The manuscript library of Tarīm in Wādī Ḥadramawt

by Nico van den Boogert

The al-Ahqāf manuscript library is located in the town of Tarīm in Wādī Ḥadramawt, 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 Ḥadramawt after Sayyūn, the region’s administrative capital. Tarīm is most famous for the minaret of the al-Muhdār mosque, reputed to be the highest in all Yemen and pictured in most tourist guidebooks.

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

The al-Ahqāf 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-Hāla al-‘Āntūs wa l-Makhtūtāt wa l-Mutahhit), which is part of the Ministry of Culture of the unified Yemeni government. This corporation has its head office in Ṣanʿā’, with branch offices in ‘Adan, al-Mukallā and Sayyūn. 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 zawāya and waqf libraries and private family libraries. Among these are the libraries of the Āl Kāf, the Āl Bin Sahīl, the Āl Junayd, the Āl al-‘Aydarūs, 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 ʿAlī Ṣālim Būkayr, the vice-director is ʿAbdallāh Ḥasan al-ʿAydarūs. 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 Tasawwuf, Mysticism
10-21 Tarājim, siyar, tārikh, History and biographies
22-23 Adab, Literature
24 Ṭibb, Medicine
25-30 Majāmīr, Miscellanies

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

Fig. 2. Interior of the al-Aḥqāf Library in Tarīm, Wādī Ḥadramawt.
A small printed catalogue of manuscripts preserved in the al-Ahqáf library and various other libraries in the Wádi Hadramawt was compiled by ‘Abdalilàh bin Muhammad al-Habashl (Fihrist al-makhtûtât al-yamaniyya fi Hadramawt, ‘Adan 1974). It was published in ‘Adan in 1974 under the auspices of the Yemeni Centre for Cultural Studies (al-Markaz al-Yamani li l-Makhtutat bi Tarîm). In the preface to the catalogue it is stated that at that time the al-Ahqáf 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-Ahqáf library may reveal many interesting manuscripts. The Wádi Hadramawt is a region with a long and caleidoscopic history. In the course of time the region was conquered by Ayyúbids and Rasûlids, before the founding of the Kathiri sultanate in 1488 AD. The subsequent long-lasting rivalries between the Kathiri and Qu‘aytr 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 Ibádite jurisprudence, since the Ibádiyya established itself in Wádi Hadramawt 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 form the Islamic world as well as from Europe.

The al-Ahqáf 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, Tarím can be reached quite easily. Yemenia Airlines offers at least three scheduled flights per week from Şan‘á‘ directly to Say‘ún (one hour). From Say‘ún, Tarím 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-Ahqáf library has become available recently. This catalogue, entitled Fihrist Maktabat al-Ahqáf bi l-Makhtûtât bi Tarîm, was published by the Say‘ún branch of the Yemeni Centre for Cultural Studies, Archeology and Museums (al-Markaz al-Yamani li l-Makhtûth at-Tabqâfiyya wa l-Áthâr wa l-Matahif, Muḍiriyat Say‘ún, Muḥafazât Hadramawt). 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-Makhtuta bi Maktabat al-Ahqáf bi Tarîm li l-Mu‘allifn al-Yamaniyyin 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, ‘Abdallâh Hasan al-Aydarîs. The library of Leiden University possesses a photocopy of the catalogue.

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