

## THE CATALOGUING OF ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS AS A LITERARY PROBLEM

by

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It is well-known that Carl Brockelmann's monumental *Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur* consists basically of nothing more than a catalogue of the catalogues of manuscripts and publications of works written in Arabic — with the exception of one final comprehensive section which deals with modern literature. However it is less well-known that Brockelmann's GAL is based mainly on the large descriptive manuscript catalogues published in the 19th century, and particularly on Wilhelm Ahlwardt's ten-volume *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*. These catalogues provided Brockelmann for the most part not only with the necessary dates, facts, subjects and summaries, but also the system for the lay-out of the tremendous volume of material containing tens of thousands of works. That Brockelmann's GAL, this superb source of reference, is being continued and added to with Fuat Sezgin's *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums* (GAS) is a wonderful gain for our studies and one which cannot be highly enough praised. It is also known that Arabic manuscripts all over the world — up to now it has been impossible to make an even vaguely correct estimate of their total number — have been the subject of increasing interest over the past two decades. It has been mostly libraries, academies and other academic organisations which have been urging — and which continue to urge — registration of manuscript collections. The main concern here has been, and remains, to include in one handy volume a register of authors and titles as quickly as possible, and to include in this, material which was described in the last century. From a librarian's point of view this is an understandable wish. This becomes even more understandable when one realises that bibliographical and academic reference works of various kinds in many places are not only necessary, but have in our modern world become almost fashionable. However, when one considers that we are still very far from being in a position to produce a history of Arabic literature, there is the very relevant question of whether manuscript catalogues compiled on a

technical, and not on a critical basis, will properly satisfy academic requirements.

This matter appeared all the more urgent to us in Frankfurt when we started a cataloguing programme within the framework of the German Research Association programme, and in conjunction with the German Oriental Society, of Arabic manuscript holdings in Germany. It is only fair to mention here that in dealing with this matter we should not forget that interest of occidental scholars in these almost embarrassingly large holdings of manuscripts at the moment remains very slight. Editing has very much slowed down, literary-historical monography is still rarely encountered. Things are different in the Orient: but here there are problems of a different kind to be dealt with. For example, editors in many cases have to be satisfied with source material which is available in a more or less haphazard fashion. It is rare for anybody to be in a position to think of philology based on a wide range of manuscript material. Furthermore, use of such manuscript material presupposes in many cases personal knowledge of collections involved: for Brockelmann's GAL, as everybody knows, is not only incomplete, but also contains information which on account of its brevity is not infrequently both confusing and misleading, sometimes even erroneous. Therefore it is advisable for anyone who is searching for specific source material to stick to the traditional, old-fashioned approach: to obtain the appropriate information direct from libraries themselves, which generally possess adequate card-index systems, or in particular from one of the many manuscript specialists in the Oriental countries concerned.

After considering the situation in which Arabic literary studies are placed, and after completing a preliminary record of several hundred manuscripts we came up with the following answer as a result of work on the increased amount of source material which passed through our hands.

It is not considered feasible:

a — to publish the estimated 10000 titles in a handlist. Firstly, because a copy of the acquisition registers available in Berlin would do more or less the same service, and secondly, because Carl Brockelmann had already taken abstracts from these registers and evaluated these to a large extent for his supplementary volumes and the second edition of the GAL.

b — it is not and cannot be considered feasible, instead of such handlists, to publish more exhaustive descriptions in isolation without relating them to a specific line of academic study: for the majority of the manuscripts contains works and articles which have already been dealt with in the old descriptive catalogues or have even been printed. Re-printing would be completely superfluous.

It would seem to be most sensible to:

a — consider cataloguing as research. This would involve placing manuscript material against secondary and primary literature. Originality and documentation would have to be clearly presented.

b — this would ensure that material which is in two senses of great value would no longer be permitted to remain unused.

c — that preliminary decisions make clear what material requires more special investigation, e.g.: editing, translating, monography.

d — that such material which considered in isolation seems to be of little interest, yet when seen as part of a whole and summarized then appears of first importance, be made available to scholars. This would include, for example, traditional-historical, literary and biographical material, documents and papers of the most various kinds, as well as countless colophons and owners' marks. In fact material which on account of its uniqueness provides a wealth of new direct information, which neither primary nor secondary literature in particular knows or registers.

e — through this it will be possible to ensure that largely unexplored areas of Arabic literature and Islamic cultural history will be further no less reliable signposts and guidelines — and

f — with the result that cataloguing will become a rich, constantly relevant and stimulating way of collecting material.

