AIMS AND METHODS OF CATALOGUING MANUSCRIPTS OF THE MIDDLE EAST

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The greater part of the texts written in Middle Eastern languages are still only available in manuscript form. Access and conservation of these texts are two main problems which can be answered with adequate cataloguing. But if a catalogue also includes collections data, it can provide materials for the history of Middle Eastern bookmaking or even on the development of science in the Islamic world.

La plus grande partie des textes composés dans les langues du Moyen Orient ne sont accessibles que sous forme manuscrite. L'accès à ces textes et leur conservation sont deux problèmes majeurs auxquels on peut remédier par un catalogue approprié. Mais si un catalogue inclut également des données bibliographiques, il peut fournir des matériaux pour l'histoire du livre en Moyen Orient ou même pour celle du développement de la science dans le monde islamique.

1. General remarks

With the word ‘aims’ in the title of this lecture I mean the long term goals the bibliographer of Middle Eastern manuscripts may try to attain over a considerable number of years. These aims should be summed up, at least according to my opinion, as to ensure the availability of the corpus of Middle Eastern manuscripts for the generations to come, not only for the inhabitants of the Middle East, but for the whole of mankind, to whose heritage they belong. I will treat some of the difficulties the bibliographer may have to cope with during his work in the first part of my lecture with emphasis on a few topics: firstly, the number of manuscripts; secondly, the importance of manuscripts as a source for the literary history of the Middle East; and thirdly, the problems involved with regard to access to collections. The general overview of the methods in cataloguing which I will give in the second part of my lecture can be of assistance to the student of manuscripts in his attempt to overcome these difficulties and to attain these goals. I will not speak about shorter term goals.

The conditions under which they may be attained vary from country to country and from institution to institution, and not much of a general nature can be said about these.

There is one more general remark to be made: in the following I will speak about, and cite examples of, mostly Arabic manuscripts. Not because I consider them more important than others or more illustrative for my opinions, but for the simple reason that I am more familiar with these than with, for instance, Persian manuscripts. And of other manuscripts written in Middle Eastern languages and originating from the different religious communities in the Middle East I have even less direct knowledge. Nevertheless I believe that most of my remarks on Arabic manuscripts are more or less valid for the other groups of manuscripts as well. That is why I have given this lecture a more general title than might have been expected from an Arabist.

2. The number of Middle Eastern manuscripts

On the number of Middle Eastern manuscripts there are several phantastic data available. There is a popular opinion in the Middle East that the total amount of Arabic manuscripts alone is three million, with a peculiar division into three portions of one million each: one of texts that have been printed already, another million which still awaits editing, and, finally, a third million of ‘unimportant’ manuscripts. I have personally encountered this opinion on several occasions (see, for instance, Witkam 1982a:5) and I think that it goes back to a remark of ‘Sādī al-Dīn al-Munāṣṣirī in one of his books on Arabic manuscripts. I have not found, however, the literal text of this statement. A number of years ago the Royal Academy in Amman set out to make a catalogue of all Arabic manuscripts in the world. This is indeed a commendable undertaking, but not likely to be completed in the 20th century, nor, probably, in the 21st for that matter. In an introductory leaflet to the project close to the same number of three million is mentioned, in this case supported by calculations, and without the rather arbitrary partition into three categories (El-Asaad 1982:8-9). Although three million is a tremendous figure, I believe that the actual amount may well surpass these three million, but I am aware at the same time that we here will never be able to know even the approximate amount, nor does it serve any purpose to know this number. Arabic manuscripts are simply too many, their number is beyond our imagination, and, by extension, the same goes for Middle Eastern manuscripts in general.

A few examples may illustrate these assertions. The Middle Eastern manuscript collections in European and American libraries are usually fairly well catalogued, but it is common experience that a manuscript, upon examination, often contains more texts than is indicated in the catalogues. The reverse sometimes happens as well, however. So, even where one would imagine that the numbers are fixed and limited, within collections that are hardly being enlarged anymore and that have been described in an exemplary manner, there is still expansion possible. But it is not in such institutions and those collections, in Europe or the United States, that the real discoveries can still be made, but rather in the Middle East. There the numbers are virtually unlimited. In a
recently published survey on Arabic manuscripts in
Nigeria a quite impressive number of public collections
is mentioned, but at the end of the survey the author
mentions only the names of some of the private
libraries and then sets forth to produce a list of 48 private
collections in Nigeria alone (Muhammad 1985:73-74).
Similar reports have recently been published in Yugoslavia
and India and there as well the promise of the contents
of hardly known collections is astonishing. Needless to
tell that lists or inventories of such collections are hardly
available as yet.

