Interview with Prof. Jan Just Witkam

On 1 June 2001 Dr. Jan Just Witkam was appointed in Leiden as Professor of Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World. The editor of the CNWS Newsletter interviews the new professor after he delivered his inaugural address on 15 November 2002.

Question: Congratulations with your appointment. How does one become a professor?

Answer: There is no standard recipe for this. I have, however, an advice for ambitious students. It is important to do your homework every day, and if possible, a bit more than that. But on the whole, an appointment is something others do for you.

Q. The chair of 'Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World' did not yet exist. What is the story behind this?

A. That is correct. Leiden is the first university in the world to have such a chair. It is, of course, because of the global renown of the Oriental collections in the University Library. The Islamic manuscripts are among the focal points in the collection. Presently there is a process going on in the University Library that aims at the increase of scholarly use of the Leiden special collections. Look for instance at the activities of the newly founded Scaliger Institute, which has the aim to stimulate the research on those collections. Another example can be seen in the emergence of the courses in Book Science. It is now time to kiss the sleeping beauties in the collections awake. Personally I have been teaching Paleography and Codicology of the Islamic World for more than twenty years now. All this has led to the creation of this new chair. I feel honored to be its first occupant.

Q. Please tell us something about your own study and work.


Q. The Islamic world is a vast domain. How many languages do you know anyway?

A. Not enough, that is for sure. After I finished my study in 1972 I acquired a working knowledge of Urdu and Malay, and more languages are on my list of desired languages. One of these is Ottoman Turkish, and a few more Indonesian languages would be useful as well.

Q. So you have continued to study after you finished your study. How did that go?

A. The real learning starts only after you have finished your study. In 1974 I was appointed as a supervisor of the Oriental manuscripts in Leiden University Library, a department where I was then the only employee. A year later I was appointed curator and in 1980 I was appointed as a curator of the Oriental printed books as well. In that period I was able to transform my personal hobby of manuscripts into a professional ability, and I am still learning on a daily basis. In the beginning I immensely profited by the lectures of Prof. Peter Gumbert, who taught Western Paleography and Codicology. It is sad to realize that he was never succeeded after his retirement.

Q. What have you been doing in the University Library?

A. I immediately started to expand the Oriental manuscript collections. The circumstances were, and still are, favorable. When I will retire (in 2011, hopefully) the size of the Oriental manuscript collections will have doubled in comparison to what I found in 1974. It took my predecessors four centuries to collect that amount. I must note, however, that the old collections, which have been formed by such eminent scholars as Jacobus Golius (1596-1667) and Levinus Warner (1619-1665), can hardly be equaled in quality. Such pieces as they could lay their hands on are not for sale anymore. Funds were and still are hard to come by, and in addition to using up the existing budgets, I started with fundraising. Another decision I made was to acquire my manuscripts as much as possible in the field. So, in the course of time an unofficial network of providers came into being in several Islamic countries. It is hardly heroic to spend your budget at one fling with a London based antiquarian. To roam through the field and see what can be acquired in situ is something entirely different, and much more gratifying, I must say. The supply is much greater and the prices incomparably lower. Not that I am only in for bargains...
However, one thing brings about the other: If one acquires a lot of manuscripts, there arises
the problem of cataloguing. So I organized several cataloguing projects. Leiden University Library
publishes a series of manuscript catalogues. Codices Manuscripti. Under my editorial care several
volumes with descriptions of manuscripts from the Oriental collections have been published. I may mention here the supplement-catalogue of Hebrew manuscripts (1977), The Guide
to the Batak collection (1977), the fourth volume of the Javanese catalogue (1980), two volumes of the Balinese catalogue (1986-1987), the
catalogue of Acehnese manuscripts (1994), and the first volumes of the Malay (1998) and Turkish
(2000) catalogues. The second volume of the Turkish catalogue is now in press, while volumes 3 and 4 are in an advanced stage of preparation.
Catalogues of the Chinese manuscripts, inventories of the scholarly archives of Max Weisweiler
(1902-1968) and of Theo Galestin (1907-1980) are also about to go to press. A catalogue of the photographic collections is being worked on as well. Personally I am the author of the catalogue of Arabic manuscripts (from 1982 onwards).
Some of these projects are funded by the Netherlands Organization for Scientific Research (NWO) in The Hague, others through the intermediary of the Royal Academy of Arts and Sciences in Amsterdam. The volumes in this series, Codices Manuscripti, I see as the most important part of my scholarly production. Presently I am making a CD-ROM with descriptions of the entire Oriental manuscript collection.
In 1986 I founded a journal, Manuscripts of the Middle East, in order to have a platform for
research in this field. It was the first journal of its kind in the world, and although its continuation
has been interrupted for some time now, internationally speaking it has certainly contributed to making Middle-Eastern paleography
and codicology an academic discipline in its own right.

There is yet another important aspect. In the Islamic world, the manuscript heritage is valued
very much, although it must be said that in many countries manuscripts do not receive the treat-
ment they deserve. In the course of time I have, because of my professional and scholarly inter-
est, come in contact with interesting and important people in the Middle East, whom I would
otherwise never have met. From them as well I have learned a lot.

Then there is the human factor that is of eminent importance. I feel so lucky that I work,
within the University Library, with a group of enthusiastic and competent colleagues, with
some of whom I have developed in the course of years bonds of friendship as well. They stimulate
me in my attempts and endeavors, and they call me back when I tend to act with too much ambition.
Without them I would not be who I am now.

Q. And what about your students?
A. I wish to give my students the experience of direct contact with the past that you can have by studying and handling original handwritten
books. In addition, I want to teach them the techniques and to let them acquire the knowledge necessary in order to understand and exploit Islamic sources of the pre-modern period. I want to teach them how to use their eyes.

How to make sense of all those traces in Islamic manuscripts coming from the author of the text, from the copyist, and from the readership, that is
what I wish to teach them, and so and only so, they will be able to use the vast amount of source material that is contained in the Islamic
manuscript heritage in a responsible way. This is more ambitious than a simple course in paleography and codicology. I will extensively discuss
with them the ideas and techniques of traditional Muslim scholarship. And the history of traditional Islamic education is a field of study that will receive regular treatment in my courses as well.

That the University Library is the repository of vast collections that enable me to do all this, is
one of the great assets of Leiden University.

Q. What more can be said?
A. On 15 November 2002 I had the privilege of delivering my inaugural lecture, and I was
touched at how many came and joined in the festivities.

Q. Thank you for this interview.
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