

# HIDDEN STORIES: NEW APPROACHES TO THE LOCAL AND GLOBAL HISTORY OF THE BOOK

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Greetings

*Hidden Stories: New Approaches to the Local and Global History of the Book* is the second part of a project, [The Book and the Silk Roads](#), that explored the history of bookmaking across routes for trade and travel that linked China to Rome and beyond for over a thousand years. A collaboration of the University of Toronto (U of T) Libraries, the U of T's Old Books New Science Lab, and the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, NJ, the Book and the Silk Roads project created a global network of historians and philologists, engineers and conservators, computer scientists, and Indigenous knowledge keepers. We brought together researchers with complementary skills to reveal what Eurocentric and single-discipline studies of books do not: vibrant stories of the local circumstances of global book development and use.

Now, with generous support from the Mellon Foundation, we're starting a new phase of work. Our goal is to listen to, care for, and share stories that books carry; to work closely with generous collaborators across disciplinary boundaries; to study regional connectivities; and to build robust local relationships, especially with communities of origin. This newsletter covers some highlights from the first few months of our project.

Alex Gillespie, Suzanne Akbari, and Sian Meikle, on behalf of the [Hidden Stories: New Approaches to the Local and Global History of the Book team](#)

# 1.

## EVENTS

### Birchbark Workshop

The first meeting of the *Hidden Stories* project connected Indigenous, settler, and international researchers, artists, craftspeople, scientists, conservators, and knowledge keepers to share knowledge about the treatment, care, repatriation, and understanding of birchbark crafted with the knowledge of peoples across the world. **“Birchbark: An International Meeting,” 14-16 October 2022** was co-hosted by the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation with participants travelling to the beautiful UTM campus, as well as calling in remotely from Lahore, Sydney, Ottawa, and northern Ontario.

One of the most striking aspects of this meeting was the connection and shared experiences of the Indigenous keepers of the living birchbark traditions in the Great Lakes and Eastern Woodlands and the international community excavating, studying and safeguarding Buddhist scrolls in the ancient Gandharan region. We were struck by the issues and questions posed in common by these millenia-old traditions, such as the sacred and mundane uses of birchbark, the challenges posed by caring for birchbark knowledge objects outside of a well-resourced museum setting, and the responsibility to build collaborations that reconnect objects with the people and lands they came from in a good way—for example, through the visiting exhibition of [Gifts from the Michi Saagiig Women to the Prince of Wales, 1860](#); or the [Gandhari Manuscript Project’s](#) current work with support from the Khyentse Foundation in founding the first birchbark conservation lab in Pakistan at the Islamabad Museum.

At “Birchbark: An International Meeting,” renowned artist Philip Cote, MFA (Young Spiritual Elder, Moose Deer Point First Nation: Shawnee, Lakota, Potawatomi, and Ojibway) discusses a birchbark scroll he created. Photo: Nick Iwanyszyn, University of Toronto.



# 2.

## TALKS

### Digital Codicology Conference

Team members Rachel Di Cresce and Melissa Moreton presented at the workshop [“Novel Approaches to Digital Codicology.”](#) held May 10-12 at the Centre d’Études Supérieures de la Renaissance in Tours, France, co-organized by project collaborator Alberto Campagnolo. The event was the most comprehensive gathering yet of codicologists, librarians, scholars, digital humanists and practitioners focused on digital tools used in the study of the physical aspects of the book. The program included presentations on 3D dome imaging, ink analysis protocols, AI and machine learning, data analysis, and tools used to study paper (watermarks) and parchment. Di Cresce and Moreton presented digital tools developed by the project (such as the [3D Codex Modeller](#)), discussed new work on descriptive terminologies and cataloguing language, and shared the methodology that shapes the current work, which is guided by conversations and collaborations with source communities. One of the central goals of the *Hidden Stories* project is to make the book visible, both for communities of origin and for the general public. Visualization tools and improved catalogue descriptions of the book’s codicological features allows users to access, study, and connect with these objects in new ways.

### Indigenous Arts and Culture Gathering

Melissa Moreton travelled north in early June to beautiful Manitoulin Island on Georgian Bay, Ontario, to learn from attendees of the [GRASAC](#) gathering (The Great Lakes Research Alliance for the Study of Aboriginal Arts & Cultures). The event, hosted at the Ojibwe Cultural Foundation, was attended by Indigenous community members (many Anishinaabek from Manitoba, Toronto, and communities around Georgian Bay, Ontario) and settler-allies and included presentations on Indigenous material culture, treaty research, land stewardship, and governance. Moreton discussed two Indigenous books—one Munsee-related, and one Anishinaabe (Ojibwe)—currently housed in the Princeton University Library. Both are part of the *Hidden Stories* project, research guided by and furthered through collaboration with Indigenous community members.

