

## Introductory Remarks (Sabine Schmidtke)

The trade in handwritten artifacts of Middle Eastern origin is flourishing and its dimensions are growing particularly in areas experiencing military conflict and/or extreme poverty. Yemen is one such area: given the ongoing war, manuscripts are being clandestinely taken out of the country. Syria, Iraq, and Libya are similarly affected. Islamic, Christian, and Jewish manuscripts that originate in the MENASA region are regularly offered for sale by Western auction houses or even on social media, and many thus end up in private hands. The provenance of the objects sold often remains obscure. While recent military conflicts and the pandemic appear to have exacerbated the situation, there are also many initiatives aimed at preventing the trafficking of manuscripts, creating awareness of their cultural value among policy makers, customs and police authorities, and auctioneers and a growing number of actors who are involved in protecting and salvaging MENA's cultural heritage on the ground. Moreover, beyond the field of Middle Eastern studies, provenance research is increasingly flourishing among museums, libraries, and scholars of many disciplines, which is a positive signal. Our panel showcases the fate of individual manuscripts or written artifacts, and entire collections of such materials, that have been auctioned or otherwise sold during recent decades, and we want to discuss what we, as scholars, can do to help remedy the deplorable situation.

The presentations will be given in the sequence indicated in the program—

Let me briefly introduce our speakers on the panel:

**Cecilia Palombo**, whose work focusses on the premodern Middle East, studying its documentary cultures, multilingual traditions, and endangered cultural heritages, earned her PhD in 2020 from Princeton with a dissertation entitled *The Christian Clergy's Islamic Local Government in Late Marwanid and Abbasid Egypt*, and she is now Assistant Professor of Early Islamic History at Chicago University.

**Valentina Sagaria Rossi** is Associate Professor of Arabic language and literature at the University of Rome Tor Vergata. She has been Curator of the Arab-Islamic Department of the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei (Rome). Her research has dealt with the Arabic manuscript tradition and codicology, the collections of Arabic manuscripts in Italy, the transmission of classical *amthāl* works, and the archival sources of Arabists and Islamicists.

**Josh Mugler** joined Hill Museum & Manuscript Library in 2018 as the Associate Cataloger for Arabic and Syriac manuscripts, and he was promoted in 2022 to the Curator of Eastern Christian and Islamic Manuscripts. Mugler holds degrees from Oklahoma Baptist University, Shawnee and the Divinity School of Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. In 2019, he earned his PhD in Theological and Religious Studies from Georgetown University, Washington, D.C., for a study entitled "A Martyr with too Many Causes: Christopher of Antioch (D. 967) and Local Collective Memory".

**Luise Loges** is an expert on antiquities trafficking and art crime, currently working at the University of Glasgow on her PhD, Cultural Commodities during Political Crises: A Comparative Analysis of trafficking and Purchasing of Antiquities from the Middle east from 1990 to the Present.

As for **myself**, I am a permanent member of the faculty at the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton NJ representing Near Eastern Studies, focussing on Islamic intellectual history and cognate fields.

I am very grateful to all our speakers for being here today, and also to **Nasser Rabat** (MIT), who kindly agreed to join our panel as a discussant. Cecilia will later introduce Professor Rabat in some more detail.