

**PRESERVING the OLDEST COPTIC MONASTIC COLLECTION in EGYPT**  
**The Deir al-Surian Library**

The Library of the 6<sup>th</sup> century Coptic Orthodox Deir al-Surian, monastery situated in the Egyptian desert half way between Cairo and Alexandria is the oldest and the most important in Egypt.

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Dating from the 5<sup>th</sup> century, it is renowned for its multilingual collection of ancient Christian texts in Coptic Boharic, Arabic, Ethiopic and Syriac. They include the earliest biblical texts and works of Church Fathers of which the Greek original are now lost, and to this day possesses the oldest dated Christian literary manuscript in any language ( AD 411), the oldest dated biblical manuscript in any language (Isaiah, AD 459/60), and the oldest dated Gospel manuscript in any language (AD 510). Since its inception in 2002, The Levantine Foundation a charitable organisation, registered in the UK and the Arab Republic of Egypt, has been preserving the collection. Under the auspices of the foundation a state-of-the-art library including conservation centre was built and the collection transferred in 2013.

The enormous task of preserving such heritage for the future requires exceptional approach and understanding and raises many issues: how to balance the needs of the religious community who still want to use their books; how to facilitate access to the increasing demand from scholars; how to structure the conservation work without encroaching on the monastic life and how to decide on the best approach of preserving this collection.

This presentation will comprise of three parts. The first part will be presented by Elizabeth Sobczynski, founder of The Levantine Foundation and project director who will outline the history of the library, its historical importance and the future goals of the foundation. The second part presented by Flavio Marzo, ACR book conservator will describe conservation of the 5<sup>th</sup> century Four Gospels manuscript on parchment, possibly the earliest existing gospel manuscript in the world. Flavio will take us through the planning, the treatment options, and challenges facing a conservator before, during and after the work. He will talk about the treatments carried out within the library facilities and the support of colleagues but most of all the need of engagement with and from the local monastic community. How conservation ethics can successfully be applied conserving material of such immeasurable value kept within a living library with access to scholars and religious community, and how this compromise was successfully accomplished. The third part will be presented by Monika Stokowiec, book and archives conservator who will focus on the most recent conservation campaign [2016], and the work carried out to stabilise two very fragile Syriac manuscripts on parchment dating back to the 6<sup>th</sup> century. The speaker will talk about the delicate issue of dealing with manuscripts which are missing bindings and different approaches practiced in conservation. A new concept for a protective but sympathetic cover was devised, though still in need of some development, it will be presented and discussed.

## Biographical notes:

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***Elizabeth Sobczynski, ACR, paper conservator***  
*Chief Executive, The Levantine Foundation*

Elizabeth Sobczynski is a conservator, specialising in art and manuscripts on paper and related materials. She works for the foremost British collections including The Arts Council, The British Film Institute, The Government Art Collection, The Henry Moore Foundation, and Tate Gallery. She is the founder and Chief Executive of The Levantine Foundation, a charity registered in England and Egypt, dedicated to the preservation of cultural heritage in the Near East. Five years ago, she extended her activities, establishing collaboration with Leiden University, The Netherlands, the Ministry of Antiquities and The National Library & Archives in Egypt setting up an international Board of Advisors from Europe, Egypt and USA to develop and implement training programme for museum professionals in Egypt. She lectured and taught on topics of conservation and preservation in Egypt, the UK, Netherlands and Poland. She lives in London and Paris.

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***Flavio Marzo, Conservation Studio Manage BL/QF Partnership,***  
*Conservation Events and Outreach Manager*

Flavio Marzo was born in Susa near Turin (Italy). He now lives in London where he has been working for the British library since 2005 and became an ICON accredited conservator in 2012. He previously worked in prominent institutions such as the Vatican Library and the libraries of Queens and Magdalene Colleges in Oxford and also as private conservator/restorer in the Benedictine Monastery of Novalesa (Italy). He has also been involved in several conservation projects in Italy, Greece and Egypt as conservator, consultant and teacher. Since 2012 Flavio Marzo has been appointed Conservation Studio Manager for the Qatar Digitisation Project within the British Library/Qatar Foundation partnership and more recently also as Conservation Event and Outreach manager. He is also author of a number of articles published on conservation journals and on the web.

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***Monika Stokowiec, Independent Conservator of Books and Archival Materials, UK***

Monika Stokowiec is originally from Poland, where for many years she worked in a private conservation studio as a conservation assistant. In 2010 she gained an MA degree in conservation with distinction from Camberwell College in London. Since then she was an intern for 18 months in a private studio in Penzance, followed by work at University of Southampton and then Durham University. She is now based in her beloved Cornwall where she runs her own private practice.

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