FOREWORD

The first Islamic manuscript to enter the Library was a copy of the Qur’an donated in 1631 by the Arab scholar William Bedwell. Since that time the Library’s Islamic manuscripts collection has grown in size and diversity to over 5,000 items. They shed a light on many aspects of the culture of the Islamic world, its beliefs and learning.

Such a collection was amassed over subsequent centuries either from scholarly collectors or purchased by skilled librarians to add more depth to the already impressive range of treasures. But this extraordinary collection has remained relatively unknown outside the Library.

Today, the aim is to change this with a number of different approaches. We are creating a fully searchable online catalogue of the manuscripts and digitising a selection of the most beautiful and interesting texts to make them available to the international scholarly community anywhere in the world via the internet. At the same time, the practical care of the original items, carried out by our own skilled conservators, will ensure their long-term survival for future generations.

The Islamic manuscripts collection is supported within the Library by a team of specialists whose knowledge and skills, whether academic, practical or technical, aim to bring them to the attention of researchers. But only with a sustained programme of scholarly co-operation with experts outside the Library can the full potential and significance of these texts be realised and their place in the wider context of Islamic scholarship become established.

Anne Jarvis, University Librarian

INTRODUCTION

Cambridge University Library’s collection of Islamic manuscripts dates from the very origins of the establishment of teaching and scholarship in Arabic in the early 17th century. The acquisition of the library of the famous Leiden scholar Thomas Erpenius, coincided with the foundation of the Professorship in Arabic by the benefaction of Sir Thomas Adams, in 1672. Since then, as befits the status of the University as a leading centre of Middle Eastern studies, the collection has grown into a rich resource and indeed a treasure-trove of wonderful examples of the art of the book in the Islamic world.

The collection has been greatly enhanced by the legacy of many subsequent professors and students: the colourful and adventurous E.A. Wallis, murdered in the Sinai desert; the indomitable twin daughters of Mr Smith of Argyllshire; another great Arabist traveler, John Lewis Burckhardt; and the exuberant larger than life figure of E.G. Browne; the University’s first lecturer in Persian. Browne was himself a great cataloguer, and his own substantial collection of manuscripts and printing plates was described in detail by his successor, R.A. Nicholson. The most recent addition, already 50 years old, was the work of A.J. Arberry, a prolific translator of literary works in Arabic and Persian, including many poetic texts and also a fine rendering of the Qur’an.

The manuscripts held in Cambridge come from far and wide across the Arab world, as well as Iran, Central Asia and North India; and in subject matter, they cover the whole range of scholarly and literary creativity nurtured by Islam. Not surprisingly, copies of the Qur’an form a substantial part of the collection, along with works on grammar, medicine, history and literature, notably many illustrated copies of Persian poetry.

One feature of the manuscripts is the variety and quality of the calligraphy, including some of the earliest examples of the Qur’an in Kufic script. The decorative qualities of the Arabic alphabet are on display in many precious volumes, not to mention the superb panels of illumination that grace many copies, whether in the opening ‘shamsah’, ornate headings, or marginal decorations.

These manuscripts are as much a feast for the eyes as for the mind. This brief introduction can hope to do no more than whet the appetite.

Charles Melville, Professor of Persian History
TO ADORN & ENRICH

Thomas Erpenius (1564–1624)

The story of the Library’s acquisition of the Erpenius manuscript collection, its first collection from the lands of the Middle East, is a colourful tale of intrigue involving brilliant scholars, political assassinations and grieving—or grasping—widows.

Thomas Van Erpe, or Erpenius, as he is commonly called, was born in 1584 in Goetschum, Holland. Originally a theologian, his interests turned to oriental languages and he became Professor of Oriental Languages at the University of Leiden. He developed a distinguished reputation throughout Europe for his learning, but despite many enticing offers he refused to leave his native country on a permanent basis. However, during his travels he amassed a valuable selection of books and manuscripts. When he died prematurely of the plague in 1624, he left a collection of around 90 manuscripts, 150 printed books and a printing press with an Arabic font, a most unusual item in Europe at that time.

It was his wish that the collection should go to the University of Leiden, but the tortuous negotiations between the University and the widow of Erpenius met with problems and eventually foundered in misunderstanding.

