher, and amanuensis of St. Mark’s, and one of the most enthusiastic supporters of the digitization project. “It is our duty to open these treasures to the world and let our youngsters understand the wisdom they exude.”

Dealing continuously with the worries of such endangered communities can be emotionally draining. By sunset, Stewart’s energy was starting to wane. “I am almost 60 and I won’t be doing this when I will be 70,” he told me.

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Under Stewart’s direction, HMML has expanded its activities to India, where it recently photographed 10,000 palm-leaf manuscripts, and to Ethiopia, where it digitized the Garima Gospels, believed to be the oldest surviving Ethiopian manuscripts. The organization has also worked in Middle Eastern countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Turkey, photographing thousands of manuscripts of all confessions and languages, from Coptic to Maronite and from Greek to Latin.



Columba visits with the monks at St. Mark’s Syrian Orthodox Monastery. (Matilde Gattoni)

In 2013, the organization decided to start digitizing Islamic material as well. In Mali, HMML is currently digitizing more than 300,000 Islamic manuscripts, which risked being destroyed when Islamists



Shimon Çan, the monk responsible for the library at St. Mark’s Syrian Orthodox Monastery, gazes at one of its manuscripts. (Matilde Gattoni)

associated with al-Qaeda took over the city of Timbuktu in 2012.

With the rise of ISIS, 2,000 out of the 6,000 manuscripts that HMML managed to digitize in Iraq between 2009 and 2014 have been lost or destroyed. Other manuscripts digitized in Syria may have suffered the same fate.

“I try not to think about that, because if I do I get really upset,” Stewart said. “But it would be more painful if I heard of something that was destroyed that we didn’t photograph, because that would be totally lost.”

While making digital surrogates of manuscripts can be fairly easy, preserving the originals from physical deterioration is a whole different matter. Because old pages are vulnerable to mold, worms, and insects, manuscripts have to be wrapped and stored in acid-free papers and cartons, sometimes in a climatized environment free of excessive humidity. Once a manuscript becomes seriously damaged, restoring it is a costly process.

“We recently spent \$70,000 to restore around 100 manuscripts,” lamented Khader Salameh, the septuagenarian librarian of the al-Khalidi Library in Jerusalem, where a collection of 1,200 Islamic, Ottoman, and Persian manuscripts is currently being digitized by HMML. The works span the gamut from medicine to astronomy, from Quranic exegesis to philosophy and poetry. The oldest manuscript, a text on early Islamic history, dates back to the 10th century.

“Although most of the manuscripts are connected with the Islamic religion, they also make you also understand the culture of the society at the time they

were written,” Salameh said. “These works do not belong only to Arabs, Muslims or Palestinians. They are a heritage for everyone in the world.” Stewart, whose ultimate goal is to create the single most comprehensive collection of digitized manuscript material, knows that the main beneficiaries will be scholars. But he also hopes that the collection can contribute to a better understanding between Christians and Muslims.

“If we don’t find deeper affinities, we will always be stuck on our superficial differences. We will remain afraid and suspicious of each other,” Stewart said. “Relations were not always easy in the past, but if we learn from places where they lived together, we might learn how to live together.”



Stewart examines a religious item he hopes to procure for HMML's museum in Minnesota. (Matilde Gattoni)

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