

## **Improving Access to Columbia's Near Eastern Special Collections: A Fundraising Proposal**

Columbia libraries and departments own a vast array of special collections from the ancient, medieval, and modern Near East, ranging from tablets, seals and papyri to manuscripts and imprints in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Hebrew, Ottoman, and Persian. The printed materials comprise incunabulae, rare books, and lithographs in Near Eastern languages, as well as scarce reference books printed in Europe, North America, and the Near East. The immense importance of these collections for Near Eastern studies in North America justifies the establishment of a Near Eastern special collections curatorship and reading room to unite these materials at a central location on the Morningside campus. Both measures would further the inclusive and comparative study of the Near East and its diverse religious traditions by eliminating the administrative separation between these materials according to the denominational fault lines of the Near East: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. The curatorship and the reading room would be concrete expressions of the resolve of the Columbia community to create a productive environment for the peaceful cooperation between members of various religious communities to foster mutual respect and understanding.

### ***Teaching Near Eastern Studies at Columbia in the first decades of the twentieth century***

These collections originated in the late 1880s and early 1890s when Columbia began to extend its graduate school. These efforts included hiring Richard J. H. Gottheil (1862-1936, at Columbia since 1886) and A. V. Williams Jackson (1862-1937, at Columbia since 1891), both of whom were graduates of Columbia College and had gone to Germany to obtain Ph.D.s in Oriental studies. Gottheil, who held the first endowed chair of Jewish studies in North America, was an outstanding Syriac specialist and Jackson a renowned Avesta scholar. Together they embarked in the 1890s on creating comprehensive Near Eastern studies curricula for undergraduate and graduate students, giving Semitic and Indo-Iranian studies an equal share within the department and combining philology with archaeology and history.

The cooperation between Gottheil and Jackson has been largely forgotten, since Jewish, Semitic, and Iranian studies are no longer perceived as subdivisions of Oriental studies. In 1891, Gottheil and Jackson served on the dissertation committee of Max Margulies, the first recipient of a Columbia Ph.D. in Near Eastern studies (see their obituary for Margulies in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 52, 1932, 106–109). Together they submitted funding requests to Columbia presidents Low and Butler (see Gottheil's letters in the Columbia Archive, as well as his letterbook in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library). Their coordinated efforts continued until the end of their lives. In the early 1930s both served on the Ferdowsi committee, which their colleague David E. Smith (1860–1944) had established to coordinate Columbia's participation in the millenary celebration of the poet of the *Shāh-nāma*, the famous Persian epic (see *Firdausī Celebration 935-1935*, New York 1936). Some Persian manuscripts, which Smith had already donated to Columbia, were included in the Ferdowsi exhibition at the Metropolitan Museum of Art.

Gottheil was particularly active in obtaining books and teaching materials for his students. Since 1873, Gustav Gottheil (1827–1903), Richard's father, had been a noted

rabbi at the temple Emanu-El, and Richard Gottheil's personal ties to New York's Jewish community lead to many gifts, small and large, supporting the study of Semitic languages at Columbia (see Gottheil's letters in the Columbia Archive and the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library). Particularly important for the Jewish collection is a valuable Hebrew library, comprising manuscripts, incunabulae, and sixteenth-century imprints, which the temple Emanu-El purchased in Amsterdam in 1892, and donated in its entirety to Columbia.

*The scope of the Near Eastern Special Collections*

Gottheil's efforts to obtain books for the Columbia libraries followed the same catholic conception of Oriental studies that he demonstrated in his work as Chief of the Oriental Division at the New York Public Library (1897–1936). Since commercial printing in the Near East was established only in the second half of the nineteenth century, and the manuscript tradition continued until the beginning of the twentieth century, many classic works of Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman literature were in the first decades of the twentieth century only available in manuscript copies. Consequently Gottheil purchased Near Eastern manuscripts not so much as antiques and collector's treasures, but as indispensable sources for Columbia's research library. The wealth of Columbia's Near Eastern collections also reflects a tradition according to which Columbia professors, such as Gottheil, Smith, and Arthur Jeffery (d. 1959), bequeathed at least part of their personal libraries and collections to support the university and its educational mission beyond their deaths.

The following survey of the collection is based on research in the summer of 2005. I was a postdoctoral research fellow at the Center for Iranian studies, preparing a Quran exhibition in the Burke Library for Fall 2005. Since I am a specialist of medieval Islam the survey is likely to be incomplete with regard to the ancient Near East, Judaism, and Christianity. Indeed, the Hebrew manuscript collection is larger than that of the Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman manuscript collections. The Islamic manuscript collection is remarkable with regard to both Smith's manuscripts concerning mathematics and natural sciences and Jeffery's manuscripts about Arabic grammar and lexicography. It was impossible to obtain a complete count of the number of Quran manuscripts because the only extant card catalogue is arranged according to shelfmarks, and single volumes of the same multi-volume manuscript are counted as individual manuscripts. My estimate is that there are at least one-hundred Quran manuscripts, ranging from ninth-century parchment fragments to Arabic Qurans with Persian interlinear translation to heavily illuminated nineteenth-century Kashmiri Korans. Finally it is extraordinary that Smith seemed to have acquired a substantial number of his manuscripts from Iranian dealers. If this observation were confirmed by further research into the collection's provenance, the Smith collection would yield new insight into the transmission of knowledge and the history of the book in the Near East, since most Islamic manuscript collections in Europe and North America are dominated by manuscripts purchased in Egypt and Turkey.

