

COMSt Team 5 Workshop “Multiplicity of Oriental Bookbinding Traditions and Conservation”

Scientific Report

Summary

The COMSt Team 5 Workshop, “Multiplicity of Oriental Bookbinding Traditions and Conservation”, organised by Laura E. Parodi (laurae.parodi@gmail.com) and Nikolas Sarris (sarris1@otenet.gr), took place at the Technological Educational Institute of the Ionian Islands, Department for the Preservation and Conservation of Cultural Heritage, in Zakynthos (Greece) on October 9-10, 2013.

The Workshop’s aim was to bring to the table the multiplicity of bookmaking practices within the individual “traditions” covered by the COMSt programme. Since the field of book history and the archaeology of Oriental manuscripts is only just developing, it is not surprising that the various traditions are currently distinguished by typifying each tradition as an archetype. However, conservators responsible for the preservation of Oriental manuscripts need to be aware of the multitude of techniques and structures present in each main “tradition” (Syriac, Byzantine, Islamic, etc.). This awareness must similarly be present in those responsible for the training of conservators in the field in Oriental countries. At the crossroads of scientific research and practice, the conservator’s profession is defined by different standards and different perceptions depending on country (even in the West).

Description of the scientific content of and discussions at the event

Below are listed the main topics addressed by the Workshop.

- 1. The archetypal traditions of Oriental bookmaking are largely abstractions; in reality regional or historical differences may be more important than linguistic or “ethnic” classification.**

The case of Hebrew manuscripts, presented by Neil McManus (conservator, working in Israel), is especially illuminating in this respect. A manuscript is classified as “Hebrew” not necessarily on the

basis of language (besides Hebrew, Ladino, Judeo-Arabic and Judeo-Persian are all languages used in Oriental Hebrew manuscripts), nor – pertinent to this workshop – on the basis of bookmaking practices: even when Torah scrolls and amulets are not considered, and the attention focused only on the codex format, Oriental Hebrew scrolls fall mostly into two categories: those bound according to Islamic or Italian practices. However, as McManus illustrated, numerous other less known traditions also exist, most notably that of Karaite Jews, who very often copied and bound the manuscripts themselves and were not professionals; as a result, a range of different sewing structures are observed. Interestingly, when Karaite manuscripts were collected in Israel during the twentieth century, the contents rather than the structure were considered important, and many were rebound.

The Islamic tradition, even as seen in a single collection, presents comparable variety, including similarly little-known structures. Karin Scheper (Conservation Department at Leiden University) presented case studies from the Leiden University collection. Among the most interesting and often encountered is the sewing based on four stations (rather than the two stations regarded as “classic” in Islamic bindings). While this structure is typical of volumes that were given a new binding, in the 18th and 19th century (when the manuscript tradition was still well alive in the Islamic world), it was used in most bindings, extending to new manuscripts and printed books. The reasons why this structure was preferred are an object for debate: the structure certainly puts less stress on the sheets and thus results in better preservation. But not all Islamic manuscripts were originally made of bifolia sewn together: African manuscripts, usually made of loose leaves contained in a thick leather cover or satchel, are today often found sewn together tightly – so much as to hinder consultation (and resulting in additional conservation problems) – but the dating of such sewings is difficult and to date unclear. Another case presented was that of manuscripts that were made of bifolia and quires but never bound: again, some of these in various collections were “normalised” thinking they were unfinished – but the number present in the Leiden collection (including even some printed books) suggests they were finished in this way and not meant to be sewn, although the reason is not clear and will require further study.

2. The diversity of bookbinding structures implies the conservator should carefully observe and “listen” to each object even when its structure is unusual or never encountered before.

A logical consequence of the variety of practices encountered within the “major” Oriental bookmaking traditions is that “anomalous” manuscript structures should be carefully recorded and researched, as the “anomaly” may be a clue to provenance / dating or may yield important information on the object’s history, to complement codicological and paleographic information.

