

Theft and Trafficking of Documentary Heritage

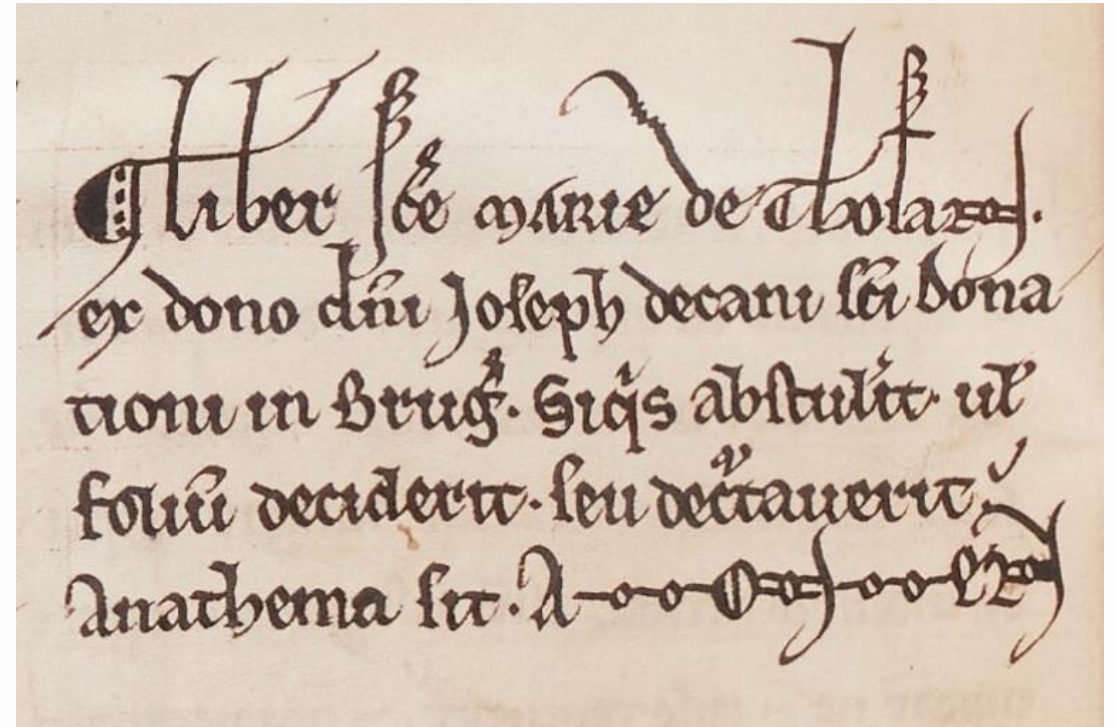
Key considerations and challenges

Launch of the Brazil Red List – Workshop
15 February 2023, São Paulo, Brazil

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Topics to cover:

- Unique Features of Documentary Heritage
- Challenges of Identifying Documentary Heritage Objects
- Challenges of Countering Theft
- Recommendations



Book curse, 12th-13th century manuscript of the Ter Doest Abbey, Gilbert de la Porrée, CC BY-SA 4.0, via Wikimedia Commons

"Whoever takes it away or alienates or tears out a sheet, be damned. Amen."



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About IFLA

- 1400 members in 130+ countries
- Library associations, institutions, individual affiliates
- 60 Professional Units (Sections, Special Interest Groups, Advisory Committees)
- Covers topics across areas of library profession



IFLA's Preservation and Conservation Centres



Documentary Heritage: Definitions



A Jain palm leaf manuscript from Rajasthan, India, 1260 CE
Museum of Fine Arts Boston, Public domain, via Wikimedia Commons



