Working with Manuscripts: Islamicate vs. Latinate

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Source image: MS Leiden, Or. 231, f. 88b. The Mozarabe Glossarium Latino-Arabicum, Spain (Toledo?), 12th century CE. End of letter N, beginning of letter O.
Abstract

Taking the foundation document of a Madrasa in Bursa (Turkey) of 859/1455 as a point of departure, I dwell for a moment on the organisation of knowledge in the early days of the Ottoman state, just as an example. What rarely happens, but what is the case with this particular charter: it contains a list of the books (all manuscripts, of course) that came with the foundation of that particular Madrasa. And even more than that: a number of the manuscripts are actually preserved on the spot till the present, and they carry their regulations of use with them. This brings us immediately in medias res. Which books were these? How can we form an idea about how they were supposed to be used? Only by addressing such questions, we will be able to define a position of our own towards the manuscripts of the Islamic world.

One such an approach concerns the long afterlife of the Islamic manuscript. There are no easy answers as to why Muslims kept writing their books, whereas for centuries in Christian Europe books were being printed. For the modern student it is maybe fortunate that this is the case. Old habits of copyist can be observed in authentic examples that were produced less than a century ago. It is a Jurassic Park for the codicologist and palaeographer. That has consequences for textual criticism, and many a beautifully constructed rule in the editorial techniques in the West proves to be less applicable in a Muslim environment.
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Apart from looking at manuscripts of holders of texts that we use as information, we also study them as primary sources on Islamic book culture. Becoming acquainted with methods and techniques employed in classical Muslim scholarship is necessary for the modern student of Islamic manuscript materials. Only by becoming acquainted with scribal and notarial concepts and techniques he knows where to look and what to look for in his research.

How then must he work with manuscripts? And how can he? There is a wide divide between the answers to either question. Whether this divide can be bridged remains to be seen, as we will see that both ideal and practice prove to be variables, not constants. A clear-cut and single answer to the questions cannot be given, therefore. This will lead to an overview of the didactics of palaeography and codicology, content and form, of Islamic manuscripts. A selective survey of the available tools is given, and some ideas are presented about strategies of future research.
An endowment of books ... in 859/1455

‘... and the afore-mentioned founder, may God accept his good deeds, made into an endowment (waqf) all the books, that are noted down on the verso side of this legitimate endowment charter, for everybody who can profit [of them] and he made it a condition that the administrator guards the books and gives them to be used, and takes them back again ...

The founder has explicitly stipulated that philosophy will not be taught in the Madrasa which is part of the endowment.

Beginning of the list of books of 859/1455 that are part of the endowment of Umur Bey bin Timurtaş Paşa in Bursa.

The first title mentioned is a set of thirty volumes of the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari. Some of these volumes are still *in situ*. The second the *Manaqib-i Abu Hanifa*.

Not only books on religion and lawe are mentioned, also sciences (medicine) and ‘entertainment’ literature.

Together c. 110 titles in c. 200 volumes.

Illuminated title-page of part 18 of the set of thirty parts of the *Sahih* of al-Bukhari, the copy preserved in the endowment of Umur Bey bin Timurtaş Paşa in Bursa (but not especially commissioned for it).

A typical *Nuskha Khaza’iniyya*, a copy made for a prominent collection, as the ex-libris indicates, although not of excellent quality.

The volume would originally seem to be the product of a Mamluk workshop. As the Bursa endowment predates the Ottoman conquest of Syria and Egypt by more than half a century, one could assume that Mamluk workshops:

- not only produced copies of the Qur’an;
- but also were exporting their products.

Detailed conditions of use, dated 853/1449-1450, for part eighteen (out of thirty) of the *Sahih al-Bukhari*, written on the fly-leaf opposite the title-page of the manuscript, in the Umur Bey bin Timurtaş Paşa endowment in Bursa.

The imam of the mosque (also part of the endowment) and his assistants guard this volume, do not give it to anyone except against caution. The manuscript cannot be taken out of town. It may not be withheld from those who have a right to it. It is ... registered and whoever changes this after he has taken notice of it, on him be the curse of God, of the angels and of men, altogether. Nine witnesses are mentioned by name, including the imam and the secretary.

Two frequently asked questions about East-West bookmaking

1. Paper.
Why has paper been adopted so late for the production of Western manuscripts?

2. Printing.
Why has the technique of printing been adopted so late in Islamic book production?

Neither question can be simply answered but in respect with the late introduction of printing many stories have developed.

These stories tell us something about ourselves, but do not give the historical explanation as an answer.

These answers belong to the Islam debate in the Western world and tell us more about the story tellers than about the issues.

Early Arab printing?