Paul Hepworth (conservator, working in Turkey and Iraq) cited instances where the characteristic flap which covers the bookblock in Islamic bindings does not extend to the whole thickness of the book: often conservators – unaware that the anomaly is present in several specimens across different collections – “normalise” the flap by adding a leather extension so it comes to full thickness, thus obscuring (or in the case of undocumented treatment, removing) relevant information which may one

day lead to the recognition of a specific book typology.

3. The perception of conservation varies across countries (as also historically), and work on the field in Oriental countries must take the differences into account.

Hepworth also recalled that patrons in Oriental countries (including both private and national institutions) often have a different perception of conservation (and are seldom interested in preservation or research). Conservators working in Oriental institutions, as Marco Di Bella (conservator working in Egypt and Iraq) recalled, are usually rewarded based on how many hours they have worked on an item and how much treatment they have applied – while the chemicals used may have to be listed in the documentation (as in the case of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina in Egypt), the methodology applied is not considered relevant. As Hepworth further recalled, often the most important thing for Oriental patrons is that the manuscript should look different after treatment – “improved” and “freshened up”. This is a far cry from current standards of best practice in the West – which place emphasis on minimal intervention; again contrary to best practice, it encourages short-term results without consideration of the long-term consequences.

While in some cases Western conservators may have to negotiate and insist on the necessity for minimal intervention approach, for the sake of the object, they should also be ready to respect the different role, function and perception of manuscripts in other traditions and contexts.

A case in point is that of Ethiopian manuscripts, discussed by Nikolas Sarris (Assistant Professor at the Department for the Preservation and Conservation of the Cultural Heritage, TEI of the Ionian Islands), or of Syriac/Coptic manuscripts, presented by Flavio Marzo (senior conservator, The British Library): these, even when very old and precious, are typically still in use and therefore the conservator’s concern is that of ensuring maximum fitness under repeated stress from access and liturgical use.

4. The training of staff in Oriental countries faces similar problems – with a necessity to negotiate between different perceptions and a need to raise the local conservators’ awareness.

Case studies were presented by Marco Di Bella (Egypt, Yemen, Uzbekistan, Lybia) and Irene Zanella (senior conservator, The British Library), (Mauritania, Iraq). The range of cases presented shows institutions may already have structures and practices in place – but again often with practices not considered optimal – or they may have been beneficiaries of international actions in the past, with materials donated and structures set up by UNESCO or by Western academic institutions, but subsequently endured decades of hiatus after which new staff had to be trained. The case of Mauritania, presented by Zanella, and that of Yemen, presented by Di Bella, were both interesting in this respect as they saw the involvement of national institutions years or decades after the international aid. In Mauritania, after realising that private collections could not be centralised in a national institution, it

was decided to train officers and create a few regional centres (in historic cities across the country) so that they could take care of local collections and also serve as reference for advice on the preservation and treatment of the vast majority of manuscripts still in private hands. Accordingly, a public awareness campaign was conducted alongside the training. In Yemen, thirty years after the German-sponsored creation in the 1980s of a National Library of Manuscripts (Dar al-Makhtutat) to house the remarkable findings of early manuscript fragments in the 1970s, the state finally undertook actions to enlarge the library (now too small for the continually growing collection) and, with UNESCO cooperation, organised training programmes assisted by targeted publications in Arabic.

5. Conservation and preservation in the field present specific and often unforeseen problems, which require plasticity, quick responses and sometimes creative solutions.

Sarris illustrated some of the difficulties encountered in his work in the field in Ethiopia. All the digitization and preliminary conservation was conducted virtually in the open air (or in basic workstations set up at rustic private homes, or monasteries). Some essential materials, such as alcohol, were hard to find locally and impossible to take along on a flight; others, such as gelatine, suffered attacks from rodents. Even when housed in a national institution in the city, the light and moisture conditions were so far from ideal that quick solutions had to be devised to improve the situation and make treatment possible.