Let me now expand on these considerations and demands by giving a couple of examples. First: it is always surprising to discover how many manuscripts, on closer examination, turn out to be rarities, or even unique. For example, the Berlin Ms. or. fol. 3142 contains an unknown homonym dictionary entitled *Mā ttafaqa lafzuhū wa-khtalafa ma'nāhu* by the famous philologist Hibatallāh Ibn al-Shajarī (died 542/1148). This has not been registered in later more comprehensive Arabic lexicographic literature nor anywhere in lexicographical secondary literature. The Ms. or. oct. 3194 contains a *kitāb al-Zahr al-maqtūf min fath al-ra'ūf* by an anonymous writer from the Mongolian period (7./13. century). It is a typical Adab work written for edification, with many anecdotes and tales in the style of the 'Treatise on Statecraft' (Fürstenspiegel). This little work must be thought of in connection with Ghazzālī's *Naṣīḥat al-mulūk* from which quotations are made. Both manuscripts have since been worked on and through editing, translation or monographical investigation have been made generally accessible.

We have already indicated elsewhere the importance for biography and for knowledge of the chronology of the literary work of such an eminent scholar as Yāqūt (died 626/1228) from study of one single Ijāza which was found at the end of Ms. or. oct. 3377 (published, Wiesbaden 1967). Let us continue this point a little further. After a checkered career as

employee of a Baghdad businessman and years of restless wandering as a bookseller and copyist, Yāqūt found a second home in northern Persia. But even here his stay was not to be a permanent one: for when Bukhara fell into the hands of the Mongols at the end of the winter 1219/20, he decided the best thing to do was to leave this district as quickly as possible. Having to flee grieved him all the more on account of the splendid public and private libraries of Khurāsān and Khwārezm where he had spent so many happy hours. The last Khwārezm-Shāh had desperately tried to fight off the Mongols. After the defeats many of his soldiers preferred to move to the borders of Azerbaijan and go over to the Ayyubides — against whom they had fought for years — rather than capitulate to the Mongols and be left to their tender mercies. Then, as today, similar problems were involved: what was one to do with these foreigners who up till then had been enemies? The solution to the problem was also analogous to what has happened in the 20th century. The Ayyubides ceded to these Khwārezmians the inhospitable areas east and southeast of Damascus. The centre was the ancient city of Zur'a — today called Izra' — on the edge of the Lajā' plain. These refugees from Khwārezm, a very gifted people, brought with them not only their Ḥanafit laws, but very soon left their cultural mark on this region which till then had been inhabited mostly by nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes. Living proof of this can be found in records such as the Ms. or. oct. 3808. If one then, in the manner indicated, compares these records with existing literature, it becomes possible to recreate in great detail the way in which a society changed in structure and achievement through re-settlement.

We then reach the quite inexhaustible subject of family history or the history of scholars and academic schools via an analysis of names and dates which is made possible through study of manuscripts. May I offer just one or two examples taken from the many possible ones. Taking five manuscripts as a source, the origins and achievements of five families could be revealed. These were the Andalusian family of the Ibn Abī Jamras (Ms. or. oct. 3898), the family of the Rāzīs from Ḥimṣ in Syria (Ms. or. oct. 623. see 3385), the Khurāsānian family of the Maḥbūbīs (Ms. or. oct. 3531), the Brussian family of the Fanārīs (Ms. or. oct. 890) and the Cairo and Istanbul family of the Qūṣūnīs (Ms. or. oct. 1466). These can in some cases be traced back for seven centuries. Since the members of these families all had to bear the same laqab or nisba they were constantly being confused with each other in primary literature, and in secondary literature even more so. For example, Brockelmann (GAL<sup>2</sup> 2/594 S 2/666) as well as more recent specialist publications mention a Muḥammad al-Qūṣūnī who is supposed to have worked successfully as doctor under Sulaymān I (926/1520-

