

26– 28 May 2003

25th ANNUAL CONFERENCE OF MELCOM INTERNATIONAL, THE EUROPEAN ASSOCIATION OF MIDDLE EAST LIBRARIANS.

Organizers: The library of the Orient-Institute (Wolf-Dieter Lemke [head librarian], Dina Banna [librarian]; Ghina Kalache Kadri, Nasma Safsouf Tayyara [library assistants]) and the Bibliothèque Orientale / Université Saint-Joseph (May Seigneurie [directrice]).

Melcom International is an international body of Middle East librarians representing libraries and archives in Europe, the Middle East and North America which collect and preserve Middle Eastern material in manuscript or printed form. They range from national libraries to university seminars. Melcom members meet once a year to exchange information about current projects and new developments in library affairs. Melcom conferences are major fora for contacts between institutions and individual members.

The Beirut 25th conference was special for several reasons:

1. Conference preparations were overshadowed by the uncertainties of the looming war and then by its catastrophic outcome for the people of Iraq and the Iraqi cultural heritage. Fears of violent repercussions led to cancellations. The programme had to be rebalanced several times and it was not certain for some time, if the conference could take place at all.
2. Melcom encourages co-operation between institutions and individuals in Europe, the Middle East and North America. But never before a conference was jointly organized by a foreign institution (the library of the Orient-Institute) and a locally well-established library (Bibliothèque Orientale / Université Saint Joseph). This co-operation falls within the framework of a general treaty of co-operation between the Orient-Institute and the Université Saint-Joseph.
3. Melcom met last time in the Middle East in 1996 in Cairo. So the 2003 Beirut meeting was a most welcomed opportunity for those regional and local librarians, who don't receive funds to travel to Europe, to take part in an international library conference. Interest in the conference was overwhelming. There were more than 170 participants, half of them coming from Lebanon. Other countries of the region and of North Africa were also well represented. Non-Middle Eastern participants came from Belgium, Bulgaria, England, France, Germany, Malaysia, The Netherlands, Pakistan, Russia, Turkey, U.K., U.S.A.
4. Meeting in Beirut provided an opportunity for European and American librarians to get first hand information about the library situation in Lebanon and neighboring countries. A keynote address by the former Lebanese Minister of Culture, lectures about the project of a Lebanese National Library, about Lebanese university libraries, special collections and archives, about a Lebanese library software and visits to different libraries provided much appreciated information.
5. Melcom is a non-political association. Normally there are no discussions of political items. But the situation in Iraq and what has happened to Iraqi libraries and archives could not be ignored by a Middle Eastern librarians conference, taking place in the

Middle East. That is why IFLA (International Federation of Library Associations), the “highest” international body in library affairs, also sent a representative.

Session 1 was wholly devoted to the Iraq library question, to international reactions and possible help. There was a general agreement that reliable information was still very scarce. To gain it would be of primary concern. Intensive efforts to bring an Iraqi librarian to the MELCOM conference did not succeed, due to security risks. Only a film by Amal al-Jubouri, describing some of the damage done to museums, libraries and archives, could be shown in a kind of avant-première

The conference passed an unanimous resolution, insisting that a solution could only be found through a combination of national Iraqi and international efforts: Speaking for the main association of Middle Eastern librarianship and being supported by IFLA, the resolution should have some effect, at least with UNESCO.

(The text of the resolution)

MELCOM, the European Association of Middle East Librarians, assembled in Beirut at its 25th annual conference, unanimously

Deplores the destruction and theft of Iraqi libraries, archives and their contents following the US and British led invasion and occupation of Iraq in April 2003. This occurred in breach of the United Nations Convention on the protection of cultural property of countries under military occupation.

Commends the efforts of UNESCO, IFLA and other international bodies to assess the extent of this damage and deplores the recent action of the occupying powers in refusing entry into Iraq to accredited representatives.

Insists that the international library community, of which it is part, play a full and unimpeded role in assisting Iraqi colleagues to restore, as far as possible, their library and archival heritage and infrastructure, a process MELCOM is willing to contribute to by offering the professional expertise of its members.

Proposes to send a highly qualified professional from among its members into Iraq to assess the situation and to report to the Board.

Supports the initiatives taken by our North American colleagues of the Middle East Librarians Association (MELA) and related organisations.

Beirut, 28 May 2003

Understandably, the Iraq session found strong resonance in the press.