### Care and Conservation of Manuscripts in Copenhagen

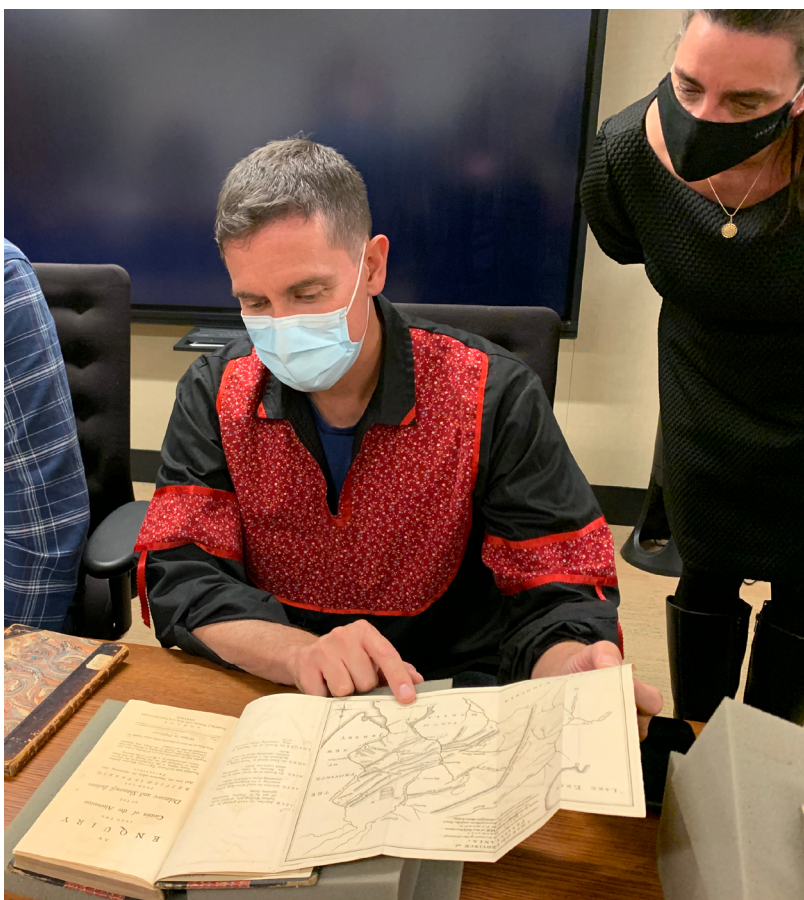
If you haven’t been, we highly recommend this [biennale gathering of rare book conservators, caretakers, and scholars in Copenhagen, Denmark!](#) Topics at the April event included scientific imaging, conservation case studies, big data surveys of books, presentations on global book traditions, and traditional care practices for manuscripts. This year’s conference was attended by *Hidden Stories* team members Melissa Moreton and James Canary (Book Conservator, Lilly Library, Indiana), with a presentation by James Sargan (University of Georgia) and independent conservator Bridget Warrington on “The Castle Acre Processional: Assessing 15th-century Oak Boards and Historical Slip Repairs Using Micro-CT Scanning and Carbon Dating.” Sargan’s conclusion: “It’s impossible to come away without new ideas, approaches, and colleagues!”

**Other *Hidden Stories* events and speaking highlights of the past few months** have included a wonderful [seminar](#) by [Toronto-based bookbinder Don Taylor](#) at U of T's Centre for Medieval Studies, [a radio interview](#) with Alex Gillespie by CBC's Quirks and Quarks program, Gillespie's keynote lecture for the [Bibliographical Society of Canada 2023 Conference](#), and Jessica Lockhart's guest instruction on global book technologies at the Universität Hamburg's Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures' [summer school](#)!

# 3. PUBLICATIONS

## *Library Trends* Journal

Project members Suzanne Akbari (IAS), Melissa Moreton (IAS), and Ian McCallum (Munsee Delaware Nation), along with Princeton University Librarian Anu Vedantham, co-authored a forthcoming *Library Trends* journal article, “Huluniixsuwaakan: The Role of the Library in Munsee-Delaware Language Revitalization and the Development of Community Relationships on Lenape Land.” The essay discusses the community-centred, collections-related work taking place around the annual Munsee Language & History Symposium, held annually at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, New Jersey—an event focused on Munsee language and cultural revitalization. Princeton sits on the traditional homelands of the Munsee (Lunaapeew, or Delaware) people. The article discusses goals of the project for both Lunaape language teachers and library staff and explores the challenges encountered, including problems using existing standardised terminology and controlled vocabularies for describing library materials, difficulties encountered when working with a wide range of stakeholders, and institutional barriers to making materials freely accessible to community members. The article, due out in 2023, offers a series of questions and recommendations to assist academic libraries in developing relationships with Indigenous communities and implementing best practices to nurture such relationships.



