

# Manuscripts of the Middle East: an introduction and a programme\*

*by Jan Just Witkam*

This is the first issue of a new Journal which is devoted to the study of manuscript materials of the Middle East. By editing it I wish to stimulate the study of the handwritten book and of other rare written materials (such as archives, letters etc.), both those of the Middle East and those related to it, in all possible aspects. The Journal will therefore be concerned not only with the study of the outward appearance of these materials (which is often interesting enough), but will also devote ample attention to their contents. The Journal will contain contributions in a wide range of fields: paleography, codicology, philology, (historical) bibliography, the history of libraries and archives, techniques and policies concerning the conservation and preservation of manuscript materials, the manuscript trade (both in the past and present), the methods and organizational aspects of the cataloguing of collections, the art of the handwritten book (calligraphy, illuminations, illustrations, bindings etc.), the life and work of authors, copyists, painters, patrons, readers, collectors, bibliographers and librarians, and numerous other related subjects, provided they are concerned with the Middle East or may be useful for the study of Middle Eastern manuscripts. Closely related subjects, such as epigraphy, numismatics and the history of the typography of Middle Eastern languages, will receive due attention as well. Recent technical developments in the field of preservation, the organization of archives in microform, electronic aids in the work with manuscripts, and the typography of Middle Eastern languages will be treated regularly.

The geographical dimensions of the subject are defined broadly. Collections and materials from the Indian subcontinent (to name but one example) are implicitly included as long as they have a connection with the Middle East. That will particularly be the case with Islamic manuscripts, and also with manuscripts from other religious communities which have their origins in the Middle East but have at some stage settled more to the East: here I am thinking especially of the Jews, Christians and Zoroastrians in the Indian subcontinent. Nor will manuscripts of Hindu or Buddhist contents be excluded provided they are useful for comparative research, e.g. of book illustration. Studies on aspects of Islamic manuscripts from Central Asia,

China, Malaysia and Indonesia will be considered for inclusion as well. But also within the Middle East itself there is enough variety. Numerous religious and linguistic minorities have, in the course of time, developed their own methods and techniques of bookmaking and their own ways of transmission of literature and knowledge, which are often their sole means of defining their communal identity, and which all are worth studying, both in their own right and for their relevance to comparative studies. One of the goals which I am trying to attain with the publication of this Journal is to bridge the gap which separates Oriental and Western researchers, both in their methodical approach and scholarly interests in their respective fields of study, and to offer a scope that goes beyond the often not very wide horizons of nationalism, language and religion. Not that I will try to bring together the irreconcilable, but it is my firm opinion that comparative studies on the level of bibliography and art history have proved rewarding in the past and will continue to be fruitful in the future. In this respect the Middle East, as the word is used in the name of this Journal, is viewed by me as one culturally compact region.

One of my considerations for launching this Journal is the obvious fact that the study of manuscripts of the Middle East is undergoing rapid and extensive changes. Public and private collections are increasingly being made available for researchers by the publication of catalogues and inventories, both in and outside the Middle East. The number of publications on the basis of or about Middle Eastern manuscripts has been increasing during the past decades and this development will doubtless continue for the time being. A special Journal that observes and mentions these developments, and that adds its critical comments and stimulates the study of Middle Eastern manuscripts, does not yet exist. This Journal, *Manuscripts of the Middle East*, will give a whole field of research its own medium of expression. With its help research efforts

\* Part of this introduction is an elaboration of an introductory booklet by myself, entitled *Manuscripts of the Middle East (.....). A new Journal. Information on its Scope with Notes for Contributors*. Leiden (Ter Lugt Press) 1985.

may be co-ordinated and stimulated, as it can state the problems involved in the research, and thus it will give an impetus, by its mere existence, to the exchange of learning in its specific field.

