Gotha Manuscript Talks | Local Manuscript Brokers: Between Preserving and Selling Literary Heritage

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Gotha Manuscript Talks

Local Manuscript Brokers: Between Preserving and Selling Literary Heritage

Organized by the Gotha Research Library in cooperation with Prof. Dr. Konrad Hirschler (Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Universität Hamburg)

At the turn from the nineteenth to the twentieth century, European missionaries, merchants, and travellers were no longer the main source of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman manuscripts for European collectors and institutions. An insufficiently studied group of local manuscript collectors and sellers entered the scene. These individuals mediated the transfer of large collections of manuscripts to libraries in Europe, America, and other parts of the world. They belonged to a group of researchers and scholars who stood outside the mainstream of scholarship produced during what is called the nahḍa, often translated as “Arab literary renaissance”. Despite strong ties to intellectual circles and publishing houses, these individuals conducted their work on the margins of literary, journalistic, and scientific production. They had various religious backgrounds, but many of them came from Jewish, Christian, and Islamic religious elites and/or clergy. This background facilitated their access to manuscripts and opened doors to book collections in local contexts for them.

Guardians and sellers of the literary heritage, these individuals functioned as intermediaries, as “brokers” who preserved and marketed manuscripts. Some of them were bibliophiles and worked towards creating their own collections, for their love of books or various scientific purposes. They kept meticulous records of their collections, produced and published indexes, and at a later stage negotiated the sale of these collections, sometimes under conditions of...
warfare and sectarian unrest. Prominent examples are the Muslim religious scholar Amīn al-Madanī (d. 1898), the priest, theologian and oriental scholar Alphonse Mingana (d. 1937), the Syrian Catholic priest Paul Sbath (d. 1945), and the Jewish scholar and collector Abraham Shalom Yahuda (d. 1951), who grew up in Ottoman Jerusalem and later studied and taught in different European cities. These and other individuals mediated the large-scale transfer of manuscripts, a fact that is commemorated in the names of important collections of libraries worldwide.

The spring series of the Gotha Manuscript Talks 2023 focuses on local manuscript brokers, dealers in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman manuscripts, who around the turn of the twentieth century played a crucial role in the preservation and transfer of manuscripts and manuscript collections from the Middle East, Turkey, West Asia and North Africa to Europe, America, and other locations on a global scale. Speakers engage with the social and intellectual background of these bibliophiles and book dealers and their motivations for buying, preserving, and bartering books. They furthermore investigate the intellectual geography in which books circulated to be eventually assimilated in today’s oriental collections in libraries from Saint Petersburg to Rome and New Haven.

**All lectures are held in English and online.**

**March 8, 2023, 18.15 (CET)**

Dr. Celeste Gianni (Hill Museum & Manuscript Library)

Paul Sbath’s Manuscript Library: From Guardian to Seller of the Eastern Christian Heritage

**March 22, 2023, 18.15 (CET)**

Dr. Alfrid Bustanov (University of Amsterdam)

Selling Manuscripts to Soviet Orientalism: The Book Trade of Sabir ‘Alimov (1872-1942)

**April 5, 2023, 18.15 (CET)**

Farid El-Ghawaby (Freie Universität Berlin, Berlin Graduate School Muslim Cultures and Societies)

Local Agents and their Power Articulation in Manuscript Translocations: The Case of Jamāl/Aḥmad al-Miṣrī and Johann Gottfried Wetzstein
April 19, 2023, 18.15 (CET)

Evyn Kropf (University of Michigan)

Agent and Architect: Abraham Shalom Yahuda’s Role in Developing the Islamic Manuscripts Collection at the University of Michigan

Join the event here: https://uni-erfurt.webex.com/meet/veranstaltungen.fb

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