Arab block printing has sometimes been styled as ‘the missing link’ between manuscript and printing in the Arab world. But block printing of amulets, of which maybe a few hundred copies have been preserved in all, was never a viable option for the transmission of texts, at least not in the Arab way. It is a neglected chapter in the history of printing, yes, but it is not a missing link.

Block printing in the Chinese way, by which huge works were printed from wooden boards incised with the mirror image of the text, never took place in Islam. Attempts to explain this have given rise to many speculations.

The few block printed Arabic amulets that do survive just show us a technique by which an image on one medium was transposed onto another medium, in the same way as happens with textile printing, the minting of coins, the use of molds in pottery, printing a seal, etc.

Original complete tarsh in Vienna, Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, A.Ch. 12.140. Estimated by Von Karabacek as dating from the 10th century CE.
The missing link?

In fact, no missing link is necessary. Islamic book production in the form of copying by hand has just continued, from its beginning in the seventh century till well into the twentieth century.

From the early-18th century onwards a small minority of Islamic books have been printed, and that not even continuously. Only in the second half of the nineteenth century the technique of printing took over from copying books by hand. This can be linked to the global effect of the industrial revolution.

A missing link needs to connect two major phenomena in a meaningful way. In the case of block printing the idea of missing link is irrelevant. It is yet another form of precursionism.
Efficiency and division of labour in the production of Mamluk Qur’ans. Mixed techniques.

A detailed study of Mamluk Qur’an manuscripts shows that these are produced in workshops where an elaborate division of labour was put in place. Some twenty workers of different qualifications are involved in the production of high quality manuscripts.

Example: Aya-dividers were usually made with mechanical tools, stamps.

1. Red circle stamped (by expert)
2. Red circle covered with gold leaf.
3. Gold leaf covered by stamp with floral design
4. Colours (red and blue) added to the petals and the center of the floral design.

Source image: MS Istanbul, Milli Kütüphane, C 44. Taken from: Nil Baydar, Newly identified techniques in the production of Islamic manuscripts, 2010, p. 72, fig. 8
Lay-out rules for 19th-century Ottoman Qur’ans

Twenty-nine rules are formulated:
(separate sheet found in MS. Leiden, Or. 11.701, ff. 90b-91a, copied 1279/1862-1863)

1. Each one of the thirty agza’ is written on ten leaves [...]..

2. The beginning of each guz’ coincides with the beginning of the page.

3. On the beginning of each page is the beginning of an aya, and at the end of each page is the end of an aya.

4. The end of each sura coincides with the end of the lines.

(Then follows a large number of rules about the handling by the copyists of specific words or phrases, such as fil-Qur’an al-‘Azim, al-Hamdu lillah, which must be written at the beginning of a line, etc.).

29. [...] No word is cut into two, one part being at the end of the line, the other part at the beginning of the (next) line, and everything that must be observed is written in red ink.
Lay-out rules of a Mamluk Qur’an, dated 858/1454-1455), in a copy which contains the ex-libris of Sultan Abu Sa’id Khushqadam (reigned 865-871/1461-1467). Size of the original: 86.5 x 60 cm.
Source: MS. Cairo, DAK, Masahif 90, ff. 1b, 2a
Lay-out rules for a Mamluk Qur’an

(Taken from MS. Cairo, DAK, Masahif 90, f. 1b, dated 858/1454-5, copy with on f. 2a an ex-libris of Sultan Abu Sa’id Khushqadam):

... وأما ما هو في مجموع صفحاته،
فالأول أن كل صفحة أولها أول أية وآخرها آخر أية،
والثاني أن أية كل سجدة من سجود التلاوة أخرها آخر سطر،
والثالث آخر كل سورة آخر سطر،
والرابع أن كل حزبين في عشرة أوراق وصفحة، إلا الجزء الأول والآخر، فإن كلا ومنهما اثنا عشر ورقاً كامل لأجل الفاتحة والغائقة بالذهب،
والخامس أن كل حزب مجزأ بالثمن والربع والنصف في كل دائرة الذهب في هامش كل صفحة، وإن وجد شيء من ذلك في غير موضعه المذكور فهو سهو من الكاتب،
وقد تم ذلك بحمد الله عز وجل، فامه تعالى يغفر لكاتبته وللقارئ فيه، ولمن نظر فيه، ...

...
The application of some of the lay-out rules of a Mamluk Qur’an, dated 858/1454-1455).

Here shown: Qur’an 12:105-111.

Rules 1 and 3 can be observed.

Size of the original: 86.5 x 60 cm

Source: MS. Cairo, DAK, Masahif 90, f. 132b
Do we write our numbers the other way around? Isn’t it strange that Arabs write their words from right to left but their numbers from left to right? Do they really? Nowadays they certainly do, but have they always been doing so? Probably not.

