

EDITOR'S NOTE:

This special issue of *MELA Notes, Pioneer Libraries, Archives, and Bibliographic Figures in Middle East Studies*, marks a significant milestone in our ongoing effort to document the foundational architectures of knowledge within Middle East Studies. When we first issued the call for submissions, our goal was to illuminate the "hidden hands" of our field—the pioneer libraries, archives, and bibliographers whose labor in preservation, classification, and stewardship has shaped decades of scholarship. The resulting collection of articles exceeds those initial expectations, offering a panoramic view that spans centuries and continents, moving from the royal libraries of the Qajar era to contemporary digital preservation strategies and community-led collective action.

The contributions in this issue form a cohesive narrative on how Middle Eastern heritage is collected, organized, and redefined. We begin with a focus on institutional foundations and the transition to modern librarianship. Hadi Jorati explores the Sipahsālār Library through the lens of the *I'tiḏād al-Saltana* Qajar collection, revealing the intersection of royal bibliophilia and public institutionalization. Homa Afrasiabi provides a critical study of Keykāvūs Jahāndārī, whose work was instrumental in bridging traditional bibliographic practices with modern Iranian librarianship. This theme of institutional vision is further enriched by Jaliseh, who examines the ambitious legacy of Muḥammad Ramazānī and his early 20th-century dream of establishing a grand public library to serve the Iranian intellectual community.

The issue then moves toward the materiality of the archive and the challenges of regional scholarship. Khalilullah Afzali offers a vital investigation into paleography and textual editing in 20th-century Afghanistan, documenting scholarly resilience and the preservation of manuscript traditions under shifting political landscapes. Farghadani traces the material "afterlife" of the *'Arafāt al-'Ashiqīn*, showing how a single manuscript's journey through various courts and archives reveals broader patterns of cultural transmission and the endurance of Persianate literary culture.

We also address the "pioneer" figure through the lens of biography and social impact. Reza Karami analyzes the professional life of Hooshang Ebrami, bridging the geographical and professional gap from Hamadan to Los Angeles. In a shift toward contemporary advocacy and the evolving definition of stewardship, Haque et al. discuss the Hijabi Librarians Collective, demonstrating that the "pioneer" spirit remains active today through collective action and the quest for nuanced, authentic Muslim representation in youth literature.

Technical and strategic challenges are addressed in depth by Seyede Torfe Abtahi Nejad Moghadam, who proposes context-sensitive frameworks for the preservation of rare books in Iran, and Stephen Urgola et al., who provide a history of stewardship and regional heritage promotion at the American University in Cairo's Rare Books and Special Collections Library. Finally, the works by Raïd and Emami remind us that archives are not static repositories; whether they are Western governmental records or contemporary "museum-archives" in Tabriz, they remain active sites of artistic reinterpretation and historical inquiry.

By bringing these diverse studies together, this special issue does more than just recount history; it acknowledges the librarians, archivists, and bibliographers who have served as the architects of Middle East Studies. We hope these contributions inspire further research into the intellectual infrastructures that sustain our collective work.

It is important to note that due to the high volume of excellent submissions and certain logistical constraints, we were unable to include every accepted piece in this specific volume. There are several additional articles originally intended for this theme that will be featured in our next regular issue. Furthermore, all materials, including reports, committee updates, and announcements related to the MELA community and our annual conference, will also be published in that upcoming issue to ensure they receive the dedicated space they require.

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