The didactics of Palaeography

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Palaeography:

Tacit assumption: Reading scripts is something for which one must have a talent, or else one will never be able to do it well. Talent is important of course, not only in paleography but in all walks of life.

However: palaeography is a craft that can be learned by everyone who can read and write.

By treating both palaeography and its didactics we look at the same time both at the craft and at the strategies to acquire it. It provides us with a double perspective.

This tacit assumption and my reaction to it can be seen in several of the recent definitions of palaeography …
Some recent definitions of palaeography:

‘… palaeography, which is an art of seeing and comprehending, …’  (Bischoff 1979/1990, p. 3)

‘the study of the history of scripts, their adjuncts (such as abbreviation and punctuation) and their decipherment’  (Brown 1994, p. 92)

‘one of the most important tasks … is dating and localizing undated manuscripts of unknown origin.’  (Derolez 2003, p. 1)

‘Palaeography is the science of deciphering and determining the date of ancient documents or systems of writing. Arabic palaeography is the study of the development of Arabic script through time and place.’  (Sijpesteijn 2008, p. 613)
Some recent definitions of palaeography 2:

The definitions by Bischoff, Brown, and Derolez come from works on Latin palaeography. Only Bischoff’s definition is a pre-scientific definition, where feeling and imagination play an important rôle.

Students of Arabic and Islamic palaeography will profit from the methodological remarks of ‘Western’ palaeographers.

Even if ‘Western’ palaeographers often look at works on non-Western palaeography as underdeveloped oddities.

Particular relevant are the works by specialists on Hebrew palaeography and codicology (such as Malachi Beit-Arié).

The definition by the Arabic scholar Sijpesteijn is a ‘Western’ definition applied to Arabic.
The components and proportions of the Arabic script, here shown for a type font, but they can equally be used for a better understanding of the Arabic script. Don’t forget: Type designers are calligraphers. Useful terminology for describing the constituent elements of script. Source: Edo Smitshuijzen, *Arabic Font Specimen Book*. Amsterdam 2009, p. 19.
Most decipherment is given by the text itself 1:

On the left side of this title-page, mention of the copyist:

‘All of it is in the handwriting of Shaykh Khalīl b. Badrān’

Badrān, not Bārān, what at first view it might be an alif, with a small descender (as exists in some writing styles, here in *Makārim*, line 1) is in fact a dāl, as becomes clear by comparison with other final alifs in the text.

Repetition of words is another helping feature.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 122, f. 1a.
Most decipherment is given by the text itself:

The formulaic character of some texts, not only of documents but of numerous non-literary texts, helps to solve previously unsolved reading problems.

This is particularly the case with theological literature, where a limited vocabulary is repetitively used. The reading certificates at the end of texts or quires are another case in point.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 580, f. 11b.
An example of repetitive text: the titles and proper names in a reading certificate at the end a quire are another case in point.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 580, f. 11b, detail of previously displayed page
Some didactic questions:

1. - How will a student learn to read and to use written sources in the Arabic script?

=> By exact copying without first wishing to fully understand at the same time. Reading and interpreting must be separated, just as it was first separated when one learned reading for the first time.

2. - How can he be trained to do so?

=> By ample exercise, with absolutely and fully reliable examples. Rigorous self-discipline and intensive corrections are necessary.

3. - How can he be spared the most common pitfalls? Skipping lines, omitting words, not thinking of a printed image when looking.

4. - What are the instruments for teaching Arabic palaeography?

=> Palaeographical atlases with partial decipherings, to start with. Copying edited text from the manuscript that was used for the edition. Advice: begin with ‘easy’ text.
Perspectives and approaches:

Palaeography, and its sister sciences codicology and epigraphy for that matter, can be studied within two different frame sets, either as a science for its own sake or as an auxiliary science. There is the encyclopedical approach on the one hand, and there is the practical approach on the other.

Whoever study palaeography (and codicology and epigraphy) for themselves will usually end up as bibliographers, authors of manuscript catalogues, historians of the handwritten book, librarians, etc.

Whoever study palaeography (and codicology and epigraphy) as auxiliary sciences will usually end up as a philologists, editors of texts, historians, antiquarian booksellers, etc. This is the choice that most students make.

One can, of course, also pursue both goals at the same time, and leave choices open.
Qā‘ida Baghdaδiyya, a classic teaching tool from the Indian subcontinent for learning the Arabic script. First the loose letters are thought, then the letters in simple combinations of two and three, then those in combinations of more than three, then the acquired knowledge is used to read guz’ 30 of the Qur’ān. Finally a few short basic texts on theology and law are presented. Learning to read and write Arabic nowadays is done with a sharply reduced repertoire of script forms.

The **main differences** between the modern printed Arabic and the manuscript sources can be seen in:

Copyist of manuscripts have an enormous repertoire in letter shapes.

Copyists use a great number of ligatures. A ligature is the linking of two or more letters into one graph, in which the original letter forms have been altered (Derolez, p. xxi).

Further considerations:

Most students have no idea of the constituent elements of a letter. They should be made aware of what they actually write and read.