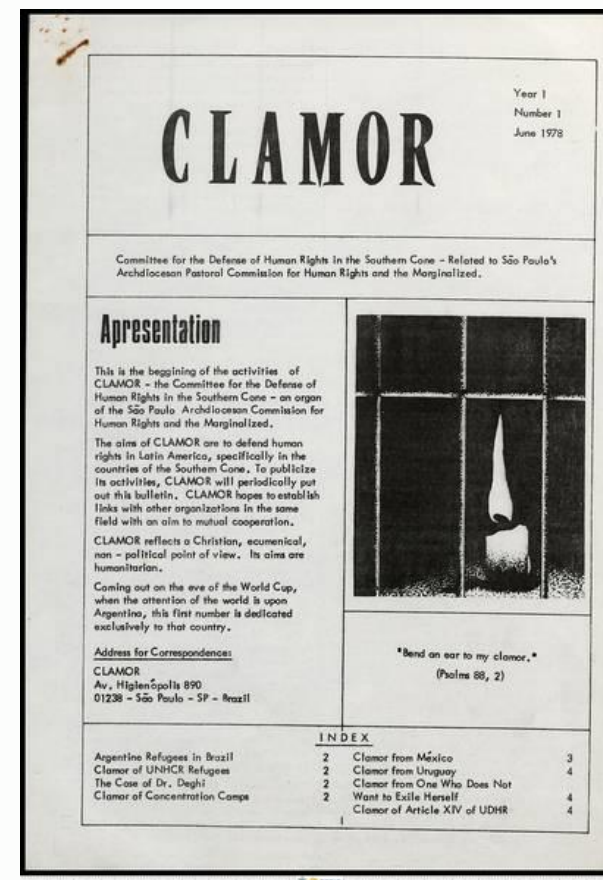
Defining a “document”

- Analogue or digital informational **content** plus its **carrier**
- Preservable and usually moveable
- Content may comprise signs or codes (such as **text**), images (**still** or **moving**) and **sounds**, which can be **copied or migrated**
- Carrier may have **aesthetic, cultural** or **technical** qualities
- Relationship between content and carrier may range from **incidental to integral**



Documentary heritage comprises those single documents –or groups of documents –of significant and **enduring value** to a community, a culture, a country or to humanity generally, and whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment.

UNESCO 2015 Recommendation on the Protection of and Access to Documentary Heritage, Including in Digital Form



Fundo Comitê de Defesa dos Direitos Humanos para os Países do Cone Sul (CLAMOR), Memory of the World International Register, Inscribed 2015, Brazil & Uruguay.

© CEDIC Bulletin CLAMOR, Year IV, Number 94, December 1981



Threats to Documentary Heritage



Empty manuscript boxes at IHERI-AB, Timbuktu, Mali, 2013
UNESCO Bureau of Mali, CC BY-SA 3.0 IGO via Wikimedia Commons



Material Challenges

- Published material is created in multiples
- Produced with intention of being sold
- Library catalogues focus on bibliographic information

What differentiates one copy of printed material from another?

How do you record all distinguishing features?

What differentiates one copy of printed material from another?

How can you record all distinguishing features?

Preventing Theft - Challenges

- Consider theft of individual pages
- Less detectable – staff may not know a theft occurred
- Difficult to return pages to original books



Map stolen by Edward Forbes Smiley III, Source: [FBI Archives](#)

Preventing Theft - Challenges

- Theft can be opportunistic
- Sale on black market or tourist market
- Objects can be cut into pieces
- Lack of capacity to preserve and safeguard
- Economic need and lack of awareness on value



Example of Cambodian palm leaf manuscripts (*sleuk rith*), 18th or 19th century, Public domain, via British Library [Or 5003](#)



Preventing Theft - Challenges

- Theft can be internal
- Lack of security measures What do you do if you find an early printed book from another?
- Libraries can be in religious institutions or personal collections within private homes How do you do that?



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Recommendations





Documentation

- Establish a clear documentation protocol
- Document all movements of items – consider emergency situations
- Cohesive, comprehensive and up-to-date cataloguing
- Digitisation / reference photographs

What do I do?

How do I do it?

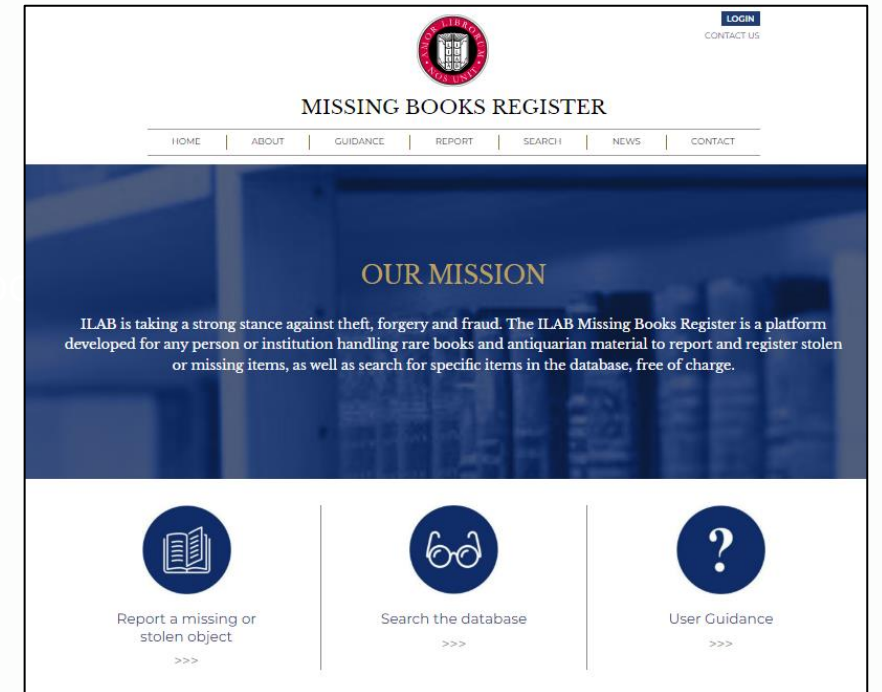
What if I borrow a book from another?