Co-authors and project collaborators Ian McCallum (Munsee Delaware Nation) and HS co-PI Suzanne Akbari studying Munsee-related materials at Princeton University Special Collections.

## Optical Character Recognition Tool for Gə'əz Manuscripts

We are delighted to share news of our forthcoming article, **“Automated Transcription of Gə'əz Manuscripts Using Deep Learning,”** led by computer scientist Sam Grieggs of the University of Notre Dame’s Computer Vision Research Laboratory (director Walter Scheirer). The paper describes our team’s collaborative development of the first open-source tool for Ethiopian manuscript transcription that is both highly accurate and accessible to communities interested in Gə'əz books and the texts they contain. Our hope is that the tool can allow students and scholars of Ethiopian manuscripts to create a substantial and computer-searchable corpus of transcribed and digitized Gə'əz texts, opening access to vital resources for sustaining the history and living culture of Ethiopia and its people. The code was written in Python using the PyTorch framework and is available on Grieggs’ Github [here](#). The article is forthcoming in [Digital Humanities Quarterly 17.3](#) in August 2023.

## Adhesive Study Using Mass Spectrometry

Can historical book adhesives offer an additional avenue of insight into human and animal interaction at specific dates and places, especially in the context of biocodicological analysis of a book? The answer (yes!) is explored in our collaborative article by Alice Sharp *et al*, **“What’s Hiding in the Spine? A Study of Adhesives in Medieval Books Using Mass Spectrometry,”** now out in [Manuscripta 66.1 \(2022\)](#). The paper describes the goals, methodology, and initial outcomes of our collaborative research project investigating whether the eZooMS method (electrostatic Zooarchaeology by Mass Spectrometry) developed by Sarah Fiddymont can be used to identify species of origin for animal glues found on mediaeval manuscripts. The study offers new applications of paleoproteomics and peptide mass fingerprinting and makes use of non-destructive sampling techniques to study medieval manuscript materials that have—until now—been impossible to analyze at this level.

# 4

## TECHNICAL UPDATES

### Digital Hub

Our *Hidden Stories* Digital Hub, to be launched in Fall 2023, will host material developed by collaborators throughout the project including: channels for communication; updates on project progress and upcoming events; a resource library; text and audio-video lessons for asynchronous learning about book history and conservation; training resources for digital rights and data transfer work; standards-based data sets, images, and descriptive metadata; best practices for provenance research and data stewardship, along with guidelines for community outreach; and access to and support for the use of open-source software tools for book historical research. The hub will develop and expand over the course of the project as new material, events, and exhibits are developed.

# 5.

## TEAM

## UPDATES

### Noam Sienna: Postdoc in Global Judaica

We are thrilled to announce Dr. Noam Sienna's acceptance of a two-year University of Toronto Faculty of Arts and Science postdoctoral research fellowship, which will begin in December 2023. Sienna is a historian of pre-modern Jewish culture with advanced skills in critical bibliography and book history, and experience with a range of digital and public humanities projects. He is currently a Junior Fellow of the Rare Book School's Society of Fellows in Critical Bibliography and brings this expertise to the project, as well as connections with scholars and projects focused on the study of global Judaica. As a *Hidden Stories* team member, he will lead our Global Judaica subproject, studying the evolution of premodern book culture within Jewish diasporic communities across Africa and Eurasia, focusing on rare Judaica held in the Friedberg Collection of the U of T's Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, one of the most significant collections in North America. Sienna notes, "Our understanding of books and the relationships they carry can only be fully grasped through collaboration across fields, disciplines, and institutions, and I am excited to discover what hidden stories will emerge through this work." Welcome, Dr. Sienna!



Noam Sienna examining 19th-c. Yemenite marginalia in a 16th-c. copy of the Ein Yaakov (Thessaloniki) with co-director of the [Footprints](#) project, Prof. Marjorie Lehman of the Jewish Theological Seminary

## Collaboration with the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library

The [Thomas Fisher Rare Book and Special Collections Library](#) at the University of Toronto is an integral collaborator for the *Hidden Stories* project, lending expertise in manuscript studies as well as facilitating research and community engagement. In particular, we are grateful to David Fernández, Tim Perry, and Nadav Sharon for supporting our research and that of our collaborators in Hebrew, Ethiopian, Mesoamerican, and Tibetan manuscript studies. We are excited to continue this collaboration over the next few years, and particularly look forward to two events: the Open House “Celebrating Ethiopian Book Heritage” in September (see below) and an upcoming Fisher Summer School in June 2024.



