

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition Project: A Collaborative Endeavor of the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) in Collaboration with Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) (Sabine Schmidtke)

Since early March, the rich holdings of virtually all university and research libraries in the US, including Princeton U's Firestone library, are behind locked doors and out of reach . . . a reminder of the dire conditions colleagues in other parts of the world are struggling with on a daily basis.

While **we** can be cautiously confident that the detrimental impact of the lockdown on our scholarship will be of a temporary nature, pursuing research in other parts of the world, especially those struck by political or military conflicts, is notoriously difficult, if not impossible, with the perspectives for the future being bleak.

Let's just remind ourselves of the destruction that has impacted even the most essential research infrastructure in places like Bosnia, Iraq, Syria, or Yemen during the last decades.

Digitization can help mitigate the global inequality to pursue scholarship, at least partly: providing open access to digital resources – be they primary materials or the results of ongoing knowledge production – is a powerful means towards democratizing knowledge, towards creating a truly global community of equally equipped scholars.

As a scholar of Islamic Studies I am humbled to observe in my daily work how many digital initiatives are based in the Middle East, and how much material is being made available through open access for scholars worldwide to use. Let me share some examples with you:

1. The digital repository of manuscripts held by the King Saud University Library in Riyadh;
2. the digital union catalogue of Arabic and Persian manuscripts held by the libraries of Iran;
3. or the digital catalogue and repository of manuscripts held by the Najaf-based library, which was founded in 1957 by al-Sayyid Muḥsin al-Ḥakīm and was shut down for close to a decade during Saddam Husayn's rule.

It is my firm belief that any artifact, regardless of when, where and by whom it was produced, is a legitimate and important part of our common global heritage as human beings ... and we all share the responsibility to care for, salvage, and provide open access to whatever happens to be in our hands.

This is particularly true for all those unique materials that are under imminent threat in many parts of the world, including pieces of art, archeological artifacts or manuscript treasures.

The project I want to present to you today is concerned with the manuscript tradition of Zaydi Islam. The Zaydi community is a branch of Shii Islam that has flourished since the ninth century mainly in two regions, namely the mountainous Northern Highlands of Yemen and the Caspian regions of Northern Iran.

In the early twelfth century the political and cultural center of Zaydism began to shift from Iran to Yemen, with Iranian Zaydism gradually falling into oblivion. Most of the community's literary and religious legacy is preserved in the libraries in Yemen, many of which date back to the thirteenth century.

The Zaydi literary tradition is among the richest and most variegated traditions within Islamic civilization and at the same time one of the least studied. The literary production by Zaydi scholars stretched over more than one thousand years covering a wide spectrum of traditional disciplines, such as law and legal theory, exegesis, Qur'anic sciences, Prophetic traditions, geography and encyclopedias, medicine and mathematics, history and biography, grammar and

philology, theology, prose literature and poetry. Moreover, Zaydis were at all times intimately familiar with the relevant intellectual strands beyond the confines of their own community and actively engaged with them, and the typical library of a Zaydi scholar would comprise not only works belonging to his own religious tradition but also an array of titles of authors from other communities (Sunni, Twelver Shii, Ismaili).

It is fortunate that the bulk of Zaydi literature is still extant, mostly in the form of manuscripts.

On the downside, the Zaydi manuscript tradition is widely dispersed.

As I just mentioned, the most significant and by far largest collections of Zaydi manuscripts are housed by the many public and private libraries of Yemen (estimates range between 40,000 to 100,000 manuscripts—which suggests how little we actually know about them).

In addition to this, several European libraries own considerable numbers of Zaydi manuscripts, as is also the case with North American libraries. Of great importance are also the many libraries of the Middle East, especially in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

In view of the poor state of scholarship in the area of Zaydi studies, the challenges that result from the significant dispersal of the material, and the disastrous situation in present-day Yemen, the tasks at hand are threefold, namely "preserving" and "studying" the Zaydi manuscript tradition, and "democratizing" the access to these materials. To varying degrees, the *Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT)* project addresses all three of them.

The project began in 2017, with a proof-of-concept phase that led to identifying Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) as the virtual repository for the digital surrogates—it has been the IAS' partner in the project ever since. For one of the primary concerns from the beginning was and continues to be the project's sustainability: how to ensure that the enormous corpus of digitized material will still be accessible in let's say ten, twenty, thirty, or a hundred years from now? HMML has been for some time the leading virtual repository for handwritten materials from different religious and cultural traditions, with more than 250,000 digitized manuscripts from about 500 libraries to date, and it is committed to permanently archive (and eventually describe) those contents and to make them available online through open access. As a complementing element, a project website allows systematic access to the individual collections and their contents.

The next challenge was to engage libraries with significant holdings of Zaydi manuscripts around the world to participate in the project by agreeing to make their holdings available. The responses range from enthusiastic support to outright refusal. The libraries situated inside Yemen constitute yet another challenge, especially many of the private libraries of individuals and families whose holdings were microfilmed and / or digitized from the 1950s onwards. In many cases, scans of these collections of surrogates could be purchased and have partly been made available in the project, while in most cases the current whereabouts of these libraries are unknown or, even worse, it is certain that they have been destroyed in the meantime. At present, the project comprises digital surrogates of manuscripts from twenty-two libraries, among them fourteen private collections from Yemen.

A project like this is collaborative by nature, and I therefore wish to take this opportunity to express my gratitude to all the colleagues, institutions, libraries and curators who have been supporting the project over the past three years. In total, the digital collection comprises to date some 1,700 codices, with more than 500,000 individual images.

Over the course of 2020, and once the current lockdown ends, it is hoped that another 500 codices from four additional collections from Naples, Rome, Berlin, and Leiden will be added to the ZMT. The next steps will be to engage additional libraries in the project and to secure their relevant materials, particularly those located in Turkey and Saudi Arabia. It

is further hoped that the situation in Yemen will improve so that it will be possible to include more of the materials still found in that country as well – needless to say, this is most urgent in view of the ongoing destruction of cultural artifacts in Yemen as part of a war strategy.

The **third challenge** from the project's outset has been to secure funding to cover the costs of digitization, purchase of scans of formerly microfilmed collections, and for preparing the material for upload unto HMML. I gratefully acknowledge the financial support of the generous donors and funding institutions, all of whom greatly helped to advance the project to where it stands now. For the following steps, additional funding will be needed from 2021 onwards.

Let me end by pointing out how important the project is for the people of Yemen themselves – for the first time in more than a hundred years they now have access to a growing number of handwritten artifacts of their own cultural and intellectual history that have been stored in libraries outside of Yemen since the turn of the century, among them many unique manuscripts. Additionally, the project contributes to salvaging some of the manuscript treasures within Yemen where they are under imminent threat of destruction. This, in my view, is a modest contribution and the least scholars in the West can do to help the people of Yemen to maintain their dignity and identity, and to continue cherishing their culture which is based on their country's exceptionally rich intellectual history.