



## ICARUS commits its activities to rescuing the cultural heritage of the Middle East

The ICARUS Network Meeting #16 in St. Pölten (November 23-25) ended with a sensational result: The immediate start of a co-operation with the "Centre Numérique des Manuscrits Orientaux" (CNMO) in Iraq, led by Dominican Father Najeeb Michael.

### Working towards three clear objectives

- **Material support:** Equipping the two scanning studios of Fr. Michael in Erbil/Iraq with machines, paper, archival boxes, etc.
- **Training:** Fr. Michael and his team urgently need archivists and restorers to give trainings in book restoration and conservation. It is planned to hold training sessions in Austria (Danube University Krems) and Croatia (State Archives).
- **Establishing a digital infrastructure (long-term storage, portal)** to collect and save already digitized material on a platform for the purpose of making it available to everyone.

### 25 years of "secret" scanning experience

"For 25 years I have been working in the dark", says - not a miner, but a friar from Northern Iraq. Since 1990, Dominican Father Najeeb Michael, born 1955 in Mosul, has been working to save, restore and digitize old manuscripts that bear witness to the different religions and ethnic groups who used to live side by side in the Middle East. At the beginning Najeeb only digitized the stock of his home monastery in Qaraqosh before turning to the archives of other monasteries, the collection of the Patriarch of Baghdad as well as private inventories, all dating back to the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The friar, who was born into an Aramaic speaking Chaldean-Catholic family, knows about the importance of such evidence in a time like this, when the region is on the verge of being destroyed by terrorists who do not only wish to extinguish human lives, but also any kind of cultural heritage. In 2014, 10 days before the city of Mosul was taken by the IS, Father Najeeb – like acting on a hunch – had a truckload of the most valuable manuscripts brought to safety. When during the night of the 6<sup>th</sup> of July he had to flee the city himself, he packed everything he could into his private car and got himself and his Chaldean-Catholic community to safety.

"Today, Kurdistan is the only safe region in Iraq", says Najeeb. "But what will become of our efforts, should this region, too, fall into the hands of the wrong people? **Would that be the end of 2000 years of Christianity in Iraq?**", the Dominican friar asks.

### **ICARUS co-operates with Fr. Najeeb Michael**

As a special guest of the international workshop on "The cultural heritage of the Middle East: Current threats and scenarios for protection in the future", organized by the International Centre for Archival Research (ICARUS) in St. Pölten, Father Najeeb impressively reported about his experiences in Northern Iraq.

**Since all of his digitized items (so far about 8000) are stored on external hard disks** and as such still remain "vulnerable", an international consortium headed by Thomas Aigner (Austria), Vlatka Lemić (Croatia), and Csaba B. Stenge (Hungary) immediately decided to start co-operating with the „Centre Numérique des Manuscrits Orientaux“ (CNMO) as quickly as possible. Meeting organizer and president of ICARUS, Thomas Aigner, explains the reason for this step: **"Preserving one's memory is always tantamount to preserving one's identity.** The importance of these historical documents of the Christians in the Middle East goes far beyond that region. It is not only about preserving the historical memory of a small group or region. **These documents bear witness to the culture of all of us and therefore concern ALL of us.**

### **Save the tree with its roots**

Father Najeeb puts an image to the words of his host: "Just like a tree, we can only save a person with their roots; the roots are always their history." Keynote speaker Andreas Schmidt-Colinet, Professor for Archaeology at the University of Vienna, also refers to the special importance these endangered documents have far beyond the Middle East region for the entire Western world. Schmidt-Colinet who, until the outbreak of the civil war in Syria, had been researching in Palmyra for more than 30 years confirms: "This is not just any war. It's the destruction of the cultural heritage of all of us". **By systematically destroying documents they strive to annihilate any evidence of a Christian civilization in the Middle East before Islam."**

### **Starting to rebuild together**

While Fr. Najeeb still ran four digitization studios in his first monastery in Qaraqosh, all of them well hidden from the public, he now only has two ill-equipped rooms, as most machines were left behind when they had to flee. But with ICARUS' help, Father Najeeb now wants to continue, develop and speed up his digitization projects out of Kurdistan. "So far I was only able to digitize some 5% of the material available in Iraq", says Najeeb. In the future, he also wants to save the stocks from other cities, such as Baghdad or Kirkuk.

Thomas Aigner feels very confident about the future co-operation with Father Najeeb: **"All of our 170 partners have experience with archival systems, digital platforms and back-up systems.** Thanks to our long-standing expertise we will be able to provide Father Najeeb

with a virtual environment, i.e. an archival information system for his data, without much delay. Moreover, we will strive to train his team in restoring particularly fragile manuscripts which in their current state could not be scanned, so that we will make considerable progress also in this area." Last Tuesday, Father Najeeb and his „Centre Numérique des Manuscrits Orientaux“ (CNMO) became the first ICARUS member from the Middle East.

**If you are interested or have questions, please contact:**

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**Who is behind the International Centre for Archival Research (ICARUS)?**

The ICARUS network currently encompasses more than 170 archives and scientific institutions from 30 countries in Europe, the US and Canada.

ICARUS is best known for being the umbrella organization of these three digital platforms:

**Matricula:** The service-oriented online portal for church registers on a cross-border and interdenominational basis

**Monasterium:** The virtual charters archive with over 400,000 medieval and early modern charters from more than 60 institutions from more than 10 European countries.

**Topotheque:** The local-historical encyclopaedia. An online archive, to which everyone can contribute, made up of photographs and picture postcards.