The collections include

- ancient Near Eastern tablets, seals, etc., many which were purchased by Gottheil (in part catalogued by the Columbia professor Isaac Mendelsohn in the 1940s)
- papyri, among which are approximately 109 Arabic items, in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (included into the online-database APIS), and one Arabic

blockprint on paper (discussed by Richard Bulliet in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107, 1987, 427–438)

- the Jewish manuscripts, mostly Hebrew, in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library (described by Isaac Mendelsohn in the late 1950s when most of these manuscripts were microfilmed; many records are included in the bank catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts, though Mendelsohn's catalogue was never printed since the anonymous indexer considered the descriptions unreliable)
- Hebrew incunabulae and sixteenth-century imprints
- small numbers of manuscripts in Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, and Ethiopic relating to Christianity in the Near East in the Burke Library (description of the Ethiopic manuscripts kept in the reading room since they have been microfilmed)
- roughly 48 Syriac manuscripts in the Burke Library (photocopies of individually published descriptions of these manuscripts are kept in the reading room)
- more than 500 Islamic manuscripts in Arabic, Persian and Ottoman, most of which are in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library
  - about 50 manuscripts were purchased by Gottheil and others (internal catalogue of collection X in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library, cf. handlist by the Columbia lecturer Nicholas Martinovitch in *Journal of American Oriental Society* 49, 1929, 219–233)
  - over 400 manuscripts focusing on mathematics and the history of science from the Smith/Plimpton collection, which was donated in the early 1930s (sketchy card catalogue in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library prepared in 1959 by Ahmet Suheyl, a visiting professor from İstanbul Üniversitesi, Turkey)
  - approximately 20 items in a talisman collection that seems to have developed from the Smith/Plimpton collection
  - 50 manuscripts with a focus on Arabic grammar and Islamic law that were bequeathed by Columbia professor Arthur Jeffery (sketchy card catalogue in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library)
  - 20 Arabic and 6 Ottoman manuscripts in the Burke Library
- books, printed in eighteenth-century Istanbul by the press of Ibrahim Müteferrika (ca. 1674–1745), kept in the Butler library
- books, printed in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century Cairo by the Bulaq press and other Egyptian printing houses, some of which are from Gottheil's personal library, in the Butler and Burke libraries
- lithographs, printed in the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries in Ottoman Turkey and Qajar Iran as well as in India and Central Asia, most of which belong to the collection of the Persian scholar Sa'ïd Nafisi (1895–1966), in the Butler Library
- books about the Near East and Near Eastern studies, printed in western Europe before 1861, in the Butler Library
- rare facsimiles of manuscripts, such as the famous Samarkand Quran (St. Petersburg 1905), in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library and the Butler Library

***The interdependency between access, cataloguing, and preservation***

These diverse Near Eastern collections comprise primary and secondary sources for the study of the ancient Near East and for research on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, but they are not yet perceived as a comprehensive area studies collection. Instead they are housed in different locations, each with its own access regulations under the care of various librarians, most of whom are not specialists of Near Eastern studies. In the Columbia Archive there is a letter by Gottheil in which he complained about the disorganization of the Columbia libraries regarding sensible access to its Near Eastern studies resources. He argued that the division along religious fault lines was deeply misguided because of the religious diversity in Near Eastern societies and the enduring connections across historical watersheds, such as the rise of Christianity and Islam. Gottheil even explicitly mentioned that as Chief of the NYPL's Oriental division he had great success with organizing the reading room in the Research Library 42nd Street according to these unifying principles.

As mentioned above, the current situation reflects that many Near Eastern manuscripts did not enter the Columbia libraries as rare items with specific preservation and complex cataloguing needs. The area studies librarians in charge of the Middle Eastern and Jewish collections focus on contemporary research and the acquisition of new books published in the Near East, and access to these materials is provided in the Islamic and Jewish studies reading rooms. But the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library does not have any staff member trained in a Semitic or Iranian language. While indispensable secondary sources and exhibition catalogues are kept as non-circulating books in the Avery Library and the Islamic Studies Reading Room, the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library in the Butler Library is not equipped to keep even a modicum of non-western reference books, such as dictionaries and manuscript catalogues, in its reading room.

