

# The manuscript library of Tarīm in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt

by Nico van den Boogert

The *al-Aḥqāf* manuscript library is located in the town of Tarīm in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, in the eastern part of the Yemen Arab Republic. The author of this article visited this library on 2 September 1992.

The town of Tarīm has some 15,000 inhabitants, which makes it the second most populous town of Wādī Ḥaḍramawt after Say'ūn, the region's administrative capital. Tarīm is most famous for the minaret of the al-Muḥḍār mosque, reputed to be the highest in all Yemen and pictured in most tourist guidebooks.

The name of the library, *Maktabat al-Aḥqāf*, was taken from Koran 46:21, where a region called *al-Aḥqāf*, i.e., "the wind-curved sandhills", is mentioned. The name *al-Aḥqāf* is popularly believed to refer to Wādī Ḥaḍramawt (cf. also Lane: "*al-Aḥqāf* applies particularly to a certain oblong tract of sand in the region of Esh-Shiḥr"). At present, almost anything can be named "al-Aḥqāf" in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt, from grocery shops to restaurants and garages.

The *al-Aḥqāf* library was founded in 1972 on the initiative of the government of the Yemen People's Democratic Republic. Initially it contained manuscripts as well as some 14,000 printed books. In 1976 the manuscripts were made into a separate collection. The manuscript library occupies at present a spacious room on the upper floor of the Friday Mosque (built in 1935) which is situated in the centre of Tarīm. The Library has an entrance of its own at the right side of the mosque.

The library now falls under the jurisdiction of the General Organisation of Antiquities, Manuscripts and Museums (*al-Hay'a al-'Āmma li l-Āthār wa l-Makhtu-ṭāt wa l-Matāḥif*), which is part of the Ministry of Culture of the unified Yemeni government. This corporation has its head office in Ṣan'ā', with branch offices in 'Adan, al-Mukallā and Say'ūn. A research permit, necessary if one wants to study or photograph the library's manuscripts, has to be applied for at any one of these offices.

The manuscripts of the library originally belonged to a number of *zāwiya* and *waqf* libraries and private family libraries. Among these are the libraries of the Āl Kāf, the Āl Bin Sahl, the Āl Junayd, the Āl al-'Aydārūs, the Āl al-Ḥaddād, the Āl as-Shaykh Abī Bakr and the *waqf* of the Āl Bin Yaḥyā. New manuscripts are still being acquired occasionally, usually through gifts.

There are now five employees working on a permanent basis in the library: a director, a vice-director and three assistants. The present director is 'Alī Sālim Bukayr, the vice-director is 'Abdallāh Ḥasan al-'Aydārūs. The latter kindly supplied some of the data presented here.

The library at present contains some 5,300 manuscript volumes. These are preserved in thirty metal bookcases with glass doors and five shelves each, ranged alongside opposite walls of the library room. Eight additional bookcases contain all the essential printed works of reference.

The manuscripts are numbered from 1 on, in Arabic numerals. The catalogue consists of a card-file, arranged alphabetically by title. A placard on the wall gives detailed information on the arrangement of the catalogue. Each card is handwritten in Arabic and contains the following data:

- 1 serial number
- 2 title
- 3 author
- 4 author's date of death with reference
- 5 incipit
- 6 explicit
- 7 number of folios
- 8 number of lines per page
- 9 dimensions
- 10 date of copy and name of copyist
- 11 provenance

The manuscripts are arranged in eight subject categories. Within a subject category, the manuscripts are arranged by their serial number. Each bookcase bears a card with a number and a caption mentioning the subject category, in Arabic and in English:

- 1-2 *Tafsīr*, Holy Koran commentary
- 2-5 *Ḥadīth*, Prophet Muhammad: sayings and deeds
- 6-13 *Fiqh*, Islamic jurisprudence
- 14-18 *Taṣawwuf*, Mysticism
- 10-21 *Tarājīm*, *siyar*, *tārīkh*, History and biographies
- 22-23 *Adab*, Literature
- 24 *Ṭibb*, Medicine
- 25-30 *Majāmi'*, Miscellanies



Fig. 1. The entrance to the al-Aḥqāf Library in Tarīm. Wādī Ḥaḍramawt.



Fig. 2. Interior of the al-Aḥqāf Library in Tarīm, Wādī Ḥaḍramawt.

