

John Bowman and the University of Melbourne's Middle Eastern manuscript collection

Pam Pryde

Curator: Special Collections, The University of Melbourne.

Abstract

The University of Melbourne currently holds 187 Middle Eastern manuscripts in its collection. A number of languages are covered, including: Arabic, Persian, Hindi, Kashmiri, Hebrew, Urdu, Turkish, Ethiopic, Mongol and Sanskrit. Most of the manuscripts date from the 19th century, but at least one may date as far back as the 14th century. Primarily the collection is made up of Muslim religious texts or associated theory. Also included are: poetical works, educational primers, dictionaries, grammars, texts on astrology, mathematics, logic and weaponry, Ethiopic prayer books, Syriac commentaries, biographies; and books of quotations and sayings.

This paper looks at how – and why – these manuscripts were collected, what conservation and access issues have been addressed to date, and what issues still need to be addressed to conserve and care for this collection in a culturally sensitive manner.

The 'recent' history of the University of Melbourne's Middle Eastern manuscript collection began in 1993 with a request from a Library patron to view one of the manuscripts. At that time there were two ways our patrons could gain access to the collection. The first was by using the University of Melbourne's 1971 *Catalogue of works of art*.¹ This very useful catalogue records a variety of genres of works of art held across the University as well as in the surrounding colleges, and includes a list of the 113 Middle Eastern manuscripts, which at that time were housed in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies. The second was by referring to a more recent listing of the collection, which was produced in 1977. By this time, the manuscripts had been moved from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies into the Baillieu Library. The Library produced a very utilitarian catalogue, entitled *List of oriental manuscripts held in the University of Melbourne Library*.² This catalogue essentially contains all the information found in the 1971 catalogue, but includes an additional 55 manuscripts, bringing the total number of manuscripts in the collection to 168. For these additional manuscripts, Library staff used whatever information they could find, such as sale catalogue entries and other information that accompanied the manuscripts to help identify and record the works. This later catalogue is arranged in two parts, firstly by language – the arrangement in the later catalogue is essentially the same as for the 1971 catalogue – followed by a listing of the manuscripts in numeric shelf number, as they had been received from the Department of Middle Eastern Studies.

The grouping by languages reveals that the majority of the manuscripts are in Persian or Arabic, with a smattering of manuscripts in Urdu, Turkish, Prakrit, Mongol, Sanskrit, and Malmud Bami. Most of the manuscripts appear to date from the 19th century, but at least one, MUL 50, may date as far back as the 14th century. Subject matter is varied, as expected there are a number of Qur'ans, but also included are: commentaries, dictionaries, grammars, poetry, love stories, adventure fantasies, Christian education, law, philosophy, medicine, history, astrology and even a manuscript (MUL 19), which is about the interpretation of dreams (Figure 1).

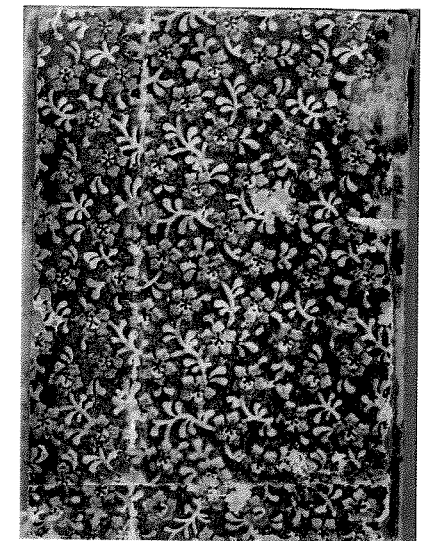


Figure 1 MUL 19

But – back to 1993 and our Library patron's request to view one of these manuscripts. At that time, Merete Smith was the Rare Books Librarian, and had no knowledge of the collection. Special Collections is scattered over a number of physical locations, so a search was undertaken, and much to her delight Merete eventually discovered a locked cupboard crammed full of dusty old manuscripts.

