

THE FACULTY

A Monk Saves Threatened Manuscripts Using Ultramodern Means

BY JENNIFER HOWARD

DOES THE phrase “monks and manuscripts” conjure up an image of medieval scribes huddled over parchment in unheated cells? One Benedictine monk, the Rev. Columba Stewart of St. John’s Abbey and University, in Collegeville, Minn., keeps that historic involvement with manuscripts alive in a very modern way—by making digital images of them.

Father Stewart is executive director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at St. John’s. A historian of the early monastic period, he leads the museum’s ambitious and longstanding effort to find and digitize manuscripts held in monastic communities in the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. “Our primary focus is Christian traditions, because that’s our expertise,” Father Stewart says.

Their religious affiliation helps them gain entree to places that may have good reason to view outsiders with suspicion. Even so, museum staff members must proceed carefully as they race to create digital archives of manuscripts threatened by deteriorating environmental and political conditions.

The work began in the 1960s, when a monk at St. John’s decided to microfilm manuscripts fading away in Austrian monasteries. Most of the museum’s current activity focuses in and around the Middle East.

“At this precise moment, we have 14 different studios operating in eight countries”—Iraq, India, Italy, Lebanon, Malta, Syria, Turkey, and Ukraine, Father Stewart says. The museum also does intermittent work in Ethiopia.

Since Father Stewart became director, in 2003, he has overseen the imaging of some 17,500 manuscripts. Over the decades, the museum has made a photographic record of more than 110,000 manuscripts—an estimated 35 million pages’ worth—shifting from microfilm to digital imaging as the technology has evolved. Lately it has run 15 to 20 projects a year. “The coming years may find us involved in fewer, more complex projects,” Father Stewart says. “It’s hard to say which doors will open.”

Each on-site digitizing studio is staffed by local people whom the museum trains and pays to do the work. It also buys equipment locally whenever it can; once a project has been completed, that equipment remains with the community. Copies of the hard drives containing the images are sent to the



WAYNE TORBORG. IMAGE COPYRIGHT OUR LADY OF BALAMAND MONASTERY.

An 18th-century Arabic Horologion (Book of Hours) from Balamand Monastery, near Tripoli in northern Lebanon, was the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library’s first project in the Middle East.

museum and their contents added to its archive for anyone to see and study. The manuscripts stay with their owners.

The documents come from a variety of Christian traditions and languages: Syriac (a dialect of Aramaic), Arabic, Armenian, Ge’ez (Ethiopic), Slavonic. Some of the materials date as far back as the 6th century AD. Others are as recent as the 19th and 20th centuries, Father Stewart says. Most of the Middle Eastern documents the museum works with date from the 14th to 18th centuries.

Much of what they contain is liturgical: Scripture and commentaries, lessons and prayers. Some, however, include histories, scientific texts, even grammars. Often they include details about who produced the document, who paid for it, and who has taken care of it, as well as records of important events. "People would sometimes use manuscripts as a place to take notes," Father Stewart says. "Sometimes those notes go right up to the recent past." He has had the experience, in southeastern Turkey, of having someone come up to him, point to something in a manuscript, and say, "I wrote that."

Contrary to the popular notion of monastic manuscripts, most of these are not heavily illustrated. "They may have a little marginal decoration," Father Stewart explains. "Not all the manuscripts are immediately visually arresting." Digital imaging allows the museum's teams to make a photographic record of nontextual details such as ownership seals and bindings.

It costs about \$20,000 annually to run each project. Once an on-site studio is up and running at a good pace, it can scan 400 to 500 manuscripts in a year. Money comes from the museum's endowment, from donors in the Twin Cities area, and from foundations; the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation has provided cataloging support to the museum. The museum's total budget, including all of its operations in Minnesota as well as the digital archiving, is about \$1-million a year, Father Stewart says.

The Library of Congress has raised \$100,000 to help digitize a selection of manuscripts and include them in the World Digital Library. Mary-Jane Deeb, chief of the African and Middle Eastern division at the library, does not know of any other manuscript-imaging endeavor that has the scope of this one. The Hill Museum teams work "across the various Eastern Christian communities, across the various linguistic and national boundaries, and that is a unique contribution," she says. "It's a remarkable, remarkable project."

DIGITIZING AND DIPLOMACY

Father Stewart describes the work as a kind of triage. "First of all we have to find out where the manuscript collections are," he says. That information comes from scholarly resources and from personal connections. "Then we think about what is most endangered or inaccessible, and then it's a matter of where we can make contact, where we can find people who can introduce us."

Father Stewart is on sabbatical this year at Dumbarton Oaks Research Library, in Washington. His current research focuses on the emergence of a distinctive monastic culture between the third century AD and 600 AD. He will also make time to spread the word about the museum's work on Capitol Hill and among federal agencies that might take an interest.

Long before he began traveling the world to preserve manuscripts, Father Stewart was interested in history and geography. "When I was a kid, the walls of my bedroom were wallpapered with maps from *National Geographic*," he recalls. As an undergraduate at Harvard University, he studied history and literature, then went on to earn a doctorate from the University of Oxford.

A trim man of 52, Father Columba has the manner of a diplomat mindful of the need to choose his words with care. He is deliberate but not unfriendly. He relishes the orderliness of monastic life, its daily rituals and continuities. He joined a Benedictine abbey in part because he was drawn to the Benedictines' sense of history. The third book to come off Gutenberg's press was a book of psalms for a Benedictine monastery in Germany, according to Father Columba.

