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## The Manuscript Hunter

Moisture, time and the 'Islamic State': old manuscripts have many enemies. Columba Stewart, an American Benedictine priest, saves manuscripts – an undertaking that is not without danger.

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**Question: Father Columba, according to your website, the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML), has preserved more than 50 million handwritten pages. Why is the digitization of old manuscripts important today?**

**Columba:** On the one hand, this is the only access we have to the past, to the literary and historical material from earlier times—not everything was later printed. On the other hand, each manuscript is unique. So even if it contains a text like the Psalms, which is virtually the same as in other manuscripts, this copy comes from a particular time and a particular place. Such information is usually in the manuscript: scribes often provide information about where and when a manuscript was copied, who the owner was or where it was kept. This gives us access to an area of intellectual and social history, that helps us reconstruct, how manuscripts and ideas spread over time. Often a manuscript was copied in one place and we find it in a completely different place. We have digitized manuscripts in India, for example, which were created in Mesopotamia, in the region between the Euphrates and Tigris in Southwest Asia. One can imagine that as an ancient form of the Internet: How were the people at that time connected? How did ideas, cultures, or texts spread? What networks for intellectual and religious transmission were there? The study of the manuscripts can give us answers to such questions.

**Question: German historians, in particular, may have become painfully aware of the importance of your work in 2009, when the Historical Archive of the City of Cologne collapsed.**

**Columba:** Yes, we had previously microfilmed the medieval Latin manuscripts there. There were over 1,200 manuscripts. And as far as I know, the rescue working continues today. We digitized many things in Germany, but also in Austria up to 1999. Today we no longer work regularly in Europe, because the libraries there are able to digitize their own materials with the support of funds from the European Union. You no longer need us.



Fr. Columba with the metal boxes that were used to bring the Timbuktu manuscripts to safety.

Photo: HMML

**Question:** HMML not only digitizes Christian writings, but also Islamic ones. What is the interest in these for a Benedictine Order?

**Columba:** My own research focuses on Christian texts, both from the East and from the West. That is true for me personally, and our Order clearly also has a Christian orientation. But we have learned in places like Jerusalem, where Christians and Muslims have lived together for many centuries. If you photograph a Christian library, then why not include an Islamic one that is just 100 metres away? If people have lived together, traded with each other, have conversed and sometimes argued, then we can re-create a more complete picture of the place and its culture by digitizing materials from both communities. And more and more scholars are just interested in this question.

**Question: But your work does not stop when the manuscripts have been digitized. What else does HMML do?**

**Columba:** There are two more steps: Digitizing already includes the archiving of photos, including backup copies and the like. But we must also catalog the photos, describing it thoroughly, so that the contents of the documents can be searched and explored. It's like vacation photos, which you must label so that people know what Church and what mountain you photographed [laughs]. Then we put them online. Also we offer fellowships to scholars to conduct research onsite at our library. And we organize "Summer Schools" for PhD students, where we teach the basics of Latin manuscript studies or Eastern Christian languages.

**Question: How did the Benedictines become so committed to manuscripts?**

**Columba:** We have a strong sense of the past and a long history. We are the oldest monastic order in the West and are very aware of our origin and our roots. The largest part of our history is from the era of manuscripts. Therefore we must work with old manuscripts, if we want to understand not only our own past but also the pre-modern history of many other cultures.

**Question: And what in the manuscripts has fascinated you personally?**

**Columba:** Oh, very many different things! Working with manuscripts is like meeting different people. Each one is unique and yet they have similarities, but at the same time each has its own character. Thus, each tells its own story and that alone is extremely interesting. But I'm also interested in their distribution, that is to say, the paths they have followed. In my own work I also find travelling to find manuscripts exciting. At times this is exciting, like detective work or a hunt.



A 17<sup>th</sup>-century Gospel book from an Armenian Church in Aleppo, Syria. Photo: HMML

**Question: Working with many people from different cultures, you have to undertake lengthy trips, proceed diplomatically and even experience frustration at times. What motivates you to carry on?**

**Columba:** Indeed, sometimes our help is turned down. But much more often we find support. Through our work we challenge the way people understand circumstances of the past and the present. For example, in regard to Eastern Christian manuscripts from Syria, Armenia and Ethiopia: The libraries of Western Europe and North America combined hold about 9,000 manuscripts from these areas. In contrast, we have photographed 36,000 manuscripts on location - and none of them are duplicates! If one gathers that together, one gets a more complete picture of the historical reality of cultures and peoples. This offers exciting research possibilities for years to come. But it's also enriching to work together with communities that have a passion for their own history, but that have suffered great destruction, such as in Mali, Iraq or Syria, and be able to help them.

**Question: How do you know that a manuscript needs to be saved, and how is the contact established?**

**Columba:** That depends on a variety of factors, such as when a library or collection of manuscripts is in a place threatened by war, civil unrest or serious poverty. Another factor is

when a repository does not have the financial means to digitize the manuscripts itself and thus make them accessible to the world. Sometimes, the libraries are known to the academic world and sometimes we are approached directly by the member of a family that owns a collection.

**Question: It is not always enough to establish a contact. For example, in 2012, hundreds of volunteers in Mali risked their lives in a secret operation to smuggle ancient manuscripts out of Timbuktu which had been occupied by Islamists.**

**Columba:** That's right. Many people there were committed to save their valuable manuscripts. In the process they not only exposed themselves to the danger of being attacked by the occupiers, but also by thieves who had their sights on the manuscripts. Similarly, our friends in Iraq, with whom we work, have often been in danger - for example during the occupation of Mosul, or when they travel throughout the provinces to visit collections. They can never know whether something will happen to them.



Manuscripts in Malta are being digitized in studios like this one. Photo by HMML.

**Question: When you get to the manuscripts, what happens to them then?**

**Columba:** The most important thing is that the manuscripts do not leave their homeland. They might be moved to safer areas in places like Mali or Iraq. We train people from the local community to perform the digitization. We provide equipment and training and we pay the workers. In some cases we don't even touch the manuscripts! Thus, our modus operandi is quite different from those of the 19th or early 20th centuries, when the manuscripts were

simply brought to the West, where they are still on exhibit in museums today. The manuscripts' owners and our library each get a copy of all photos. We have contractual rights to put the photos online then and make them available to scholars. All other rights remain with the owners.

**Question: What are the advantages of this approach?**

**Columba:** For the owners, the advantages include the fact that they can make these manuscripts that they have sometimes owned for centuries accessible to others in an affordable way. In addition, digitization is a kind of safety net for them: On the one hand, it acts as a kind of backup, should the manuscripts ever be lost. On the other hand, they can prove that they are the owners, should the manuscripts ever be stolen - as happened in Ethiopia in the 1970s when manuscripts were brought from there to the West. Our microfilm copies could prove that this happened illegally. Some manuscripts could be returned to their owners.

**Question: How has it worked for you? You have personally visited the various places where the manuscripts are digitized already.**

**Columba:** Although I have visited all the countries where we work, I cannot go everywhere. For example, I have travelled to Iraq several times, but never to Mosul--not even before it was occupied by the "Islamic State". In those days the danger was being kidnapped as a foreigner. I'm always very careful. I follow the instructions of our local colleagues, who know what is safe and what is not. In addition, I am rather discreet in my travels--in other words, without an armored car and security personnel.

By Johanna Heckeley

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About Father Columba:

Benedictine Father Columba Stewart (59) has been the executive director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) since 2003. According their own records, HMML has digitized 140,000 complete manuscripts from 540 partner libraries around the world—including Jerusalem, Lebanon, Ethiopia, Italy, India, and Germany.