An impression of the progress of Arabic
bibliography during the past few centuries can be had if
one compares the numbers of titles and authors in
Hašší̄ Kālīfī’s Kaft al-Ẓāmīn and in Brockelmann’s
Geschichte. In the middle of the 17th century, Hašší̄ Kālīfī
could boast of some 15,000 titles by around 5,500 authors
and approximately the same proportion is found in the
survey by Brockelmann, who did his research some three
centuries after Hašší̄ Kālīfī. The figures have risen con-
spicuously in the interval: Brockelmann lists no less
than around 25,000 titles by approximately 18,000 authors.
Now another half century has passed since the publica-
tion of Brockelmann’s Geschichte, and developments have
accelerated, but at present there are no reliable figures
available.

I can quote another example of the abundance of
Arabic manuscripts and the progress of bibliography I
can obtain from the press. When for the pur-
pose of making a critical edition I was collecting
manuscripts of the work entitled Irād al-Qaṭīf dī‘ān al-Aḥmād
al-Maḥṣūlī, an Encyclopædia of the Sciences by the 14th-
century Egyptian physician Ibn al-Afkhān, I started, of
course, with Brockelmann, who gives in all some fifteen
manuscripts of that text (Brockelmann 1937-1949: II, 137).
After some years I had, without much difficulty,
located c. forty copies (Witkam 1982b: 381) and now,
only five years later, the score is approximately seven-
ety, and already copies continue to be added to the
publication of almost every new manuscript catalogue.
This may be quite disturbing for the philologist who wishes
to edit a text, especially if he is aware of the fact that the counting in this particular case was done, with a few exceptions, on the basis of printed
catalogues of collections only. Another startling ex-
perience in connection with the search for manuscripts
of Ibn al-Afkhān’s Encyclopædia, in addition to the ever
increasing number of manuscripts, was the paradoxical
fact that it proved more and more impossible to establish
a stemma of the manuscripts. This is contrary to what one
would expect: the more manuscripts available, the more
material that could serve to establish a sound text.
In
ternal evidence, that is the results of the comparison of
variant readings in the different manuscripts, was not
sufficient to establish relationships between most of the
available manuscripts. The numerous manuscripts that
have survived are apparently only a minor segment of
the total of manuscript witnesses of the text. For the com-
pletion of the critical edition I had, in the event, to adopt
the second-best, but probably only practical method and
I made my selection of manuscripts on the basis of sec-
dary, external criteria only.

Another factor which influences the counting of
manuscripts is that there is no definition of what should
be considered as a manuscript. If one accepts every bibliographical entity, that is to say: every scrap of paper
with handwritten text on it, as an independent item (and
one should do so, I believe) and if one also adds to this
archival materials (this may be questionable, although
the treatment of archival materials does not differ much
from that of manuscripts) the figure of three million for
Arabic manuscripts alone must be multiplied many
times.

3. The importance of Middle Eastern manuscripts

The greater part of texts written in Middle Eastern
languages are still available only in manuscript form.
From this follows that the literary history of those
languages is entirely dependent on the progress of
the research into manuscripts. It is only since the begin-
ing of the twentieth century that typesetting and prin-
ting has almost entirely superseded the traditional ways
of the diffusion of the written word. Medical and medical
time manuscripts were made in the same way as had
been done for centuries. Since the beginning of the 19th
century this happened with fierce competition from the
printing press. But even since Arabic typesetting and
printing started to be practised in the Middle East in the
1920s, many in Middle Eastern society, indeed entire
sectors, were excluded from the benefits of this inven-
tion and continued, for that and other reasons, to write
their books by hand. Until quite recently, to give but
one example of the availability of handwriting to the
average person, a picturecard of that reality, which can
be used till the present day, it was possible for a student at
the Azhar University in Cairo who was looking in
second-hand bookshops for al-Bayḍawī’s Tūṣūr, which is
one of the commonly used text-books of the cur-
iculum, to choose between a printed and a manuscript
copy of that work. Both were available at prices which
did not differ very much, the manuscript being only
slightly more expensive than the printed copy because
it was more prestigious to have a handwritten copy. This
illustrates how firm the link is between the Middle East
and the world of the handwritten and that of the
printed book.

