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CULTURAL COMMENTARY

Yemen's Threatened Cultural Heritage

The heartbreakingly destructive civil war in Yemen has put some of the world's most treasured Islamic manuscripts in peril

BY CHRISTIAN C. SAHNER

men has caused untold human suffering: tens of thousands killed, millions displaced, widespread famine, and a deadly cholera epidemic. In an extraordinary step, the Senate on Dec. 13 voted to limit U.S. support for the brutal Saudi-led campaign to oust the Houthi rebels. As the debate continues, it's important to remember that Yemen has also experienced a tremendous loss of cultural heritage, which is among the richest in the Middle East.

Throughout history, Yemen has stood at the crossroads of Arabia, East Africa and the Indian Ocean. Watered by the rains of the monsoon season, it was home to great civilizations long before the foundation of Islam, and became the seat of numerous dynasties after. Each of these contributed to the diverse tableau of cultures that still exists in Yemen today. The country contains four Unesco world heritage sites—including the Old City of Sana'a, a magical place said by travel writer Tim Mackintosh-Smith to look as if

Tim Mackintosh-Smith to look as if it were "baked, not built, of iced gingerbread."

This patrimony has fallen under

grave threat as a result of the civil war. During the past three years, ancient dams, medieval mosques, museum collections, and relics of the colonial era have been obliterated. Although

Saudi-led bombing has caused most of the damage, Houthi rebels also bear responsibility. So do a patchwork of other belligerents, including forces loyal to President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi, Islamic State, and al Qaeda. This destruction has received scant attention in the main-

stream press.
Within this tragedy, one of the great untold stories is the grave threat to Yemen's libraries, not unlike the plundering and destruction that happened in Mali in 2013. Indeed,

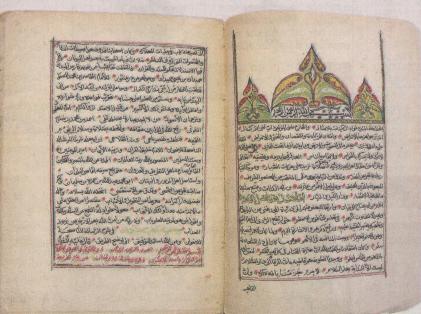
Islamic manuscripts
are among Yemen's greatest historical treasures. Perhaps the most famous is the Sana'a Quran fragment, discovered in the attic of that city's Great Mosque in 1972, and still stored on-site. It is thought to be one of the oldest Qurans in the world, preserving a seventh-century version of the text

read today.

While the Sana'a Quran appears to be safe, the same cannot be said

different from the one Muslims

A Yemeni man reads the Quran at the Great Mosque in the Old City of Sana'a, top; a picture from March 2016 of Unesco-listed buildings in Sana'a that were destroyed by air strikes carried out by the Saudi-led coalition, above; 20th-century manuscript of 'Sharh al-Nasiha' by Imam al-Mansur bi'llah 'Abdallah ibn Hamza, a commentary on a famous Zaydi theological text, below left; workers renovating a historic building in the Old City of Sana'a in May, below right



of Yemen's priceless collections of Zaydi manuscripts. These are scattered across the country in small museums and private libraries, many of which appear to have been destroyed or looted. The Zaydis who produced these manuscripts belong to a sect that forms about 35% of Yemen's population. Zaydism is a little-known branch of Shiite Islam dating back to the eighth century and found today

only in Yemen. The Houthi rebels are themselves Zaydis and have forged ties with the government of Iran on the basis of their shared Shiite leanings (though the Iranians belong to a different branch known as Twelver Shiism, which constitutes the majority of Shiites world-wide) and hostility to Saudi Arabia.

Despite their political ties with Iran, it is important to remember

that the Zaydis have a deep history all their own. In fact, across the centuries, Zaydis have oscillated between Sunni and Shiite forms of law and theology. Through it all, they have often been distinguished by their emphasis on learning and openness to non-Zaydi ideas. This is reflected in the Zaydi manuscript collections of Yemen, which also include the works of Sunni,

Twelver and Ismaili authors. Inter-

est in such a wide spectrum of Islamic intellectual history is unique in the world. In the same vein, the Zaydis are the only Muslim community today to preserve the rationalist teachings of the Mu'tazilis, a medieval school of thought that advocated the use of human reason as a tool for accessing divine truth. Once the official doctrine of the Abbasid court, Mu'tazili theology eventually became marginalized nearly everywhere except for Yemen, which thus became a unique repository of Mu'tazili texts.

The Zaydi libraries of Yemen also open a unique window onto the history of book production. Although most manuscripts date to the late medieval and early modern periods, the practice of copying by hand endured in Yemen well into the 20th century. Indeed, only with the growing popularity of photocopying in the region around the 1980s did many traditionally trained scribes abandon their craft. Yet in an interesting twist showing a combination of medieval and modern practices, Yemenis began reproducing manuscript pages with photocopiers, while binding the printed results using traditional methods.

Scholars do not have a precise grasp of what has been lost since 2015, though the destruction has certainly been extensive. It has been driven as much by sectarian hatred as by the vicissitudes of war, as it seems that some of the

destruction has occurred at the hands of Salafi militants who regard the Zaydis and their books

as heretical. Amid this, there is a small glimmer of hope for Yemen in the form of a new project called the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: A Digital Portal. Led by Prof. Sabine Schmidtke of the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, N.J., the portal aims to preserve, study and make available online the rich patrimony of Zaydi texts. Thus, while war ravages the country, a digital salvage op-

eration of Yemen's patrimony is well under way. It has the power to play an important role in rebuilding the country's cultural heritage after the war ends—and, thus, contribute to rebuilding its identity.

Mr. Sahner is associate professor of Islamic history at the University of Oxford. His latest book is "Christian Martyrs Under Islam" (Princeton).