Marzo similarly worked on manuscripts in monasteries in the Nile Delta, including a composite parchment manuscript featuring some very ancient portions, in extreme climatic conditions ranging from fog to extremes of heat and dryness. The stabilisation of manuscripts in such environments is especially problematic. In the discussion, the issue of air-conditioning was raised, concluding it is often wishful thinking to expect air-conditioning to work in Oriental countries, especially in areas where electricity is only provided for limited hours each day. Under such circumstances, it is far better to leave the manuscripts in their natural weather conditions than to expose them to continuing shifts and temperature and humidity resulting from partial or improperly managed air-conditioning.

6. Even cutting-edge treatments may tomorrow reveal their limits: hence the importance of conveying key principles rather than being prescriptive in the Handbook.

An especially illuminating case study is that of Dead Sea scrolls, presented by Ira Rabin (Federal Institute for Material Analysis, Berlin). The scrolls were notoriously collected between 1947 and the 1960s and were subject to various treatments since their discovery. In the 1960s, the primary focus was on their physical reconstruction from about 18,000 fragments: in the process, some (particularly those with a high copper content in their ink) were left exposed to light and air for months after centuries in darkness, resulting in such complete destruction that today they are almost pulverised and only old photographs allow researchers to study them. Others were assembled using scotch tape; but the tape strips themselves resulted in less damage than the treatments subsequently applied as late as the 1990s to remove them. Various substances, most notably castor oil (on a group of scrolls), were used to

enhance their legibility – which in the long run has actually worsened the situation.

Even a success story such as that of the digitization of Homer’s Iliad in Venice (Codex Veneticus A), presented by Manfred Mayer (University Library, Graz), remind us that technology quickly becomes obsolete. While the complete, 3D and multispectral recording of the most important manuscript of Homer’s Iliad through a specially-devised cradle and scanner stands as a landmark of scientific achievement, the technological advancements made since its completion in 2006 mean there is room for further improvement and possibly some new, more detailed imaging in the near future.

The discussion was extremely lively and lasted beyond the expected limits. Its focus was mostly on how to convey best practice and sensitivity to the multiplicity of traditions in the Team’s chapter within the COMSt Handbook – a discussion that was further pursued the next day during a productive and intense full-day editorial meeting.

Among the main topics debated were:

- a. the changing profile of the conservator – even in the West this is often a bookbinder, whereas increasingly professionals are academic researchers with a background in science and conservation.
- b. how far can we provide “recipes” or “advice” on best practice, especially given that we ourselves, in the West, have not yet reached a consensus and the long-term assessment of past treatments often reveals mistakes made in the past?
- c. how far can we provide this advice without sounding “colonial” or disrespectful?
- d. to what depth should the topic be covered in the Handbook, given it is not a handbook for practitioners (though presumably it will be perused by them as well)
- e. the importance of research and the role of the conservator and conservation in yielding scientifically relevant information should be forcefully stressed in the chapter
- f. minimal intervention should be championed

Assessment of the results and impact of the event on the future directions of the field

This workshop provided a unique opportunity to convey a discussion on the conservation of Oriental manuscripts among leading conservators who have a deep knowledge and a range of experiences from the realities related to the conservation of Oriental manuscripts, particularly from Oriental collections and institutions.

The intention of COMSt - Team 5 is that through the Handbook a message could be conveyed, to demonstrate what the mentality of modern conservation aims at, to present what is the state-of-the-art

in manuscript conservation and to advice on the best practices and the main problems encountered in the conservation of oriental manuscripts today. By gathering a group of experts, the editorial team of COMSt – Team 5 aimed also at receiving further advice regarding particular areas where external expertise was considered beneficial. What is more, a discussion of the approach followed by Team 5 needed to be communicated outside the group. The discussions that followed the presentations were particularly useful in advance of the editorial meeting, since they gave the opportunity for further thoughts and helped identifying areas that would be beneficial to address in the Handbook and concerns that required further attention.