974/1566) and Selim II (974/1566-982/1574) and who was furthermore identical with the Turkish poet Nidā'ī. Closer investigation has revealed that grandfather (died 917/1511), father (died 931/1524) and son (died 976/1568), all three of whom worked as doctors and wrote medical articles and books, were thought to be one and the same person. Exact details of their lives and publications can be produced for all three. It can be equally satisfactorily proved that none of them had any connection with the Turkish poet Nidā'ī, and that this suggestion can be traced back to a mistake made by Hammer-Purgstall.

This method of exact analysis has also had as consequence that at long last light has been cast on the problems inherent in such a many-sided literature as that of rhetoric or that of grammar. Here I should just like to remind you of Mss. or. oct. 972 and 3385. In connection with these two items, the development of these two branches of literary study could be worked out exactly after Sakkākī's *Miftāḥ al-'ulūm*, or after Isfarāyini's (died after 684/1285) *al-Lubāb fī l-naḥw* and Abarqūhī's (died end 7./13. c.) or Bayḍāwī's (died 716/1316) *Lubb al-albāb fī 'ilm al-i'rāb*, with the result that these sections in the GAL could be re-written.

In the course of such literary-historical cross-section work we were repeatedly successful in tracing down pseudo-epigraphic literature: e.g. a pseudo-Abū Huraira, a pseudo-Tanūkhī and a pseudo-Ibn al-Wardī. And finally, in this connexion, a quick mention of the Arabic literature of the Umayyad period. This matter, which has always been and remains, a controversial one, has come all the more to the fore in discussions since the publication of the first volume of Fuat Sezgin's GAS. However positively one may stand in regard to Arabic tradition, nevertheless here one would be well-advised to check each and every particular in this matter. In connexion with a small work (Ms. or. oct. 1330) by a certain Ghimrīnī (ca. 1188/1775) on the *Qirā'at 'Āṣim* (died 127/745?) it could not only be established that this Qirā'a was taken from the *Shāḥibīya*, that is from Dānī's (died 444-1053) *Taisīr*, but — and this may come as a surprise — a very reasonable argument could be presented to prove that Qirā'a-literature started only with Abū 'Ubaid, who died in 224/838.

On the occasion of the 28 International Congress of Orientalists in Canberra, on January 8th. 1971, this paper was read in the section West Asia, Arabic. The resulting discussion brought forth the following resolution:

“Whereas Islamic civilization, within and without the Arabic speaking countries, has in large measure laid down its achievements and left its self-portrait in an exceedingly rich legacy of Arabic manuscripts; and whereas an understanding of Islamic civilization and its relations to preceding and contemporary civilizations as well as the history of the sciences

and the history of medicine will remain precarious until this legacy may be surveyed in full; and whereas, despite substantial efforts extending over more than a century, location, registration, let alone cataloguing of those manuscripts are far from complete; and whereas efforts to accomplish these tasks when undertaken by individuals, academic institutions, single states or even groups of states will, owing to the magnitude and complexity, not be terminated within the lifetime of any and all here assembled; b e i t r e s o l v e d by the 28 International Congress of Orientalists that this Congress, in plenary session, recognize the need for early cataloguing of all Arabic manuscripts not yet adequately listed and described, and that it recognize further the fact that successful completion of this all-important task will be contingent on an international initiative to start work where it has not yet been begun, to consolidate ongoing efforts where needed by financial assistance, and to secure and maintain co-operation and co-ordination of cataloguing endeavours in progress or to be undertaken.”

This resolution was unanimously accepted by the Final Plenary Session of the Congress. Meanwhile (spring 1973), printing of the first volume has begun, entitled: *Arabische Handschriften, Materialien zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, appearing as volume 17, part A 1, of the entire cataloguing programme: *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*. The above-mentioned manuscripts have been described and discussed in this first volume. Dr. Attia Rizk has finished his edition of Ibn al-Shajari's important homonym dictionary, to be published in the *Bibliotheca Islamica*. — For the resolution see D. George, in: *ZDMG* 124/1974/386 f.

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