Enter the newly elected Chancellor of the University of Cambridge, George Villiers, 1st Duke of Buckingham (1592–1628), a favourite of James 1st. Buckingham was a man of both politics and culture, with an interest in painting, fine books and manuscripts. In 1625 he happened to be in The Hague on political business for the King. Knowing of Cambidges interest in the Erpenius collection, he intervened in the negotiations and offered Erpenius’s widow a cash payment of £500 for the manuscript collection only. Tired of the long bargaining procedures with the University of Leiden, she accepted, and the manuscripts were swiftly and secretly shipped to England. Unfortunately, when the Duke’s increasingly fraught political career was abruptly terminated in 1628 by his assassination, the manuscripts became the property of his widow, Katherine, Duchess of Buckingham, who did not appear to be in any hurry to part with them.

Shortly afterwards, in 1632, Sir Thomas Adams founded the first chair in Arabic at Cambridge and Abraham Whelock (1599–1633) was appointed to the position. Whelock also held the post of University Librarian (from 1629 until his death) and was keen to develop a collection of manuscripts and books in Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages, both for his own particular interests and to enhance the Library’s collections. He knew of Erpenius’s valuable collection and very much wanted it for the Library.

A persuasive letter from the University was written to Buckingham’s widow: ‘We have often heard that his Grace had bought in the Low Countries the Library of Mr. Erpenius, Professor of the Oriental Tongues, in the Universitie of Leyden, with the intention to bestow the said Library upon the University of Cambridge... that your grace would be pleased out of your noble disposition, to adorn and enrich our universitie with this Treasure’. This was indeed a boldness to petition to your Grace at this time... The Duchess, not wishing to be involved in any further controversy, relented and the manuscripts were transferred to Cambridge in 1632.

Important individual manuscripts include the oldest Persian manuscript in the Library, two volumes of an ancient commentary on the Qur’an. The most celebrated item is perhaps the 13th century history of Sal’di Ibn Battut, as well as a manuscript of the Gospels translated into Arabic and written by the same scribe. The Library’s collection of rare printed books also contains 27 publications by Erpenius, including a copy of his Grammar of Arabic printed in 1613 and two copies of his Dictionarium Linguae Arabicae printed in 1730.

The value of the Erpenius collection was soon realised. It not only laid the foundation for the Library’s unique Middle Eastern manuscript collection but subsequently—and partly because of this—attracted others. Today, individual items are shelved amongst those from other collections in similar subject areas. However, the Erpenius manuscripts are identifiable to the knowledgeable eye because most still retain the distinctive, if rather faded and worn, leather bindings chosen long ago by the collector himself.
A THOUSAND YEARS OF ARABIC GRAMMARS

Cultures of the Middle East have a long tradition of grammatical study (called kāf/īr or tafṣīl), with early works being written both to counteract misaligned people and to express themselves, and to correct errors made in recitations of the Qur’an. Scholars discussed learnedly and endlessly on whether the methodology of Arabic grammatical study developed as a result of the influence of Greek logic from Aristotle onwards, or whether it was a development from classical logic (if any). Whatever the truth of the matter, the science of Arabic grammar grew in importance in early medieval times and the great intellectual centres of Basra and Kufa developed in Southern Iraq.

At the end of the 8th century two very important works by Sibawayhi (d. 799) and al-Kufi (d. 822) codified all the grammatical material originating from pre-Islamic poetry and from the Qur’an. These texts were used to teach in Baghdad, which in the 9th century became the centre of grammatical studies under the eminent teacher and grammarian al-Mubarrad (d. 898).

Following the ground rules laid down by Sibawayhi, authors of grammatical works divided their content into a large number of chapters grouped into two major divisions—one section dealt with the changes of word endings and the other section with changes in the forms of the words themselves. This division is still to be found in all Arabic grammatical works, even though the order within the two major divisions may vary slightly.

Developments in the second half of the 10th century resulted in a golden age of grammatical studies in Baghdad, where important advances took place resulting in the development of three schools of grammarians pursuing different concepts and terminology.

