

I heard they burned them: Rumour, secrecy, and suspicion as challenges to manuscript conservation

Paul Love, Al Akhawayn University, Morocco

My contribution to the seminar is a report on a pilot project launched in July 2017 to document and preserve the private manuscript libraries on the island of Jerba in southern Tunisia. From the medieval centuries all the way up to the 20th century, Jerba was home to a rich Arabic manuscript culture both in terms of production and collection. The island is especially well-known for its libraries of manuscripts belonging to Ibadis, a Muslim minority community whose adherents live in geographic pockets throughout northern Africa. Unfortunately, the history of manuscripts collections on the island and their current state is poorly documented.

After briefly presenting our pilot project efforts to photograph one of the largest libraries on the island, the al-Bāsī Mosque, I would like to contrast that experience with other attempts to document and work with collection owners on the island. The al-Bāsī collection is today in the possession of the al-Bāsī (fr. El Bessi) family, who has been working with us throughout the project to conserve the collection. They have allowed us full access to the collection, in exchange for our cleaning, describing, photographing, and boxing every item in the library.

By contrast, many manuscript collections in Jerba are not accessible at all. Indeed, rumors and secrecy surround the very existence of several of them. For example, some of the richest collections belonging to great scholarly families of the early-modern centuries (17th-19th c.) are said to have been sold in piecemeal to tourists. Perhaps the oldest collection on the island is rumored to have been intentionally destroyed by fire while another is said to have been thrown into an old well due to the magical properties of the texts.

While these rumors circulate widely among local communities on the island, an equal number of people deny their veracity altogether. These people instead claim that the rumors of manuscript destruction as merely ruses to keep collections out of the hands of outsiders. Families who are unwilling to provide evidence as to the fate of their books are held in great suspicion. These suspicions in turn generate new rumors as to the history of inaccessible or secret collections. For example, stories circulate that some families hold in their possession manuscripts stolen from mosques and other private libraries. Out of fear of being accused of thievery or out of an unwillingness to surrender the manuscripts to their 'original' owners, they opt to keep them secret.

Hovering above all of this is a dark cloud of awareness among all parties that manuscripts are in danger of disappearing. As I have witnessed in working with collections in Jerba over the past several years, many manuscript collections on the island are indeed deteriorating rapidly. The majority are lost not to the flames of arson attacks or the depths of a well but rather to the humidity of a Mediterranean climate and the voracious appetites of insects. The presentation offers thoughts on how the layers of rumors and secrecy that make these collections inaccessible present a unique challenge to the effort to preserve manuscript libraries in northern Africa.