The student of any sector in any Middle Eastern
literature, be it Arabic or any other one, has therefore
to cope with the problem posed by both the phantastic
number of manuscripts and, in addition to that, by the
fact that they are preserved in hundreds of collections
all over the world, many of which are hardly described
in adequate catalogues. Any major literary or historical
study on a "medieval" subject (and with the vague term
"medieval" I mean in this context to define the period
which ended approximately in the early years of the 19th
century), any such study which is not based on a con-
siderable amount of manuscripts and other handwritten
materials would be extremely incomplete. These scholars
that apparently succeed in avoiding the use of texts in
manuscript form are not only deceiving their readers but
themselves as well. From this it should become clear that
a huge task of highly elementary nature, the collation of
inventories of collections and catalogues of collec-
tions of Middle Eastern handwritten materials, is waiting
to be accomplished. But I will elaborate on the subject
of cataloguing later.

As I have already said, the fact that Middle Eastern
manuscripts are preserved in public and private collec-
tions all over the world compounds the problem posed
by their enormous numbers. As far as the public collec-
tions are concerned the access to manuscripts is more or
less guaranteed, but anyone who is familiar with the
working of a public library from behind the curtains
 knows that there is a gap, a picturecard of that reality
which is far more complicated than it would seem to the
incidental visitor. A few of these complications may be
mentioned here.

Every librarian knows that, somewhere in the
library, there is that unlit and out-of-the-way corner or
storage room where a number of unspecified materials
are piled. He has seen these many times and knows that
his predecessors and their predecessors already knew
about them, but he lacks both time and courage to start
sorting out this hoard. If there is such a corner in every
library, and personally I am convinced that there is (and
more than just one), then together they must contain a
formidable amount of material. Recipes of inscriptions
which have only the name, at least to the outsider, of
having complete catalogues.

Another complication is sometimes caused by a cer-
tain amount of what may euphemistically be termed
‘over-organisation’, which some libraries display as a
compensation for the defects in other fields. In theory
library exists in order to safeguard its collection against
the vicissitudes of time and let the coming generations
have their turn in the use of its holdings. The practice
is sometimes different, however. There are many libraries
that somehow have failed, in the course of time, to keep
their collections entirely intact. If they then all add
new numbers to their books, in order to conceal the
lacunae on the shelves, without publishing new lists or
catalogues, their collections have simply become inac-
cessible. The examples of the Egyptian National Library
in Cairo and of the National Museum in Jakarta (Indo-
nesia) are notorious in this respect, though by no
means unique.

With the private collection the story is different.
With these there are guarantees at all.

Their owners have absolute power in disposing of their
holdings. The private manuscript collection is, as far as
Middle Eastern materials are concerned, a phenomenon
which cannot be neglected. Its presence can be historical-
ly explained by the fact that other possessing knowledge
has always been, at least in Islam, a private affair, not sob-
ly a prerogative of a religious class. As a result of this
situation it happens that private collections are found in
vast numbers in all countries of the Middle East, and
not only there but also in the West and, even at the
farther extent, in Europe and the USA. The example of
Nigeria which I have already mentioned is not at all an
exception. Even if there were catalogues of such collections available, which is seldom the case, it remains to be seen whether the collection has not been
dispersed in the meantime. Private owners rarely suc-
ceed in guaranteeing continuity for their collection over a
number of generations.