"When you become a Benedictine monk, you join a tradition that is more than 1,500 years old," he says. "But we're also very much people of our time and place."

The museum's work begins long before any digital imaging takes place. It can take months or years to convince some communities that outsiders, especially from the West, can be trusted. Father Stewart must persuade the manuscripts' caretakers that the museum is acting in good faith and is not trying to make money off the work. (It doesn't.)

"The fact that I'm a monk helps, because that helps create a common bond," Father Stewart says.

He reads several languages, including Syriac, Latin, Greek, and a bit of Arabic, and is brushing up his Armenian during his sabbatical. He says that his spoken Arabic is poor. In the Middle East he often uses French, a common language for many church members in the region. Face-to-face negotiation is often what clinches the deal, so Father Stewart spends a good deal of time traveling. "The caretakers of the manuscripts need to see the monk and interact with the guy who directs the library," he says. "It's a way of underscoring that we're not trying to take something."

Father Stewart also relies on his director of field operations, Walid N. Mourad, who is based in Lebanon. Once the Hill Museum finds out about a manuscript collection in the region, either Mr. Mourad or Father Stewart will approach that community—carefully.

"Over here, people tend to think that if you initiate contact, you want to rob from them or steal from them," Mr. Mourad says. Manuscript owners worry that images of their collections will be sold without their permission or that people will stop visiting their monasteries if the images are posted online. "This is what I try to explain to them—that if the manuscripts are hidden in their library, no one is going to come visit them," Mr. Mourad says.

To get a project going, Mr. Mourad looks for local residents—usually lay people—who are literate in English and have basic computer skills. "No deep knowledge of com-

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puters is required,” he says. In four or five days, he can have workers trained and ready. He makes a site visit after a few weeks and will return three or four times a year, depending on geography, until the work has been completed. The Internet and Skype have made it easier to follow the progress at each site.

Setting up digital-imaging studios can have a positive social impact, too. Father Stewart and Mr. Mourad emphasize that the people employed by each project learn marketable skills as part of the process. “Some of them have started their own electronic archiving companies,” Mr. Mourad reports.

POLITICS AND PERPETUITY

The museum does not like to advertise itself overseas much, because its work can be risky. “We really try to fly under the radar that way, because many of these communities themselves are in a delicate situation with the government,” Father Stewart says. They don’t want a lot of interference, and they don’t want these projects to be a pretext for greater government interference.” At Mor Gabriel, an Orthodox Syriac monastery in southeastern Turkey, the monks are under pressure from local villagers who want to take some of the monastery’s land.

Father Stewart recalls “a difficult case” in Armenia that centered on a manuscript library in Yerevan. The digitizing work there was canceled after negative reports in the media focused on the involvement of non-Armenians. “There was a firestorm of criticism because foreigners were being allowed to work with their cultural patrimony,” Father Stewart remembers. “That was a bitter experience, because we negotiated in good faith.”

“Some of the projects are located in very sensitive areas, and we don’t talk about them,” Mr. Mourad says. “I’ve never had any dire problem. I was never stopped by anyone or investigated and interviewed. But it’s always scary. It’s always an adventure.”

Among the projects that museum staff members cannot discuss is work under way in Iraq. Although war poses an obvious threat to manuscripts as well as to people, Father Stewart also worries about less dramatic risks.

“At the present moment, outright destruction isn’t perhaps the principal threat, although anything could happen,” he says. “There’s also another kind of physical destruction that happens when people don’t have the resources to keep manuscripts the way they should be kept.”

Fire, humidity, and insect damage can wreak havoc. So can the dwindling of a community as its members die or emigrate from areas where they are increasingly outnumbered. “In a lot of these countries, monasticism is very di-



VANESSA VICK FOR THE CHRONICLE

The Rev. Columba Stewart, a Benedictine monk and director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library at St. John’s U., in Minnesota, works with a team digitizing early Christian manuscripts on page 1.

minated after centuries of being a minority culture,” Father Stewart says.

Still, he does come across many examples of resilience. “One of my favorite places is a monastery in southeast Turkey where there are only four or five monks, but there’s a flourishing community of laypeople who live in the monastery,” he says. The monks there are keeping their liturgical tradition alive by teaching it to younger lay members of the community.

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Whatever happens to the communities that created these manuscripts—or to the manuscripts themselves—Father Stewart and the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library intend to preserve images of them in perpetuity, or as close as it is possible to get with current technologies. Father Stewart invokes the archivist’s mantra: “Multiple copies, multiple media, multiple locations.” He says, “The missing link in the preservation scenario is what I call the clay-tablet standard”—a medium you can read with nothing fancier than a source of light. Short of that, the museum keeps copies not just on the hard drives from each project but on its server, on tape

backups, and in remote storage—including “a tunnel dug into a mountain in Utah next to where the Mormons have their stuff,” Stewart says. “That’s kind of our ‘Mad Max’ scenario, which may be a little silly.”

Still, as he points out, “nothing’s forever. If you scatter these things widely enough, somebody will find them.”

That’s his hope, anyway. “These are holy things, not just from a religious standpoint,” the Benedictine says. “They’re worthy of care and study.”