On another note, this workshop was one of the rare events where experts of conservation had an opportunity to present their work and their projects, particularly for the preservation and conservation of Oriental manuscripts, within an international audience and to help promote the science of conservation and its importance not only for the physical protection of the manuscripts but also for their benefits in bibliographical studies and the archaeology of books and their bookbindings. The dissemination of knowledge on these subjects are still in their infancy and the organization of events such as this workshop was immensely beneficial for a better understanding of the role of conservation and its establishment within the bibliographical, historical and analytical studies.

The hosting of this event in Zakynthos came at a particular moment for the Technological Educational Institute of the Ionian Islands. The establishment of the course on the Protection and Conservation of Cultural Heritage a few years ago (2007) aimed to support and advance the training on conservation of cultural objects in a culturally rich area of Greece, which at the same time would form an international centre of conservation to attract researchers, scholars and conservators worldwide to promote its study. The Department actively supports and performs conservation work on Oriental manuscripts for private, monastic and state collections of the Ionian Islands and its networking and presence in the international scene of conservation offers the possibility for further collaborations and gains for all involved. This workshop was an opportunity for conservators to visit the facilities of the department, to see the work that is being carried out by conservation students and to learn about largely unknown and little visited collections of Byzantine manuscripts that are held in Zakynthos collections.

ANNEXE I: Programme of the meeting

Wednesday, October 9th

09.00-09.20

Welcome of the participants, introduction to the workshop and practical remarks

09.20-10.40

I session: Case studies on best practices and training on the conservation of Oriental manuscripts

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| Marco Di Bella, | An evaluation of the current state and the future prospects of conservation training in the Middle East |
| Flavio Marzo, | Conservation of Oriental library material: a personal experience from the conservation of a 5 th century Syrian Manuscript in Egypt |
| Irene Zanella, | Conservation training in Mauritania and Iraq |

10.40-11.00

Coffee break

11.00-12.20

II session: Case studies on best practices and training on the conservation of Oriental manuscripts

Neil McManus,	Hebrew manuscripts conservation
Nikolas Sarris,	Manuscripts conservation in Tigray, Ethiopia. Managing high-end conservation work in unfavourable conditions.
Karin Scheper,	Some cases of sewing on manuscripts from the Islamic collection of Leiden University Library

12.20 – 13.40

Lunch break

13.40-15.00

III session: Case studies on best practices and training on the conservation of Oriental manuscripts

Paul Hepworth,	Islamic Manuscripts: Different Structures, Different Treatments
Ira Rabin,	Conservation of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
Manfred Mayer,	Digitization of Homer's Iliad in Venice: A report.

15.00-15.20

Coffee Break

15.20- 17.00

Conclusions and open discussion

17.00-17.15

Introduction to the editorial work of the following morning

20.00

Dinner

Editorial Meeting (Only for members of COMSt Team 5)

Thursday, October 10th

9.00-10.40

IV session: Editorial work

10.40-11.00

Coffee break

11.00-12.40

IV session: Editorial work (continuation)

12.40-13.40

Lunch

13.40-15.00

Future steps

17.00-20.00

Visit to the manuscripts collection and the museum of the 16th c. Monastery of St. Dionysios, centre of Zakynthos and to the museum of Xenopoulos.

20.30

Dinner

ANNEXE II: List of Speakers and Participants

1. Laura E. Parodi, Italy
2. Nikolas Sarris, Greece
3. Karin Scheper, Netherlands
4. Marco Di Bella, Italy
5. Flavio Marzo, UK
6. Neil McManus, Israel
7. Irene Zanella, Italy
8. Ira Rabin, Germany
9. Paul Hepworth, Turkey
10. Arietta Revithi, Greece
11. Ewa Balicka-Witakowska, Germany
12. Manfred Mayer, Austria
13. Suzanne Hummel, Germany
14. Sophie Dege, Germany
15. Abraham Adugna, Ethiopia
16. Vladimir Kotchetkov, Russia

Participants also included book and paper conservation students from the Department for the Protection and Conservation of Cultural Heritage of Zakynthos