The Haddad collection in Beirut is a case in point.
It was brought together by Dr. Sāmī Darāhh Hāddad,
a physician working in the Orient Hospital in Beirut,
who was interested in the history of Arab medicine and
who has published a large number of Arabic
manuscripts. After his death an exhaustive catalogue was
published (Haddad/Biestepfelh 1984), and one would
suppose that from then on the collection would be wide-
ly available for interested scholars. On the contrary:
within a year after the publication of the catalogue the
greater part of the collection surfaced in the catalogue
of one of London’s auction houses (Sotby’s 1985) and
for some time it was feared that the collection as it was
described in the first catalogue would be lost forever.
Fortunately, the Wellcome Institute in London purchased
the entire collection out of sale and thereby that collec-
tion, at least, was saved for the world of learning.
But anyone who sees what is regularly offered for sale in Lon-
don’s auction houses and in the sales-catalogues of some
specialist bookdealers and book collectors will realize
that many manuscripts drift from owner to owner and are thus
excluded from scholarly consideration.

There is yet another type of manuscript library
which I will call semi-private. I take a middle position
between the public and private collection, but an exact
definition is not easy to give. In the Middle East this
type is quite common. It is for educational benefit by some non-governmental body. It can be, for
instance, the manuscript collection in a Christian
monastery, or in some pious Islamic foundation. The
administrators of such an institution are often not
primarily concerned with the issues I have mentioned. For them the manuscripts which are entrusted to them are the embodiment of their communal past rather than source-material that is waiting for scientific exploration. A reckless lending policy in such collections in the course of many years has reduced the size of its holdings considerably. As far as access to such collections is concerned it does not differ very much from private collections: catalogue and reading facilities are usually poor, let alone the possibilities of microfilming and the like, and the researcher is fortunate if the librarian proves to be a scholar himself.

And even if a private or semi-private collection is still more or less extant, gaining access to it can often be a complicated affair. The owner or administrator's confidence has to be won by the prospective researcher and this more often than not requires skills which are not acquired at a university.

4. Preservation and Access

Here I come to my third topic. Preservation of and access to collections can go hand in hand, the one dependent on the other. Preservation is the stage of treatment of a manuscript which precedes the compilation of a catalogue. Only after we have become acquainted with the content of a volume, and after we have established a survey of the physical, outward characteristics of a handwritten book, is it possible to make a plan for its restoration and preservation. Any restoration which is done prior to a thorough description is likely to damage the manuscript and will cause the irreparable loss of its original features. This is valid for all three categories of libraries which I have mentioned, but usually fewer mistakes of this kind are made in the public library than in the other two. In this respect as well, the catalogue is the point of departure for other activities. It is, in fact, the starting point for everything and by stating this I have arrived at the main topic of my lecture.

5. Catalogues

Cataloguing is done, and has been done during the past few centuries, in almost as many ways as there are catalogues. Their methods range from the compilation of summary handlists and compact surveys of a particular collection on the one hand, and exhaustive descriptions with extensive quotations on the other. Both types are somewhat presented here as extremes, but that is not what I mean. They have both their advantages, and do not exclude one another. Summary handlists give one a quick overview into a certain collection. They usually do not contain more than the bare bibliographical necessities like author, title, bibliographical reference, date of copying and the physical size. The user of such a handlist only finds out whether the information contained therein is correct by a study of the manuscript itself. The exhaustive catalogue, on the other hand, contains the information which in most cases enables the user to find out what he wishes without needing to have recourse to the original manuscript. The advantages of the exhaustive catalogue are therefore, generally speaking, enormous. Nevertheless, loss of time and effort can in many cases be avoided when the catalogue contains sufficient information. But the advantages are not only evident to the researcher. If loss of time can be avoided for the student of the manuscript, so can wear and tear be avoided for the original manuscript materials. Extensive catalogues have the effect that the originals can remain in their place on the shelves. That all this saves the librarian's work is yet another advantage.