The adverse effects of these practical challenges are reinforced by the absence of adequate cataloguing and other bibliographical aids. There is no comprehensive catalogue of the Hebrew manuscripts and imprints in the Columbia Libraries, though the most important manuscripts are included in a digital bank catalogue at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. For most of the Islamic manuscripts there are only very basic handlists and card-catalogs that were compiled between the 1920s and the 1950s, as well as rudimentary internal records for additions to the collections since the 1960s. The result is a vicious circle: Since little is known about these collections, they are rarely used by faculty and students. And since they are rarely requested, they receive little attention and do not seem to merit the financing necessary to conduct a desperately needed review of their condition and to invest in their cataloguing. In the summer of 2005 when I worked in the Rare Books and Manuscript Library, many Islamic manuscripts had not been taken off the shelf for decades, and their dire need for preservation measures strongly suggests that their current storage is inadequate.

An inclusive view of Columbia's Near Eastern special collections needs to consider the Near Eastern and European imprints pertinent to Near Eastern studies. At the moment, most of these materials are kept in the Butler Library. Although eighteenth-century imprints cannot be checked out, Oriental studies research before the nineteenth century has received comparatively little attention. The emergence of modern philology and history toward the end of the eighteenth century made these previous scientific efforts seem theoretically and practically insignificant. Near Eastern imprints, however,

underlie few circulation restrictions because most were published after 1850. But many of these books were printed on highly acidic paper, and are now too fragile for regular use in a reference collection. Until recently these early imprints, many of which are lithographs, seemed of little value, since many have been replaced by newer imprints, though only rarely by critical editions. Yet they are of great importance for research on the transmission of knowledge in the Near East: late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imprints are often the only existing copies of lost Near Eastern manuscripts. It was common practice to destroy manuscripts after the completion of new copies, whether those were manuscripts or imprints. This practice was not indigenous to Near Eastern societies: the same phenomenon was observed in western Europe after the introduction of the printing press in the fifteenth century.

*Establishing a curatorship and a reading room on the Morningside campus*

This unproductive situation suggests the establishment of an endowment for a curatorship for the special Near Eastern collections and a Near Eastern studies reading room. To provide the curator with the means to care adequately for these collections the endowment would need to cover the curator's salary, as well as to provide funds for (1) collection development through new acquisitions; (2) conservation to preserve the collections for future generations; and (3) operations of the reading room, especially with regard to staffing needs and the purchase of reference books.

To tailor the curatorship as precisely as possible to the scope of the Near Eastern special collections, the first step would be to review the diverse holdings. Since the library of the Jewish Theological Seminary is associated with the Columbia Libraries, one of their specialists might be willing to assist the curator of medieval and Renaissance manuscripts in the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library with an evaluation of the state of the Jewish and Hebrew collections. Otherwise, there is agreement among the current staff of the Rare Books and Manuscripts Library that the Islamic manuscripts are in particularly urgent need of attention because they are the least known among Columbia's Near Eastern collections.

One of the curator's primary obligations would be to obtain outside funding for adequate cataloguing of the various manuscript collections. Such a stipulation seems realistic because the NEH and the Getty Foundation, as well as other research organizations, are particularly interested in supporting manuscript research. Nonetheless, the funding available for the cataloguing will clearly affect the ability to recruit specialized librarians and scholars for these tasks.

The curator would also be involved in the organization of the Near Eastern studies reading room which would provide access to these Near Eastern special collections, as well as to the indispensable reference materials, such as dictionaries, bibliographies, manuscript catalogues, collection descriptions, facsimiles, exhibition catalogues, and specialized journals. Consequently, the initial review of the holdings needs to be combined with a study of how the establishment of this new reading room be best integrated in the Columbia University Libraries system. The set-up of the reading room concerns practical questions, such as how to organize reference assistance in various Near Eastern languages and opening hours. Since most of the special Near Eastern collections are currently hidden away in the stacks of various libraries it is difficult to gauge how heavily a new reading room will be initially used by Near Eastern studies scholars and students. Nonetheless the reading room will allow for the emergence of

synergy between access to the collections and knowledge about them, though there might be a period of transition until the Columbia community will take full advantage of this new facility.

Depending on the ultimate design of the fundraising campaign it might be interesting to consider naming the reading room for Gottheil and Jackson to commemorate their dedicated service in establishing Near Eastern studies at Columbia. Such a decision could also provide a timeline for a fundraising campaign since it could be linked to the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of their births in 2012.

A further rationale for this project is its potential to contribute positively to the perception of the Columbia community by the general public. Fundraising for a curatorship and a reading room that transcends the current factional divisions between ancient Near Eastern, Jewish, Christian, and Islamic collections could counterbalance the recent allegations that anti-Semitism is rampant among the Columbia faculty specializing in Islam and Islamic history. The campaign could focus attention on the Columbia tradition of an inclusive approach to the diverse field of Near Eastern studies that promoted respectful and productive exchanges between members of different religious communities.

The Chester Beatty Library, Dublin (Ireland)

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