LT to RT: Thinley Gyatso (PhD candidate in Buddhist Studies, U. Toronto), Alex Gillespie (Hidden Stories co-PI), and David Fernández (Head, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library) examine [MSS 09700](#), a 15th-c. Italian antiphoner (choral manuscript).

## International Collaborations

The team has also hit the ground running with establishing two international collaborations devoted to preserving written cultural heritage for future generations.

In collaboration with our partners at the Universität Hamburg’s Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC), the *Hidden Stories* project has sub-granted funding for a team of conservators led by Dr. Bidur Bhattarai to continue their efforts to preserve and document approximately 6000 paper artefacts in the Āśā Saphūkuthi (Āśā Archives) in Kathmandu. The team is working to clean and stabilize, box, catalogue, and digitize the collection, which includes Hindu and Buddhist manuscripts as well as other artefacts written on supports such as palm-leaf and paper. As of May 2023, you can watch here [a new series of videos](#) documenting their project, [“Preserving the Written Cultural Heritage of Nepal”](#) (PI Bidur Bhattarai, CSMC).

As of June 2023, the *Hidden Stories* project has also been able to partner with Tunisia’s National Heritage Institute and the [Kairouan Manuscript Project](#) (KMP) based out of Hamburg’s CSMC to fund the continuation of an early career conservator internship program in Raqqada, Kairouan. With *Hidden Stories* funding, four early-career conservators will continue their training at the National Laboratory for the Preservation and Conservation of Parchment and Manuscripts (NLPCPM) in Raqqada, Kairouan, Tunisia. Under the mentorship of NLPCPM’s senior manuscript conservators and networking with the international community of the KMP, the interns will continue their work to become the next generation of Tunisian caretakers for Kairouan’s manuscripts, described by Davidson MacLaren as “one of the largest Islamic manuscript collections in North Africa, and among the most historically and intellectually important collections of Islamic religious and literary manuscripts worldwide.” We are excited to support these conservators in this next stage of their work.

6.

CURRENT &  
UPCOMING  
EVENTS**Lunaape Language Camp**

The inaugural [Lunaape Language Camp](#) at Princeton was held on 27-29 July 2023, building on the annual fall symposia co-organized by *Hidden Stories* co-PI Suzanne Akbari in collaboration with Munsee partners. Language teachers from Munsee-speaking communities, along with faculty and students at Princeton University and the Institute for Advanced Study, gathered on Lunaapahkiing, traditional Lunaape (or Delaware) lands in and around Princeton, New Jersey for traditional land-based learning and hands-on workshops that brought together language, land, and water. This gathering — to be repeated in future years — provides a space to share Lunaape language, local history, and discussions of Indigenous sovereignty in today's world. The July language camp, like the annual Munsee Language and History symposia each autumn, is a key element of the community-based work taking place with Indigenous partners in conjunction with the *Hidden Stories* subproject on book history and book-adjacent technologies of the Great Lakes and Eastern Woodlands of North America.

**“Celebrating Ethiopian Book Heritage” –  
Open House at Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library**

On 27 September 2023, the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library in collaboration with the *Hidden Stories* project and the Bikila Award will be hosting the event “Celebrating Ethiopian Book Heritage,” an Open House featuring Ethiopian manuscripts in the University of Toronto’s collection, including some recent acquisitions. The parchment manuscripts include decorated liturgical and devotional books, codices on history, and amulet scrolls painted and scribed for specific individuals to aid in healing. The event features guest lecturer Eyob Derillo, scholar of Ethiopian manuscripts and References Specialist for Asian and African materials at the British Library, with a reception hosted by the Bikila Award to follow at the U of T’s Centre for Medieval Studies. All are welcome!

**Date: Wed. 27 Sept. 2023****Open House: Noon-5pm** (Maclean Hunter Room, Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, University of Toronto)**Remarks and discussion: 5-6:30pm** Guest speaker Eyob Derillo (Blackburn Room, Robarts Library, University of Toronto)**Reception: 7pm** (Great Hall, Centre for Medieval Studies, University of Toronto)**CMS Convivium:**

Just a few days after “Celebrating Ethiopian Book Heritage,” we look forward to introducing the *Hidden Stories* project as a whole at a Convivium of the U of T’s Centre for Medieval Studies (CMS) in the afternoon of 29 September 2023. If you are in the Toronto area, come and join the *Hidden Stories* project team for a discussion of the principles and methodologies guiding our work, how the project has evolved over time, and what to expect from *Hidden Stories* in the future. Check CMS’s [events page](#) for more details as we get closer to the event!



Ethiopian amulet scroll, late 19th c., Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library, MSS 08024



# NEWSLETTER — SUMMER 2023

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