A small printed catalogue of manuscripts preserved in the al-Aḥqāf library and various other libraries in the Wādī Ḥaḍramawt was compiled by 'Abdalilāh bin Muḥammad al-Ḥabashī (*Fihrist al-makhṭūṭāt al-yamaniyya fī Ḥaḍramawt*, 'Adan 1974). It was published in 'Adan in 1974 under the auspices of the Yemeni Centre for Cultural Studies (*al-Markaz al-Yamanī li l-Abḥāth at-Thaqāfiyya*). In the preface to the catalogue it is stated that at that time the al-Aḥqāf library contained 2,322 manuscripts. Only a small portion of these, to wit 603 manuscripts, are described in the catalogue, which contains only very brief descriptions. The additional printed catalogues of Yemeni manuscripts promised in the preface have apparently never been published. Because of this, and because the number of manuscripts in the library has more than doubled since 1974, this printed catalogue is of little use nowadays.

A thorough investigation of the contents of the al-Aḥqāf library may reveal many interesting manuscripts. The Wādī Ḥaḍramawt is a region with a long and kaleidoscopic history. In the course of time the region was conquered by Ayyūbids and Rasūlids, before the founding of the Kathīrī sultanate in 1488 AD. The subsequent long-lasting rivalries between the Kathīrī and Qu'ayṭī tribes are notorious. According to the present vice-director, the library contains many works dealing with the history of the region, many of them unique autograph manuscripts. The library may also contain some unknown or rare works on Ibādite jurisprudence, since the Ibādiyya established itself in Wādī Ḥaḍramawt in the 8th century AD and remained in existence there for at least four centuries.

A sizeable number of the oldest manuscripts, dating from the 5th-7th c. AH, and most of the autograph manuscripts have been microfilmed by the ALECSO in 1976 and in 1982. As a result of this, some manuscripts have been rebound in boards in a rather crude fashion. No microfilming equipment is available in the library itself.

A dozen of the more interesting manuscripts are displayed in a small showcase. The library receives some 300-400 visitors per month. The register of visitors that is kept shows that among them are researchers and scholars from the Islamic world as well as from Europe.

The al-Aḥqāf manuscript library, though modest in its design, entirely fulfils the aims of any such library: the manuscripts are kept free from dust, damp and harmful insects, and they are easily accessible.

Though seemingly situated in an isolated and far-away region, Tarīm can be reached quite easily. Yemenia Airlines offers at least three scheduled flights per week from Ṣan'ā' directly to Say'ūn (one hour). From Say'ūn, Tarīm is reached by bus or taxi in 45 minutes.

The library is open daily from 8.00 a.m., except on Fridays.

## POSTSCRIPT

A new catalogue of manuscripts in the al-Aḥqāf library has become available recently. This catalogue, entitled *Fihrist Maktabat al-Aḥqāf li l-Makhṭūṭāt bi Tarīm*, was published by the Say'ūn branch of the Yemeni Centre for Cultural Studies, Archeology and Museums (*al-Markaz al-Yamanī li l-Abḥāth at-Thaqāfiyya wa l-Āthār wa l-Matāḥif, Mudriyyat Say'ūn, Muḥāfazat Ḥaḍramawt*). It is divided into four parts, contained in one low-budget mimeographed volume.

The first three parts of the catalogue (pp. 1-507) contain short entries on 3,202 manuscripts which are arranged by subject, and within each subject in alphabetical order of the titles of the works. The entries are numbered consecutively from 1 onwards. These numbers appear to be the same as the shelf marks of the manuscripts as they are presently arranged. This arrangement would not leave room for the registration of new accessions. The compilation of the first three parts of the catalogue was completed in August 1987. The fourth part of the catalogue (pp. 1-123) contains a list of texts in the library written by Yemeni authors. It is entitled *Fihrist al-Kutub al-Makhṭūṭa bi Maktabat al-Aḥqāf bi Tarīm li l-Mu'allifīn al-Yamaniyyīn* and was completed in March 1988.

The compilation and printing of the catalogue were carried out under the supervision of the vice-director of the library, 'Abdallāh Ḥasan al-'Aydārūs. The library of Leiden University possesses a photocopy of the catalogue.

(NvdB / 16 February 1993)