How do you document a book that is damaged?



Awareness Raising

- Decisionmakers, professionals, general public, external partners
- Key topic: de-escalating stigma around **reporting**
- **IFLA Rare Books and Special Collections Section** and International League of Antiquarian Booksellers (ILAB) partnership
- missingbooksregister.org





Focus on Regional Context

IFLA PAC Centre at QNL

- Himaya (حماية) Project
- Countering the theft and trafficking of manuscripts in the MENA region and neighbouring countries
- Manuscripts, ancient Qurans are easier to traffic in region
- Need to work with law enforcement, customs officers and library professionals





Social Media Sales

- PAC Centre at Qatar National Library notes huge increase in online sales on dark web and social media
- See sales in dedicated Facebook groups
- Introduced smart content management system to automatically flag suspicious social media posts
- Cross-check flagged posts with library catalogues



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What can be done?





In institutions...

- Focus on preparedness
- Monitor reading rooms, carry out regular stock checks or audits
- Use clear documentation practices
- Update catalogues & take good photos
- Keep records of ownership markings / unique identifiers



By decision-makers...

- Empower staff to report theft
- Consider preparedness a top priority
- Assign budget to cataloguing, targeting gaps in security, and digitisation
- Prioritise human resource management and training





By Partners...

- Include documentary heritage in training on cultural property protection
- Provide guidance to front line officers
- Raise awareness on ways to identify documentary heritage and how to question passengers to better understand the goods they carry
- Establish partnerships with subject experts



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**Sustained information
sharing is critical.**

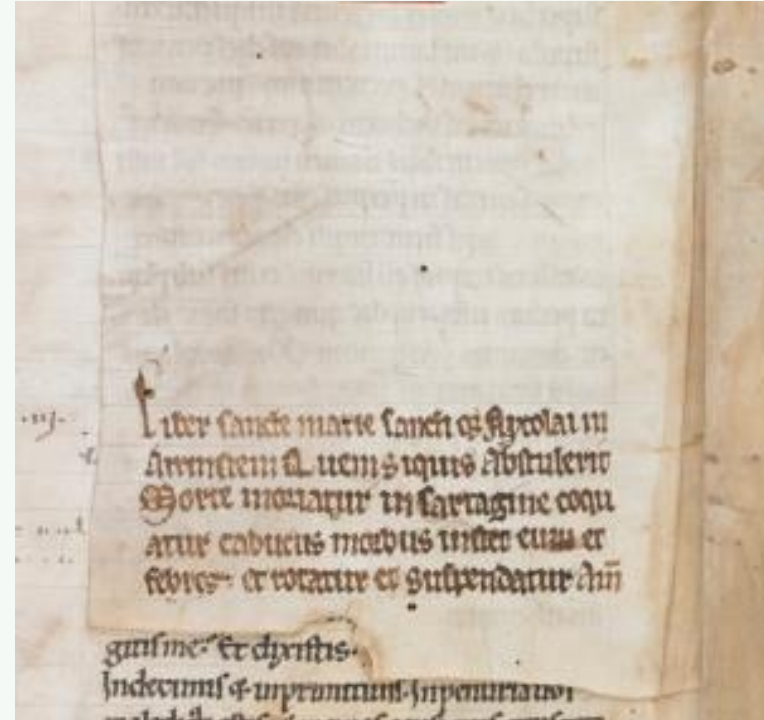




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Thank you!

Contact: claire.mcguire@ifla.org



A book curse from the Arnstein Bible, W. Germany (Arnstein), c. 1172 [Harley MS 2798](#), f. 235v, source: [British Library](#)

"A book of [the Abbey of] SS Mary and Nicholas of Arnstein: If anyone steals it... may he be roasted in a frying pan..."