6. The “regular” conference programme treated topics of classical librarianship and modern library technology under the following categories:

Acquisition policies and practices

Manuscript studies and rare material collection

Cataloguing policies and practices

Libraries and new technologies

Papers will be published on the website of Melcom International:

www.uni-bamberg.de/unibib/melcom/home.html

A selection will appear in printed form in Manuscripta Orientalia (St Petersburg).

Most impressive were the papers about manuscript studies, libraries and new technologies.

The fate of the Iraqi libraries had not only underlined the importance of manuscript cataloguing, but even more the need for digitalization.

Katherine J. Gill (U.S.A.) lectured about "The Hill Monastic Manuscript Library's Eastern Mediterranean Initiative", while Youssef Ziedan (Egypt) introduced "Heritage Revival Projects of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina". Both papers treated digitalization of manuscripts as a means of preservation, a topic of great urgency after what had happened to Iraqi and Bosnian manuscript collections.

Descriptions of manuscript collections were given by Asma Fathallah (Lebanon): *Handle with Care: Manuscripts at the American University of Beirut Libraries*"; Dimiti Osipov (Russia): *Arabic, Persian and Turkish Mss in Moscow Collections*; Andrew Peacock (U.K.): *Uncatalogued Islamic Historical and Geographical Manuscripts in Cambridge University Library*; Antoine Saliba (Lebanon): *La Bibliothèque Orientale, Histoire et orientations actuelles*; Souad Slim (Lebanon): *Le rôle de l'Université de Balamand dans la préservation du patrimoine culturel et religieux des chrétiens arabes du patriarcat d'Antioche*; Olga Vasilyeva (Russia): *Christian Arab Manuscripts in the National Library of Russia*; Muhammad Isa Waley (U.K.): *Hidden Treasures of Birmingham: some Rare Turkish and Persian Manuscripts in the University's Collection*.

Tilman Seidensticker (Germany) lectured about a special group of manuscripts: *The Development of Small-Size Copies of the Qur'an*; while Zeina Genadry (Belgium) analyzed the structure of an individual manuscript: *A Herati Lacquer Bookbinding*.

Of outstanding interest for the history of Beirut and Bilad as-Sham in general was an analysis of archival material at the National Library of Bulgaria: Stoyanka Kenderova (Bulgaria): *La bibliothèque d'Osman pasha, wali de Beyrouth et de Saida (selon le defter de son heritage)*. Mrs. Kenderova also gave a second more general lecture at the Orient-Institute about this unique historical material.

Lectures about libraries included among others: Anne Cathelineau (France): *Présentation d'une bibliothèque d'UFR spécialisée en langue et littérature arabe et projets de développement [La Bibliothèque Orient-Monde Arabe (Paris)]*; Yasmin Faghihi (U.K.): *RSLP-Retroconversion project for Arabic-Persian in the John Rylands University Library of Manchester – a conclusion*; Farzaneh Zareie (France): *La bibliothèque de l'Institut d'Etudes Iraniennes (IEI) et son projet d'intégration à la Bulac*. New technologies were discussed by Hasna Askhita (Syria): *Syrian Libraries and New Technologies*; De Gaulle Daou (Lebanon): *L'Unicode au service du catalogage, de consultation et d'échange de données en réseau local et en réseau international (Internet) sous format XML et MarcXML*; Reinhard Hiß (Germany): *The Role of Unicode in the Actual and Future Development of Information-Exchange and –Storage. Its Impact on Existing Information Systems, especially in Small and Medium-Sized libraries*.

Lutz Wiederhold and Sibylle Wegener (Germany) informed about: *Latest Developments of MENALIB [Middle East Virtual Library]*.

Other promising papers were withdrawn as prospective participants cancelled due to security considerations.

Conference participants judged the conference as highly informative and enjoyable. Financial help by the German Research Foundation (DFG) and a reception given by the German Ambassador demonstrated the support of German authorities. The library of

the Orient-Institute and the Bibliothèque Orientale are proud of successfully organizing that much interaction and dialogue.

There was only one deplorable aspect – at least from the point of view of the Orient-Institute. The Institute does not have a conference room big enough for international conferences, a disadvantage regularly felt, even when organizing lectures. So all sessions had to take place at the Bibliothèque Orientale. This was misinterpreted by parts of the Lebanese press, thus diminishing the efforts of the Orient-Institute in the eyes of the Lebanese public.

Best regards

Dina Banna