It was obvious to Merete that the very first thing the manuscripts needed, as a collection, was conservation treatment – finding out about the history and the significance of the collection was something that could follow later. Merete contacted Robyn Sloggett, who was at the time the Chief Conservator at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, and they agreed that the first step should be to do a conservation survey of the manuscripts.³ The survey was completed in that same year and exposed many areas of concern; the physical housing of the manuscripts was far from adequate (the manuscripts were tightly packed into a metal cabinet), large volumes were forced to stand upright, the manuscripts were double-stacked on the shelves, many of the bindings and text blocks were in poor condition and there was active corrosion in some of the volumes because of the type of ink that had been used in the manuscript, the list went on. In

summary, the conservation survey found that 30% of the manuscripts were in poor condition and required treatment by a specialist book conservator. Work recommended in the survey included repairs to severely damaged bindings; extensive paper repairs and stabilization of flaking paint surfaces. In addition, the survey recommended that the collection be re-housed into individual acid-free boxes, and that a secure, well-ventilated, lockable unit be constructed, sufficiently large enough so that at least the large and fragile volumes could be housed lying flat.

The first major outcome from the survey occurred when Merete dedicated her whole year's bookbinding allocation to having acid-free boxes made for the manuscripts. This took place in 1996. The manuscripts were individually boxed by University of Melbourne Conservation Services staff, and as part of this project the manuscripts were also dusted and acid-free tissue was interleaved between pages, where necessary, to halt further off-setting.

Little has happened to the manuscripts since then. They are currently housed in two locked metal cabinets, rather than one, however, approximately half the manuscripts are still double-stacked on the shelves. The manuscripts are still housed standing upright, and are in the same numeric shelf order that the Library received them in some 35 years ago. Over the next few years, Special Collections hopes to source the funds necessary to further address the physical needs and the cultural sensitivities that we are only now beginning to appreciate must be addressed as part of housing such a collection. Appropriate space in Special Collections, which is large enough to house the Middle Eastern manuscript collection in the traditional manner, with the manuscripts lying flat rather than standing upright, and with the Qur'ans housed above the secular texts rather than as they currently are shelved, in numeric shelf order, is needed.

The second major outcome from the 1993 conservation survey was that other activities began to happen around the Middle Eastern manuscript collection. In 2004 the newly established Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation (CCMC) held its first symposium on the care and conservation of Islamic manuscripts.⁴ That first symposium had a number of aims, but essentially the symposium was concerned with finding out how to care for and conserve this collection and others like it in Australia, and to gain an understanding of the cultural sensitivities involved in looking after such a collection. And, of course, this current symposium aims to deepen this understanding and to develop a uniform 'best practice' approach to the care and conservation of the Middle Eastern manuscript collections held in Australia.

A third significant outcome which has come about because of the raised profile the collection has enjoyed over the last few years is increased access to the collection. All but three of the manuscripts are now catalogued online, making our holdings accessible to researchers world-wide.

Although we are still a long way away from being able to provide digital access to the collection, having the majority of our holdings online is a very exciting step in the right direction. The three remaining manuscripts which have defeated cataloguer Mahboubeh Kamalpour are in Ethiopic and Mongol. We hope these remaining manuscripts will be catalogued in early 2008.

The Middle Eastern manuscripts collection is just one of a number of collections built up by the Reverend Professor John Bowman between 1959 and 1975, during his time as head of the Department of Semitic Studies at the University of Melbourne.

John Bowman⁵ was born in Ayr, Scotland in 1917, and from an early age it was obvious that he had an amazing gift for languages. At Ayr Academy John won several medals in Classics, followed by the Orientalist Prize at Glasgow University where he studied ancient languages and Biblical Studies. He achieved his doctorate at the University of Oxford in 1945, with a thesis entitled *The Pharisees: A critical investigation*. Two years later, Dr Bowman was appointed to the Department of Semitic Studies at Leeds University, where he stayed for the next fifteen years and rose to Head of Department. In August 1959 he relocated to the University of Melbourne with his wife and seven children, to take up the Chair of Semitic Studies. The Chair had been vacant for two years by this time, following the death of Professor Maurice Goldman in September 1957.