6. Toward the exhaustive catalogue

When a catalogue of a certain collection must be compiled, the compiler, or rather the library administrator, has theoretically the choice between a handlist or an extensive catalogue. Practical considerations, like the availability of money or expertise, dictate the choice in most cases. If the collection is a large one, and if there is no catalogue at all, the compilation of a handlist would appear to be the logical choice. In a relatively short time the researcher will have at his disposal a list with titles and so he will know what he may expect to find. Compiling an exhaustive catalogue for a major collection can take a considerable time, it could even take the compiler's entire lifetime, and during that period access to the collection must forcibly remain limited. This disadvantage disappears when there is already some sort of handlist available. In that case the catalogue has all the time in the world for its collection of the catalogue. Before embarking upon the evident advantages of an extensive catalogue I will mention a few disadvantages of compiling handlists. Although handlists are very compact in the presentation of their data, the time and effort needed for their compilation are not in proportion to the result. A handlist only lists the findings of the author's research per manuscript, but at the same time it conceals the amount of effort that had to be invested, and, what is even more important, the handlist tells us nothing about the information which was discarded during the final stage of its reduction. This implies that the handlist's compact outward appearance does not warrant research done in a period as limited as the size of the final product. The handlist is much more labour intensive. This Furthermore entails that a considerable amount of data, often the outcome of a detailed and highly specialized scrutiny of the material, is not used. If these data are not kept in an orderly way, during the compilation of a handlist, they run the risk of not being able to be retrieved anymore. But if, on the other hand, they are kept in an orderly and consistent way, they may as such already constitute the framework for an extensive catalogue. Another disadvantage of the handlist is that it is of less practical, commercial nature. The publication of a handlist may jeopardize the sale of a catalogue of larger dimensions at a later date.

What is then the exhaustive catalogue which I am constantly mentioning? It is, to begin with, the description of both the outward and inward appearance of a number of manuscripts. In it the contents of each text are identified and set in their cultural background and within their bibliographical context. In addition to this it contains a description of the outward appearance of the manuscript and of the techniques of bookmaking which have been employed in each volume. These are the codicological characteristics and are as essential as the identification of the contents. The employment of codicological techniques, for which the volume is studied as an object in itself, may be revealing for certain aspects of the contents of a volume, which otherwise would not easily, and certainly not so quickly, have come to the surface. To cite but one example: one can, by making a survey of the composition of the quires, conclude that a number of leaves must be missing or that several leaves are of a different manufacture. This can mean that there is an irregularity in the quires themselves, possibly caused by an irregular or defective supply of paper to the copyist, or it may also point to a lacuna or later replacement in the body of the text. Irregularities in the quires can thus be a warning signal for defects of another type. But even if the quires are entirely regular, and of a single type of paper, they may point to a particular origin of the volume, its date, its combination with the age of the volume. That this is possible has been demonstrated in the study of Hebrew manuscripts (Beit-Arie 1976: 43-47) and is, with the appropriate modifications, valid for other groups of manuscripts as well, provided that the necessary additional data are available.

Both the description of the physical aspects of the volume and of the contents of a text are, to a certain extent, interpretations by the catalogue, made on the basis of the material which he has in hand. They are the personal conclusions of his research. In addition to these two elements, his entry for each text should contain all quotations which prove his assertions and support his conclusions. By the inclusion of such texts the correctness of his descriptions can be proven, or challenged, with the help of the catalogue itself, in many cases without further recourse to the original manuscript. The exhaustive catalogue has thereby become, as it were, self-supporting. And at the same time it has become a sourcebook, and also the starting point for further research. If the codicological data in the exhaustive catalogue are sorted into appropriate indexes, conclusions can be drawn from these and with the help of these conclusions the catalogue can provide researchers with sets of characteristics which they may apply in their study on other manuscripts. I am thinking in this connection not only of surveys in which data on localities and dattis are combined with other information on details of bookmaking, but the compilation of glossaries of technical terms and standard formulae which are employed by authors and copyists is also one of the most significant possibilities.

What I have said here may have been for some of you a series of self-evident truths. The theoretical discussion on the theme of the management of manuscript collections is, however, often overshadowed by clouds of intricacies and technical details concerning the description of handwritten materials, and these sometimes seem to have become an aim in themselves, clad as they are in archaic terms and formule which have often the deliberate effect of barring newcomers from entering this field of study. But the issues at stake are too important for that. The bare survival of irreplaceable materials of great historical value is endangered from several sides. These may be neglect or religious fanaticism, greed or cultural bias, the resurgence of a narrow-minded nationalism or simply the predominance of different sets of values towards the heritage of former generations in an age where 'change' has become the password. But in all cases we must try to find out what is happening and then decide how to make a stand. That is precisely what I try to stimulate by this summing up.

Bibliography