In the 11th century, one of the first studies of Arabic syntax by the Persian grammarian Jurjani (d. 1078), became known in Europe when Erpenius translated it into Latin in 1617. The 12th and 13th centuries saw further developments taken forward by the Persian scholar al-Zamakhshari (d. 1144) whose major work Kitab al-Mudżal was commented on by later scholars such as Ibn al-Hajib (d. 1249) and al-Kuntuludhi (d. 1289). Finally, in the 14th century

The beginning of an Arabic grammar in Latin written by Guillaume Postel. (Q4-6-9)

the Egyptian grammarian Ibn Hisām (d. 1360) wrote the Kitāb Maqārib al-labīb, this became and still remains the standard for teaching Arabic grammar in Arab countries today.

The Library has manuscript copies of works by many of these scholars, including al-Mubarrad’s Fādil, Jurjani’s Kitāb al-Muqattam and Ibn al-Hajib’s famous Kitab al-Mudżal.

A keen interest in Arabic language structure also developed among members of the European scholarly community. Some of the earliest works in this area were produced by Guillaume Postel (1510–81), a French linguist whose controversial religious opinions frequently made him unpopular. Postel had interest in many other scholarly fields and was adept in several languages, including Arabic, Hebrew and Syriac.

(Left) An Arabic grammar with comments in and around the text in Persian and Turkish, completed in 1389. From the collection donated by King George I in 1715. (Q4-6-2)
DEFINING DICTIONARIES

The concept of a dictionary is not covered by any one term but in Arabic is often referred to as qamus or mushaf; in Persian the term is farhang. Because of the language structure, dictionaries in medieval Arabic were not arranged in the same way as those of European languages; some were arranged by the root of the word and its variants listed in alphabetical order based on phonetic principles; others were listed by rhyme order with roots of the word listed by the final sound; and yet others were arranged on a European pattern with all words ordered by the initial letter listed together.

Many important dictionaries were written during medieval times: the Usul al-'Arab of Ibn Manzūr was and still is the best-known large-scale dictionary. Grammarians Zamakhshari and Firdaūsī (d. 1415) also produced dictionaries, while from later times Murtaḍa al-Zarqālī's Fī ḥarām al-'arās is well known and continues to be widely used today.

EUROPEAN LEXICOGRAPHERS

European scholars, intent on making Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages more accessible in the West, also produced dictionaries: the first, by Jacob Gollus (1596–1667), was printed in 1663. Gollus was a Dutch mathematician who studied Arabic and was the most distinguished pupil of Eusebius. He held the position of professor of both mathematics and Arabic at Leiden. His Lexicon Arabico-Latinum, printed in 1651, remained the most famous Arabic-Latin dictionary for around two centuries.

According to some sources, it was not Eusebius but William Bedwell (1561–1632), a priest and scholar who had interests in the field of Arabic, other oriental languages, and in mathematics, who was the first to revive the study of Arabic in Europe. Bedwell compiled a dictionary of Arabic based on his own readings of texts. After completing seven volumes of this work he came across a copy of the Qāmūs of Fīrūzabādī and added yet more definitions to the light of this. His completed work extended to nine volumes with extra slips inserted, and four further bundles of sheets.

Following his death, Bedwell’s manuscripts (and a type font for printing in Arabic) came to the Library, where they were consulted by Edmund Castell (1606–85) during the creation of his monumental Lexicon Heptaglotton. This multi-language dictionary, which included Arabic and other Middle Eastern languages, took Castell many years to complete, even though he was helped by many assistants whom he financed from his own funds. It was eventually printed in 1669. Castell became Professor of Arabic at Cambridge and he too bequeathed his manuscripts collection to the Library.

In the 19th century another important English scholar was George Percy Badger (1815–88), an Anglican missionary who travelled widely in his early years in Malta, the Middle East and India. He wrote a large number of books relating to Arabic history, literature and his own travels, and in 1881 completed his English-Latin Lexicon. The original manuscript copy of the dictionary together with Badger’s notes on its compilation, is now preserved in the Library.

Top right: The first part (better all only) of a Persian Latin lexicon begun by the missionary and scholar George Lewis but left unfinished. (Add 233)

Below: Decorative frontispiece from a copy of the celebrated Arabic dictionary, the Qāmūs of Fīrūzabādī. Written in Isfahan in 1670. (Add 847)