Only if they acquire that knowledge it makes sense if they wish to analyze and compare scripts.
Richness and complexity:

The complexity of written Arabic, as compared to the more simple Arabic in printed texts, becomes clear at four levels:

First the level of adherence to orthography. Here choices for normative orthography present themselves.

Secondly the level of the variant shapes of the letters.

Thirdly the level of the ligatures, and

Fourthly finally the level of the extra reading marks and their implications for writing and reading. This fourth level needs further elaboration.
Example of *ihmāl* signs: dot under *dal*, v-sign on *sin*, v-sign on *ra’,* v-sign on ‘*ayn*, dot under emphatic *ta’, all to indicate that these are *muhmala*, without diacritical dots.  
Source: MS Leiden, Or. 2600, f. 33b, detail.
Further examples of *ihmāl* signs:

v-sign on top of ra’, v-sign on top of sin, little 'āyn underneath the ‘āyn, little ha’ underneath the ha’, all in order the indicate that these letters are neglected. But note that the emphatic ta’ does not have a sign of *ihmāl*.

It is important that the student, while describing a scribe’s hand, makes an inventory of the copyist’s repertoire of *ihmāl* signs, because these are meaningful additions.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 437, p. 2, detail.
**About ihmāl**

The twenty-eight letters of the Arabic alphabet in fact consist of only some fourteen different groups of base forms.

The letters in each composite group are usually distinguished from those in the same group by dots or no dots. Those dots are written on top or underneath the ductus (rasm in Arabic). Writing such dots is called *iʿğām*, ‘to provide with a diacritical point’. Not writing such dots is called *ihmāl*, ‘to neglect’, ‘to omit’, ‘not-providing with dots’.


Each copyist has his own choices for providing the *muhmalāt* with *ihmāl* signs. The *alif, mīm, wāw and ḥāʾ* are not really groupes and do not need *ihmāl* signs. A copyist will not always use all possibilities.
Ibn al-Salāh (d. 643 AH) about *ihmāl*

Five. In the same way as the letters that have diacritical points must be provided with these points, so necessary is it that the letters that have no points must be correctly provided with the signs that indicate that no points are written.

The way in which people write these signs can vary. There are people who turn upside down the points, and then they write the point that stands above the letter, which does have a diacritic, underneath the letter which has no diacritical point, and so they place a point underneath the *rāʾ*, the *ṣād*, the *tāʾ* and the ‘*ayn*, and so on with the other letters that have no diacritics. Some of these scholars say that the points that are written underneath the *sīn* (without diacritical dots) have to be extended in one row, and that the points that must be written over the *shīn* (with diacritical dots) must be written like the three stones on which one cooks.

=> to be continued
Ibn al-Salāh (d. 643 AH) about *ihmāl* (continued)

There are others who place the sign of absence of diacritics on top of those letters that are devoid of diacritics, just as nail clippings that are lying on their back. Other people write underneath the ḥāʾ without dots a single small ḥāʾ, and similarly under the dāl, the ṭāʾ, the šād, the sīn, the ʿayn, and the other letters that are devoid of diacritics and that may create a similar ambiguity.

Now, these are ways in writing the sign that indicate absence of diacritics that are wide spread and well-known. However, there are also signs that cannot be found in many old books, and of which few people are aware, such as the sign consisting of a small line, which one places over the letter which carries no diacritical marks, and such as the *hamza*-like sign that one places underneath the letter which does not carry diacritics. And God knows best.

About *ihmāl* 2

The *ihmāl* system, which seems so accurate, can have reverse effects, however.

A minute v-sign on the letter *raʾ* can create the impression that in fact a *zay* is meant. An *ihmāl* sign can look almost exactly the same way as the diacritical dot that is meant to replace.

In a text fully provided with *ihmāl* signs one can sometimes observe in the trio *
ǧīm, ḥāʾ, khāʾ* as follows:
- that the *haʾ* will usually be provided with an *ihmāl* sign of one sort or another,
- that the *khaʾ* is usually provided with a diacritical dot on top,
- and that the letter that has no dot, nor an *ihmāl* sign, is thus the *gim*.

If such an orthographic context is recognized, the reader should be extremely circumspect, since while reading he has no choice in placing a dot underneath or on top of the dotless letter of this trio, since that dotless letter is forcibly a *gim*. 
Teaching palaeography in practice

- The student should not read and interpret at the same time. He should first concentrate on the script that he sees, and only later he may satisfy his curiosity by trying to find out what the text means.

- The student is unable to exactly copy a text. This has been taken away from the school curriculum. It means that he will make many copying errors while writing.

- It necessitates that he gives much of his time and effort to correcting his own work. He should collate several times, till he is sure that his copy is (almost) free of error.

- He should make exercises from paleographical atlases and similar teaching aids.
Bibliography:


*Qa`ida Baghdadiyya*. New Delhi, n.d. (many editions exist)


Edo Smitshuijzen, *Arabic Font Specimen Book*. Amsterdam (de Buitenkant) 2009