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التراث الأوروبي المتوسطي

Of Manuscripts and Men...

Did you know that Arabic was used to write Hebrew and vice versa? That Ottoman writing re-transcribed many Greek manuscripts? That the Berber language can be written in both Arabic and Hebrew characters? And that Syriac is written equally well using Arabic or Syriac alphabets?

An exceptional linguistic diversity and a very much alive ancestral know-how testify to the cultural richness of the Mediterranean and its multiple interactions throughout the centuries. This has been transmitted to us through an extraordinary legacy, where tangible and intangible dimensions interact harmoniously: the manuscript. In spite of the million specimens preserved in libraries and Mediterranean archives, this heritage is at risk, and the threat to the survival of traditional craftsmen and techniques of production and conservation, will entail its loss.

Stéphane Ipert, Manager of CCL and Project Co-ordinator of ManuMed II – Of Manuscripts and Men, introduces us to this universe and to the means of its preservation and valorisation.

(material collected by Giuliano Salis)

What are the problems that led you to conceive ManuMed II and what needs does the project intend to address?

We have noted that several million manuscripts are preserved in the libraries and archives of Mediterranean countries, the majority of which are in a problematic state of conservation ranging from the deterioration of materials and lack of care or the absence of strategies of preventive conservation. These artefacts are moreover the objects of a very thriving illegal traffic, which unceasingly increases over the years. We therefore want to address the needs of the professionals in terms of training in these specific topics and in the supporting technology such as the installation of a virtual library, which would allow them to have access to and use the collection of documents. In parallel, we would like to make these documents accessible to the wider public, notably researchers who are very interested in manuscripts as part of an important written tradition and a privileged vehicle of traditional Mediterranean languages.

What is the collection typology that ManuMed II wants to valorise?

We are dealing with manuscripts in vernacular and ancient languages of great richness and variety: Arabic, Syriac, Berber, Armenian, Coptic...representing an extraordinary linguistic diversity threatened by the omnipresence of the languages of the Western media, which are often in conflict with the vernacular languages, mostly, but not only, Arabic, and which all too often, maintain a difficult rapport with minority languages. We are witnesses to a double fracture, both digital and linguistic, which puts into peril one or the other of the languages, excludes Arabic, and puts into danger the minority languages which are threatened with disappearance in the short time.

The tangible and intangible aspects of heritage tackled by ManuMed II project through the physical medium of manuscripts as conveyor of intangible heritage are rather clear: could you tell us some more?

People, particularly the young, often ignore the history of their own language, of their alphabet and the numbers that they manipulate. In an area of recurrent conflict, it is important to explain to them that language and writing constitute an intangible heritage that is an inalienable part of their culture, which has often been shared with “others”. Do they know that that Arabic was used to write Hebrew and vice versa? That Ottoman writing re-transcribed many Greek manuscripts? That the Berber language can be written in both Arabic and Hebrew characters? And that Syriac is written equally well using Arabic or Syriac alphabets? Such a rich crossing of languages and writings was in the past a source of richness, which is embodied today in Mediterranean manuscripts. The Mediterranean region is also exceptional in the fact that there are still artisans today who make manuscripts utilising ancestral materials and techniques, the study of which may greatly help the study of the history of the book. Unfortunately, some aspects of modernisation and globalisation allow that craftsmen who manufacture paper, leather, parchment or craftsmen who are binders, calligraphers and illuminators disappear without any hope of replacement and their activities cease. This situation has negative consequences on the local micro-economy.

You already have experience from previous EH phases: how would you characterise this new phase of work?

Our institute, “Institut pour la Conservation du Livre”, we have participated some ten years in EH I. At the time, our action was directed more towards the professionals, with the aim to raise their awareness, give them training, help them and place them in a network. Thanks to this effort, networks have been created and methodologies established. We still insist on these aspects, but today our actions focus on sensitising and reaching out to the general public, particularly youth, raising their awareness of their heritage as it is represented by the manuscripts. For this purpose, we have planned for training activities, and activities that would valorise the manuscripts and the traditional craftsmanship related to their manufacture and conservation. We would also like to develop activities in Mediterranean libraries and archives, which for the most are rather behind in terms of conservation and accessibility to the public.

How do you envision the participation of ManuMed II in EH4 and what are your expectations in relation to the programme and the contribution it will make?

As an operational and financial framework, EH is very important for our work and I cannot hide the fact that the financial support provided by the European Union is fundamental for us to carry out our activities. Moreover, the programme offers us the opportunity to exploit wider networks, including other EH4 projects, which should contribute to the sustainability of our activities.

What are your wishes for the end of the project?

We would like to reach out to the largest possible number of people and make them aware of our activities and although it is rather unrealistic, to eventually be able to do without ManuMed phase III... Through the conservation and valorisation of the manuscripts we hope to contribute to the safeguarding of the diversity of the written heritage and the languages, and by doing so, contribute to the application of the convention of UNESCO on the promotion of the diversity of cultural expressions.

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