The lost archive

Missing for years, cache of photos spurs research on Islam’s hallowed text

By Andrew Higgins in Munich

own traditions. "It is very exciting," says Patricia Crone, a scholar at Princeton University's Institute for Advanced Study and a pioneer of unorthodox theories about Islam's early years. She says she first heard that the Munich archive had survived when attending a conference in Germany last fall. "Everyone thought it was destroyed."

The Quran is viewed by most Muslims as the unchanging word of God as transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad in the seventh century. The text, they believe, didn't evolve or get edited. The Quran says it is "flawless" and fixed by an "imperishable tablet" in heaven. It starts with a warning: "This book is not to be doubted."

Quranic scholarship often focuses on arcane questions of philology and textual analysis. Experts nonetheless tend to tread warily, mindful of fury directed in recent years at people deemed to have blasphemed Islam's founding document and the Prophet Muhammad. A scholar in northern Germany writes under the pseudonym of Christoph Luxenberg because, he says, his controversial views on the Quran risk provoking Muslims. He claims that chunks of it were written not in Arabic but in another ancient language, Syriac. The "virgins" promised by the Quran to Islamic martyrs, he asserts, are in fact only "grapes."

Ms. Neuwirth, the Berlin professor now in charge of the Munich archive, rejects the theories of her more radical colleagues, who ride roughshod, she says, over Islamic scholarship. Her aim, she says, isn't to challenge Islam but to "give the Quran the same attention as the Bible." All the same, she adds: "This is a taboo zone."

Ms. Neuwirth says it is too early to have any idea what her team's close study of the cache of early texts and other manuscripts will reveal. Their project, launched last year at the Berlin-Brandenburg Academy of Science and Humanities, has state funding for 18 years but could take much longer. The earliest manuscripts of the Quran date from
On the night of April 24, 1944, British air-force bombers hammered a former Jesuit college here housing the Bavarian Academy of Science. The 16th-century building crumpled in the inferno. Among the treasures lost, later lamented Anton Spitaler, an Arabic scholar at the academy, was a unique photo archive of ancient manuscripts of the Quran.

The 450 rolls of film had been assembled before the war for a bold venture: a study of the evolution of the Quran, the text Muslims view as the verbatim transcript of God's word. The wartime destruction made the project "outright impossible," Mr. Spitaler wrote in the 1970s. Mr. Spitaler was lying. The cache of photos survived, and he was sitting on it all along. The truth is only now dribbling out to scholars — and a Quran research project buried for more than 60 years has risen from the grave. "He pretended it disappeared. He wanted to be rid of it," says Angelika Neuwirth, a former pupil and protégé of the late Mr. Spitaler. Academics who worked with Mr. Spitaler, a powerful figure in postwar German scholarship who died in 2003, have been left guessing why he squirreled away the unusual trove for so long.

Ms. Neuwirth, a professor of Arabic studies at Berlin's Free University, now is overseeing a revival of the research. The project renews a grand tradition of German Quranic scholarship that was interrupted by the Third Reich. The Nazis purged Jewish experts on ancient Arabic texts and compelled Aryan colleagues to serve the war effort. Middle East scholars worked as intelligence officers, interrogators and linguists. Mr. Spitaler himself served, apparently as a translator, in the German-Arab Infantry Battalion 845, a unit of Arab volunteers to the Nazi cause, according to wartime records.

During the 19th century, Germans pioneered modern scholarship of ancient texts. Their work revolutionized understanding of Christian and Jewish scripture. It also infuriated some of the devout, who resented secular scrutiny of texts believed to contain sacred truths.

The revived Quran venture, called Corpus Coranicum, plays into a very modern debate: how to reconcile Islam with the modern world? Academic quarrelling of the Quran has produced bold theories, bitter feuds and even claims of an Islamic Reformation in the making. Applying Western critical methods to Islam's holiest text is a sensitive test of the Muslim community's readiness to both accommodate and absorb thinking outside its tradition and to reconcile Islam with the modern world. Many Christians, too, dislike secular scholars boring into sacred texts and dismiss challenges to certain Biblical passages. But most accept that the Bible was written by different people at different times and that it took centuries to winnow before the Christian canon was fixed in its current form.

Muslims, by contrast, view the Quran as the literal word of God. Questioning the Quran "is like telling a Christian that Jesus was gay," says Abdou Filali-Ansary, a Moroccan scholar. Modern approaches to textual analysis developed in the West are viewed in much of the Muslim world as irrelevant, at best. "Only the writings of a practicing Muslim are worthy of our attention," a university professor in Saudi Arabia wrote in a 2003 book.

A man prays near a Quran, which Muslims view as the verbatim transcript of God's word.
As Germany slid toward fascism early last

service and helped birth today's largely secular

research gave way to more serious scientific

Mr. Marx called Arab television network al-Jazeera and other media to
topple kingdoms," Mr. Marx called Arab tele-

dicted that it would "overthrow rulers and
to explain the project to the Muslim

immaculate, unalterable and inimitable."

He too set off with a

He took photographs of them with a Le-

set off on a

overly cautious, unproductive and hostile to

Their original focus was the Bible. Priests

and rabbis pushed back, but scholars

met the Quran, he says, "ruined my life."

Mr. Lülling. (Mr. Spuler's subsequent teach-

Mr. Spitaler rarely published papers but

was widely admired for his mastery of Arabic

during a Hamburg student protest, he

offering was lifted in part from Christian hymns. Black-

Mr. Spitaler served

Recitation: "Quran" means "Recitation," and

Muslim tradition holds that the Quran is a

scribes responsible for writing down the revela-

Muslim tradition also mentions

"The whole period after 1945 was poi-

his teaching job and launched a fruitless six-

and rabbis pushed back, but scholars

Mr. Spitaler served

ent from a Hamburg student protest, he

He wrote books and articles at home,
funded by his wife, who took a job in a phar-

Mr. Lülling lost his

scholars, however, judged him

was never given an autopsy; rumors spread

Mr. Nöldeke was illiterate and recited God's revelations to his

was born in 570 in what is today Saudi Arabia.