Arabic introductions to arithmetic describe the Arabic positional number system as starting with the units, then the tens, then the hundreds, then the thousands, and so on. Can we assume therefore that in pre-modern times Arabs wrote their numbers from right to left? It seems to be the case.

When Europeans adopted this number system (Leonardo of Pisa, Fibonacci, d. c. 1250 CE), they exactly imitated the numbers of the Arabs, but wrote them from left to right, from the digit of the highest value down to the units. In this way the numbers were not mirrored, remained the same, and we, Europeans, write them, therefore in the reverse order in which they were first invented.

In order to easily produce polychrome manuscripts, such as the *Kashf al-Asrar* by al-Qalasadi, complex inkwells were designed.

The illuminator at work

A self-portrait of the illuminator who says: ‘Mention in your prayers the priest Mkrtitch, the miniaturist and the illuminator of this book. And say with the same mouth: May God have mercy with me and my parents, the priest Katchatour and his wife.’

Ever since Malachi Beit-Arié showed, for Hebrew manuscripts, that copyists bring their own ideas and habits, but that they use the materials that they find where they live, a cross-cultural approach in manuscript studies has gained importance. Data relevant for Christian and Jewish bookmaking in the Middle East are relevant for the study of Islamic manuscripts.

The language of images

*Mukhallafat-i Rasūl Allāh*, the estate of the Prophet Muhammad, all objects provided with captions.

Depicted are the Prophet’s mantle (*Khirqa-yi Sharīf*), his copy of the Qur’ān (*Kalām-i Qadīm*), his prayer beads (*Tasbīh*), his water jar for his ritual ablutions (*Ibrīq-i Sharīf*) together with his water basin (*Lakan-i Sharif*). The *An‘ām-i Sharīf* is a de-luxe prayer book of the late-Ottoman period. Only illustrated and illuminated copies of the book exist.

The illustrations prompt all sorts of *Tasliya* prayers, by which God’s blessing is invoked over the Prophet Muhammad, and thereby transcend the simple material dimension of the objects depicted.

The mosques of Mecca and Medina.

Mecca at right with sandy ground (as in Qur’ān 14:37, *bi-Wādin ghayr Dhī Zar*’), mountains in the foreground (Abū Qubays?) and in the background.

Medina at left on green ground as it is an oasis, mountains in the background. In the mosque the Qubba, cupola, over the Prophet’s grave, stands out.

On another level these images stand for the *Kalimatani*, the two parts of the Muslim creed.

Source image: Victoria BC, McPherson Library, MS 1995-014, pp. 366-367
Qur’an (text 21:1) on paper, possibly from China, but found among a collection of Mamluk manuscripts. Source: Cairo, DAK, Masahif 118, ff. 1b-2a.
Drawing of the human organ of speech: a cross-section of the mouth. Indicated are the articulation points of the Arabic phonemes, as part of the preliminary pages of an Acehnese Qur’án of the 19th century. In non-arabophone regions (Turkey, South-East Asia, etc.) one may find similar guides for Arabic phonology. On the left side a poem in Malay telling how to recite the Qur’an.  

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 2064, f. 4a
Islam in action in a multicultural South-East Asian environment: An offering to appease the demons is carried out by a Muslim for two Chinese. A Muslim *pangulu* (teacher/cleric) recites the Koran (or at least an Islamic book) for a group of followers. Bali, c. 1890.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 3390-256 A.
Not all Islamic manuscripts are always in Arabic script.

Example: Miniature of the Ark of the Prophet Nuh, in a Javanese translation of an Arabic or Persian version of the *Qisas al-Anbiyâ’,* the ‘History of the Prophets’.

Manuscript in Javanese, from Java (Indonesia), around 1830.

The Dutch flag shows the word *Allâh.* The smaller banner has *Lâ,* possibly as part of the *Shahâda.*

Source: MS Leiden Or. 2251, p. 22.
Not all Islamic manuscripts are always in Arabic, though written in Arabic script. Example: Fragment of an old (15th-century?) manuscript in Berber.

This extremely rare (just this damaged leaf preserved!) example of a work written in Berber proves that already in the Middle Ages there was a written Berber culture. There are several words recognizable in Arabic, but the overall text is in Berber.

Source: MS Leiden Or. 23.306, recto side
Materia Medica by Dioscurides. Revised Arabic translation by al-Natili.

End of the text, followed by the colophon of the copyist and note by the translator of the Arabic text into Persian.

Manuscript dated 475/1082, copied in Samarqand, with the note dated 510/1116.

Two hands: text, additions.
Three writing styles: text, colophon, addition.

Source: MS Leiden, Or. 289, f. 227a