I believe that as yet there does not exist a Journal with the abovementioned scope. In the Western world a number of periodicals are published that are solely devoted to the handwritten book, but these usually contain only contributions on Western manuscripts. And if they contain studies on Oriental manuscripts at all, this is often because these serve their purpose in a comparative frame and have relevance to a Western field of research. The considerable number of Orientalist and Oriental periodical publications occasionally contain articles on the subject of Middle Eastern manuscripts. Recently some journals have been founded that are devoted to the art of the Middle East, and these, as well, contain from time to time articles on Middle Eastern manuscripts, alongside contributions on non-book or non-written materials. None of these journals exclusively focuses its attention on handwritten materials from the Middle East as a subject in its own right. In the Middle East itself there are a few journals with an editorial formula which somewhat resembles that of this Journal. As a major and exemplary effort in this respect the *Newsletter* and the *Journal* of the Institute of Arab Manuscripts in Kuwait, which are both published in Arabic, should be mentioned. This Institute is a subsidiary of the supranational Arab League, but also on a national level in the Arab world and in other Middle Eastern countries there is a variety of organizations, projects, institutions and publications, not only in the public but also in the private domain, which are concerned with the exploitation and preservation of the national heritage. These Middle Eastern publications sometimes have limitations different from the Western ones. Generally speaking, they treat only Arabic, Persian or Turkish materials and are usually also published in these languages, and, therefore, not directed at a worldwide audience. Middle Eastern scholars are sometimes not very conversant with modern techniques of bibliography, although they do compensate for this with their often immense traditional knowledge. In addition, they tend to limit their attention to mainstream, Islamic materials, disregarding materials from the other, rarer, Middle Eastern book cultures which they often have direct at hand, however. In addressing a global audience and in treating subjects of the book culture of not only the majority but also of the minority groups in the Middle East, this Journal is as yet a unique venture. The inclusion of a considerable number of illustrations is yet another asset.

This first volume contains contributions by a number of European scholars on a variety of subjects. For a Journal based in Western Europe it is not surprising that the authors, at least of its first issue, are from that same area, but once the Journal is more or less

established and has proved its ability to survive, its authorship will gradually become as global as its audience is expected to be. How then is the practical application of the aforementioned ideals, as embodied in this first issue? It opens with Alexander H. de Groot's introductory survey on source materials for the history of the Middle East kept in the General State Archives of the Netherlands in The Hague. Then follows a translation (from the Latin) by Robert Jones of a lecture by Thomas Erpenius (1584-1624) on the value of the Arabic language. Erpenius was a professor of Arabic at the University of Leiden and a keen collector of manuscripts, and in this lecture he unfolds a — for his time — extraordinarily modern research and publication programme. The *pièce de résistance* of the present issue is Hans Daiber's article on new manuscript findings from Indian libraries, the results of the author's scholarly passage to India, with some 160 references to Arabic texts in the fields of Islamic philosophy and the Graeco-Arabic sciences. Next comes a short contribution by Adam Gacek on the meaning of *kabikaj*, that mysterious word that one often sees on the fly-leaves of Middle Eastern manuscripts. Geoffrey Khan's article on the Arabic fragments in the Cambridge Genizah collections gives an overview of the variety of subjects treated in the Genizah fragments. This is followed by C. G. Brouwer's account of the vicissitudes of Pieter van den Broecke's recently rediscovered Register of Resolutions concerning Dutch trade in the Western Districts of the Dutch East India Company. In a way it may be read as a specific example of what already had been announced and hinted at in more general terms by Alexander H. de Groot's article with which this volume opens. Questions of provenance and philology are treated by A. G. P. Janson in connection with Karaitic and Rashi manuscripts. In each volume of *MME* I wish to include a facsimile edition of a short text which is for some reason or another rare or special. Here a facsimile of the unique manuscript of a short *risala* on some of the negative aspects of the use of *bars̄*, hashish and coffee, written by Nūr al-Dīn 'Alī b. al-Ġazzār, an Egyptian author living in the 10th/16th century, is presented. Three obituary notices on librarians who have been active, each in his own way, in the realm of manuscript studies follow next: the Leiden bibliographer A. J. W. Huisman is remembered by S. A. Bonebakker; Wolfgang Voigt, the organizer of that great project of catalogues of Oriental manuscripts in Germany, by Barbara Flemming; and Voigt's successor, Dieter George, by Klaus Schwarz. Then follows a bibliography of Arabic language publications concerning Arabic manuscripts, compiled by Adam Gacek. This issue introduces also the first three of a series of shorter notices on various aspects of manuscripts of the Middle East, which I intend to include in each volume of *MME* under the title 'Manuscripts & Manuscripts'. They may sometimes be provocative and con-

vey private opinions, but I will try to make them as entertaining as possible at the same time. Finally, the issue closes with a number of book reviews.

Of great variety as this first volume may seem to be, it is at once clear that only a very limited number of the ideal total of possible subjects has been treated here. It is my intention to edit every year one volume of similar size, usually containing miscellaneous contributions like the present one, and occasionally articles devoted to a single theme. This Journal, which is entirely

independent and receives no subsidies of any kind, can, of course, only continue to exist as long as the publisher considers its basis financially sound. At this stage of the existence of the Journal nothing very specific can be said about this not unimportant aspect, but the reader can be certain that I will do my best to provide him or her with an interesting periodical publication. With the enthusiastic co-operation of authors and readers it can become a lasting success.