Mr. Nöldeke, says Ms. Neuwirth, is

"the rock of our church."

The Munich archive began with one of Mr. Nöldeke's protégés, Gotthelf Bergsträsser.

As Germany slid toward fascism early last

He hunted down old copies of the Qu-

their work last fall on its front page and pre-

Mr. Marx, her research director, have

trial to explain the project to the Muslim

"Muslim views on the Holy Book must re-

Hannover, the Berlin Quran expert,

Mr. Nöldeke's protégés, Gotthelf Bergsträsser.

In 1852 a Paris academy offered a prize

In 1933, a few months after Hitler became

had helped collect some of the

leaves, animal bones and

Egyptian tradition emphasizes oral transmission.

residence was given a autopsy; rumors spread

reported a journey to

The Prophet was

transmitted to the Prophet Muhammad.

First Text: After Muhammad's death, God's

Around the age of 40, he began to have visions and

recording voices telling him he was God's mes-

The story of the Quran

Muslim tradition holds that the Quran is a

varbitism transcript of the word of God as

A brief history, according to this tradition:

The Prophet, Prophet Muhammad was

 verifying the Prophet Muhammad.

Books and articles at home,
funded by his wife, who took a job in a phar-

Some Muslim scholars, Muhammad

were illiterate and recited God's revelations to his

followers, who memorized his words.

THE BOOK: Muslim tradition also mentions

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year court battle to be reinstated. Feuding

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the war when German forces began pushing their way into a royal library containing ancient Quranic manuscripts. The Nazis began to use Arabists early in the war when German forces began pushing into regions with large Muslim populations, particularly after the founding of the German Church. Despite their wartime activities, the subsequent work of such scholars is still highly regarded.

By the mid-1970s, Mr. Spitaler was nearing retirement at the university. He began moving boxes into a room set aside for the dictionary project at Bavaria's Academy of Sciences. His last doctoral student in Munich, Kathrin Müller, who was working on the dictionary, says she looked inside one of the boxes and saw old film. She asked Mr. Spitaler what it was but didn't get an answer. The boxes, she now realizes, contained the old Quran archive. "He didn't want to explain anything," she says.

In the early 1980s, when the archive was still thought to be lost, two German scholars traveled to Yemen to examine and help restore a cache of ancient Quran manuscripts. They, too, took pictures. When they tried to get them out of Yemen, authorities seized them, says Gerd-Rüdiger Puin, one of the scholars. German diplomats finally persuaded Yemen to release most of the photos, Mr. Puin says. The manuscripts suggested to him that the Quran "didn't just fall from heaven" but "has a history." When he was said to publicly a decade ago, it stirred rage. "Please ensure that these scholars are not given further access to the documents," read one letter to the Yemen Times. "Allah, help us against our enemies."

Berlin Quran expert Ms. Neuwirth, though widely regarded as a master of Islamic tradition, got sidelined by Arab suspicion of Western scholars. She was fired from a teaching post in Jordan, she says, for mentioning a radical revisionist scholar at a lecture in Germany.

Around 1990, Ms. Neuwirth met Mr. Spitaler, her old professor, in Berlin. He was in his 80s and growing frail but remained sharp mentally. He "got sentimental about the old times," recalls Ms. Neuwirth. As they talked, he casually mentioned that he still had the archive. He offered to give it to her. "I had heard it didn't exist," she says. She later sent two of her students to Munich to collect the photo cache and bring it to Berlin.

The news didn't spread beyond a small circle of scholars. When Mr. Spitaler died in 2003, Paul Kunitzsch, a fellow Munich Arabist, wrote an obituary recounting how the archive had been lost, torpedoes the Quran project. Such a venture, he wrote, "now appears totally out of the question" because of the attitude of the Islamic world to such a project.

Information about the archive's survival has just begun trickling out to the wider scholarly community. Why Mr. Spitaler hid it remains a mystery. His only published mention of the archive's fate was a footnote to an article in a 1975 book on the Quran. Claiming the bulk of the cache had been lost during the war, he wrote cryptically that "drastically changed conditions after 1945" ruled out any rebuilding of the collection.

Ms. Neuwirth, the current guardian of the archive, believes that perhaps Mr. Spitaler was simply "sick of" the time-consuming project and wanted to move on to other work. Mr. Lüling has a less charitable theory: that Mr. Spitaler didn't have the talents needed to make use of the material and wanted to make sure colleagues couldn't outshine him by working on the material.

Mr. Kunitzsch, the obituary author, says he is mystified by Mr. Spitaler's motives. He speculates that his former colleague decided that the Quran manuscript project was simply too ambitious. The task, says Mr. Kunitzsch, grew steadily more sensitive as Muslim hostility toward Western scholars escalated, particularly after the founding of Israel in 1948. "He knew that for Arabs, the Quran was a closed matter."

Ms. Müller, Mr. Spitaler's last doctoral student, says the war "was a deep cut for everything" and buried the prewar dreams of many Germans. Another possible factor, she adds, was Mr. Spitaler's own deep religious faith. She opens up a copy of a Quran used by the late professor, a practicing Catholic, until his death. Unlike his other Arabic texts, which are scrawled with notes and underlinings, it has no markings at all.

"Perhaps he had too much respect for holy books," says Ms. Müller. "Almut Schoenefeld contributed to this article."