The Department of Semitic Studies had been established in 1946, and was the only department in an Australian University at that time that offered a full four-year honours degree focusing on languages. When John Bowman arrived in 1959, the department consisted of one professor and two lecturers. By 1963, under Professor Bowman's leadership, the number of lecturers had increased to eight, and during his time as Chair, Professor Bowman built up a remarkable unit that was internationally recognised for its comprehensive curriculum and wide research interests. In particular, Professor Bowman focused on developing the department as a centre to advance the understanding of Middle Eastern culture and civilization. One of the first things Professor Bowman did when he started in the department was to fund two annual periodicals to promote and facilitate local research and publishing into ancient Near Eastern languages, literature, archaeology and comparative religion. *Abr-Nahrain* is still published under its new name of *Ancient Near Eastern studies*, while *Milla wa-Milla: The Australian bulletin of comparative religion* enjoyed a nineteen year existence before ceasing in 1979.

Professor Bowman also set about building up a collection of reference books on the Middle East which were made available to students through the Baillieu Library. Additionally, in order to give students the opportunity to study primary texts, he began to acquire the amazing collection of Middle Eastern manuscripts, which is now housed in Special Collections. Professor Bowman purchased

most of the manuscripts from Luzac's, a famous London firm that traded in ancient texts, and paid for them out of departmental research grants. He made the first donation of Middle Eastern manuscripts to the Library in 1972, and in the letter⁶ which accompanies the donation, Professor Bowman states that he is transferring the manuscripts because '...open shelves in my department just will not do. I had hoped for glass cases, but these have not been furnished...'. Besides security, he was also very concerned about temperature and humidity control for the manuscripts, and not only for the manuscript collection, but also for his very large microfilm collection of Middle Eastern manuscripts. This is yet another substantial collection Professor Bowman built up over many years using departmental research grant money. He donated the microfilm collection to the Baillieu Library at the same time as he donated the first of the manuscripts.

The collections built up by Professor Bowman contributed to a thriving postgraduate school at a time when it was common practice for the best students to travel overseas to undertake their postgraduate research. Under Professor Bowman's leadership, local students were encouraged to undertake their postgraduate studies here at the University of Melbourne in the Department of Middle Eastern Studies (as the department was called from 1966 on). He also encouraged postgraduate students from other Australian and International universities to study here at the University of Melbourne, where he offered a wide and stimulating range of research topics.

As for Professor Bowman's own research: he was deeply interested in the study of religions and published a number of books and many articles on the subject. In particular, his research focused on the common links between Christianity, Islam and Judaism, and this passion wove a thread throughout his whole career. By the time of his retirement in 1975, Professor Bowman was firmly established as an international expert on ancient and modern Hebrew, Aramaic, Syriac, Greek, Latin and Persian – he was also familiar with several modern European languages including French and German.

The Department of Middle Eastern Studies no longer exists at the University of Melbourne. However, according to Professor Antonio Sagona, in the obituary he wrote on John Bowman, who passed away in 2006 just four days short of his 90th birthday, the fact that the study of the Middle East still matters at Melbourne, and is still studied as part of several programmes, is in no small measure a legacy of the foundation that Professor Bowman had shaped.

Notes

1. UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE (1971). *Catalogue of works of art 1971: catalogue of works of art in the University and its affiliated colleges with a catalogue of the collection in the Dept. of Classical Studies*. University of Melbourne: Melbourne, pp 97-102.

2. UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, Library (1977). *List of oriental manuscripts held in the University of Melbourne Library*. The Library: Melbourne.
3. UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE, Conservation Service (1993). *Conservation survey of the Middle Eastern manuscript collection, Baillieu Library*, November/December.
4. *Symposium on the care and conservation of Islamic manuscripts*, 8-12 November 2004.
5. For personal details on Professor Bowman, I am indebted to the 'Obituary', written by Professor Antonio Sagona and published in *Ancient Near Eastern studies*, vol. XLIII, 2006, pp 3-6, and to an article by Dr Andrew Jamieson, titled 'Calligraphic creativity: Middle Eastern manuscripts', published in *Taasa review: the journal of the Asian arts Society of Australia*, vol. 16, no. 1, March 2007, pp 7-9.
6. The two-page letter, dated 14 June 1972, is part of the University of Melbourne's Archives Collection.

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Author biography

Pam Pryde is the Curator of Special Collections in the Baillieu Library here at the University of Melbourne. Prior to that she was the Rare Books Librarian at the State Library of Victoria. Pam has a particular interest in early printed books and in the book as a physical object – a study known as analytical, or physical, bibliography – and to further this interest she for many years been involved with hand type setting and printing at the Ancora Press at Monash University.