Preface

When we treat manuscripts as rare and precious objects it is because we know that they are unique and irreplaceable. Yet they are not always rare in the sense that one seldom sees them, or that the historian or philologist has difficulty in finding them. In fact, Islamic manuscripts are found all over the world and they exist in incredible numbers, both in public and private collections. This is more or less the case in the entire world of Islam, but there are some regions that, for reasons of their own, have always been particularly rich in manuscript resources. As a result, the study of Islamic manuscripts will for a long time be a field of pioneering research, an attractive prospect. The Yemen is one of the regions where handwritten sources abound, possibly more than in any other Islamic country. The number of manuscripts still unknown there must be enormous. Indeed, we have no idea how many there are, but from the relatively few Yemeni manuscripts that are known to us, we may safely assume that these are only the tip of the iceberg.

It cannot, therefore, be a total surprise that the *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* now devotes a double issue to manuscripts of the Yemen. The ten articles herewith offered to the reader show, apart from the information and opinions they contain, also how much more can be done. The present issue of the journal, then, can be considered, to use a somewhat worn-out expression, not only the end of a dedicated publication project but also a starting point for further research.

The studies in this volume generally deal with three basic issues: the bibliography, the physical condition and the spread of Yemeni manuscripts. For about two centuries much international research has been done on Yemeni manuscripts that are kept in collections outside the Yemen. Nowadays one can discern trends that indicate that in Europe and North America academic interest in manuscript studies is decreasing, but a hundred years ago it was in Europe that the great manuscript catalogues were produced and that the huge editorial projects were completed. As a consequence Yemeni book culture became wider known, and not only through the work of philologists and linguists, but, more recently, also by that of anthropologists such as Brinkley Messick, to name but one outstanding author in this respect.¹

In the meantime, bibliographical resources in the Yemen itself are increasingly being explored. The difficult political situation there, more than anything else, has hindered this development, yet it could not bring it to a complete standstill, fortunately. The conditions under which our Yemeni colleagues must work these days are far from enviable, but they are sitting on gold mines, and they will certainly explore these. With this in mind, the present volume of the Journal of Islamic Manuscripts serves as an encouragement for this process and a sign of willingness to cooperate.

The manuscripts of the Yemen are part of humanity’s heritage, and their content does not exclusively belong to specific groups. They have become an intellectual property in which each individual holds a stake. The owners of the physical manuscripts also have an extra responsibility, irrespective of where they are established. It is upon them to guarantee their survival in time. It is also upon them to let their collections become better known. In the modern world there are two strategies for preserving manuscript sources: properly cataloguing them and posting the images of as many manuscripts as possible on well-organized websites, free of charge for the public at large. It is almost a truism: by making collections transparent they cannot easily disappear. The other strategy, to keep manuscripts hidden in the dark and prevent them from being studied, is doomed to failure. That road only leads to disaster and, ultimately, to the loss of manuscripts.

This first strategy has been on the mind of the editors of the Journal of Islamic Manuscripts when they decided to publish this volume. Other scholarly initiatives are underway, both in and outside the Yemen. All these are small steps forwards, even if each of them seems to be a giant effort while being made. Ultimately, they will bring us to a situation in which the richness of the cultural and literary heritage of the Yemen can be savoured to the full.

In the two years that it has taken for this project to come to fruition the editors of the Journal of Islamic Manuscripts were lucky enough to avail themselves of the editorial cooperation of Dr. Anne Regourd, now of Copenhagen University, who is an experienced researcher on Yemeni manuscripts. Without her illuminating ideas and her unfailing energy the present volume would never have acquired the form in which it is now presented to the journal’s readership. We would like to thank Dr. Anne Regourd greatly for all her help.

Jan Just Witkam
Leiden, 5 August 2014
Manuscripts in Transit | Manuscrits en transit

The Case of the Yemen | Le cas du Yémen

المخطوطات العابرة: مخطوطات اليمن أتموزجاً

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Guest editor for this special double issue

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