

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 codicological 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 des 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 catalogage approprié. Mais si un catalogue inclut également des données codicologiques, il peut fournir des matériaux pour l'histoire du livre au 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, so 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 those.

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:3) and I think that it goes back to a remark of Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munāḡḡid 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-Assad 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 (Muḥammad 1985:73-74). Similar reports have recently been published on Yugoslavia and India and there as well the promise of the contents of hardly known collections is astonishing. Needless to say 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 Ḥaḡḡī Ḳalifā's *Kaṣf al-Zunūn* and in Brockelmann's *Geschichte*. In the middle of the 17th century, Ḥaḡḡī Ḳalifā could boast of some 15,000 titles by around 9,500 authors and approximately the same proportion is found in the survey by Brockelmann, who did his research some three centuries after Ḥaḡḡī Ḳalifā. The figures have risen conspicuously 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 publication 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 quote from personal experience. When for the purpose of making a critical edition I was collecting manuscripts of the work entitled *Iršād al-Qāṣid ilā Asnā al-Maqāṣid*, an Encyclopedia of the Sciences by the 14th-century Egyptian physician Ibn al-Akfānī, 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 seventy, and this process of finding new copies continues with 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 experience in connection with the search for manuscripts of Ibn al-Akfānī's Encyclopedia, 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. Internal 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 completion 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 secondary, 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 beginning of the twentieth century that typesetting and printing has almost entirely superseded the traditional ways of the diffusion of learning in the Middle East. Till that 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 ever since Arabic typesetting and printing started to be practised in the Middle East in the 1720s, many in Middle Eastern society, indeed entire sectors, were excluded from the benefits of this invention 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 manuscripts and their use 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-Bayḏāwī's *Tafsīr*, which is one of the commonly used text-books of the curriculum, 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 narrow the gap still is in the Middle East between 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 considerable amount of manuscripts and other handwritten materials cannot but be extremely incomplete. Those scholars that apparently succeed in avoiding the use of texts in manuscript form are not only deluding their readers but themselves as well. From this it should become clear that a huge task of highly elementary nature, namely the compilation of inventories of collections 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 collections all over the world compounds the problem posed by their enormous numbers. As far as the public collections 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 this is too simple a picture and that reality 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 there is (and often more than just one), then together they must contain a formidable amount of materials, preserved in institutions which have often the name, at least to the outsider, of having complete catalogues.

Another complication is sometimes caused by a certain amount of what may euphemistically be termed 'over-organisation', which some libraries display as a compensation to defects in other fields. In theory a 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 allot 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 inaccessible. The examples of the Egyptian National Library

in Cairo and of the National Museum in Jakarta (Indonesia) are notorious in this respect, though by no means unique.

With the private collection the story is different. With these there are no such rules or 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 historically explained by the fact that pursuing knowledge has always been, at least in Islam, a private affair, not solely 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 further south and east, and even, but to a far lesser 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 succeed 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 Ibrāhīm Ḥaddād, a physician working in the Orient Hospital in Beirut, who was interested in the history of Arab medicine and had accumulated a handsome collection of medical manuscripts. After his death an exhaustive catalogue was published (Haddad/Biesterfeldt 1984), and one would suppose that from then on the collection would be widely 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 (Sotheby 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 collection, at least, was saved for the world of learning. But anyone who sees what is regularly offered for sale in London's auction houses and in the sales-catalogues of some specialized booksellers must realize how 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. It takes 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 was usually set up for the public 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 here. 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 sometimes 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 follows 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 cataloguers. 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 can only find out whether the information con-

tained 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. Travelling, microfilming, loss of time and effort can in many cases be avoided when the catalogue contains sufficient information. But the advantages are not only evidently there for 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 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 administration, 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 cataloguer has all the time in the world for the compilation of an extensive 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 redaction. 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 of a more practical, commercial nature. The publication of a handlist may jeopardize the sale of a catalogue of larger dimensions at a later date.

What then is the exhaustive catalogue which I am constantly mentioning? It is, to begin with, the description of both the content and physical 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, by 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, but 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, if studied, for instance, in 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 cataloguer, 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 source-book, 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 dates 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 distinct 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 formulae that 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.

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