

Conference reports

The Tenth Islamic Manuscript Conference *Manuscripts and conflict* **Cambridge, 31 August–2 September 2014**

Since its founding, The Islamic Manuscript Association has annually held conferences, with the overarching aim to stimulate the preservation and increase accessibility of Islamic manuscript collections around the world. In 2014 the Tenth anniversary of the Islamic Manuscript Conference was celebrated, hosted in Cambridge in cooperation with the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation and the HRH Prince Alwaleed Bin Talal Centre of Islamic Studies, University of Cambridge. The conference's special theme, 'Manuscripts and Conflict', was far from celebratory. It reflected the effects of recent and current crises, in the Balkans, the Middle East and Africa, and addressed acute needs resulting from these political and social conflicts. Case studies were presented of manuscript rescue efforts, and the role of the international community and enforcement of international laws were discussed. The conference also provided an optional special programme, including a workshop on disaster planning for Islamic manuscript collections.

The first day, focussing on 'Manuscripts and Conflict', opened with a contribution by András Riedlmayer, bibliographer in Islamic Art and Architecture at Harvard University. During the Balkan Wars of the 1990s, he travelled through the region and documented the dramatic consequences of the conflict for manuscript collections. Riedlmayer reported about looting and the role of the international art market; he also described how manuscript collections can be ideologically targeted. His account illustrated the fragile situation of collections, when apart from destruction of physical collections their catalogues were damaged and digital or other surrogates of catalogues were lacking. The casus Riedlmayer presented contained a clear message which resonated with the audience.

Several other impressive contributions followed, for example by Father Columba Stewart, of the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library, Saint John's

University, Minnesota. He presented the difficulties and successes of a long-term project: the digital preservation of endangered manuscripts in the Middle East, in Africa, and India, including work evolving from the recent rescue operation of manuscript collections in Timbuktu.

Assistant Professor of Arabic Language and Religious Literature, Department of Religious Studies, David Hollenberg, University of Oregon, presented another project that connected digitisation with manuscripts in conflict. He talked about the practical needs during an operation that aimed to digitise as many Yemeni manuscripts as possible, in sub-optimal conditions in a destabilised region.

The role which manuscript collections can play in post-conflict recovery was addressed by Anahita Shahrokhi, Institute of History, Archaeology and Ethnography, Dagestan. She used the North Caucasus Ethnic Conflicts of the 1990s and its destructive impact on Islamic manuscripts, particularly on research and publishing, as a case study.

Gaia Petrella and Irene Zanella, both Italian independent paper and manuscript conservators, provided insight in the organisation and realisation of a conservation training programme in Erbil.

For the purpose of this education programme, they developed a conservation survey form and terminological glossary in the Arabic, Kurdish (Sorani), and English languages.

During day two and three, new studies and best practices were presented. But, since this year's conference was the Tenth Anniversary of the Islamic Manuscript Association, the opportunity was also used to reflect on the undertaken projects and achievements of the years past, and to look ahead. This formed the context for the recurring subject areas: cataloguing, conservation, digitisation, and research relating to Islamic manuscripts and manuscript collections, which were covered during day two and three.

For a full programme of the conference, visit <http://www.islamicmanuscript.org/biennialconference/2014conference/programme.aspx>.

Throughout the first decade of TIMA activities, the organisation has helped shaping networks and the exchange of knowledge. TIMA supported a substantial number of projects in the above subject areas and established its own corporate journal, *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*. For the next period, there will be a focus on disseminating knowledge by organising or supporting courses and workshops. It was therefore decided to start of a new conference schedule which will be biennial from now on; this will allow the organisation to spend more time on the development of this programme.

Karin Scheper, Leiden University