Craftsmen and the Making of the Manuscript

In the context of a general introduction to the codicology of Arabic and Islamic manuscripts, it may appear superfluous to discuss the working practices of copyists. In the first place, this aspect of book production is not always easy to discern in the finished product since a number of basic facts—such as who was to receive the work, how long it took, and where it was undertaken—often remain unknown. In addition, illustrations of specific points are frequently taken from literary sources or, more occasionally, from archives, and still have to be compared with the facts as they transpire from the manuscripts themselves. And lastly, the preceding chapters have already detailed many of the operations involved in the making of books, and thus introduced the reader, to a certain extent, to the tasks of the copyist. Moreover, colophons, which could at least potentially provide compelling evidence in this connection, call for separate treatment and accordingly will be dealt with below. It is nevertheless worthwhile drawing the attention of researchers to the importance of this question in the broader context of the history of the Islamic book. The aim of the following pages is little more than to present a succinct account of some of the more important advances in contemporary research.

The identity of the copyists

Who, then, were the men, and sometimes women,1 who lavished effort and patience on the time-consuming task of copying manuscripts? Colophons are generally speaking so sparing of details that, unless they provide the name of a specific individual—author, scholar, physician, or other—already recorded in other sources, they are of little help in determining the identity of the person who transcribed the text. In the absence of catalogues of dated manuscripts

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with a full series of indexes, and lacking a general inventory of all copyists' names, to build up a picture of the occurrence or career of an individual scribe, is, in the current state of affairs, very much an uphill task.2

The professionals

Since the art of calligraphy occupied such a pre-eminent place in the Islamic world, it seems perfectly natural to begin with the calligraphers, a group a priori distinct from the general run of copyists. Treatises on the calligrapher's art often incorporate brief biographies of these craftsmen, and they and their creations are regarded with the utmost respect. According to the data provided by their colophons, Qur'ans Paris BNF arabe 6082 and BNF arabe 6716 were copied by the celebrated Yaqit al-Mustasim2 both bear fullsome notes expressing the regard in which they were held. Nonetheless, BNF arabe 6082 is in fact a forgery, as are many similarly attributed manuscripts in other collections.

Without even entering into the discussion of forgeries, to which the existence of these two manuscripts inevitably gives rise, the codicologist is confronted with two particularly thorny questions: should calligraphic manuscripts be put into a special category? And if so, how may calligraphers be identified? Some copyists overtly claim this status: a Kitâba wa-Dînâra (a famous collection of fables) copied in 661/1262 is signed by a certain Muhammad ibn Muhammad ibn 'Umar ibn al-Kamil al-Khatib.3

As has already been mentioned, from a certain juncture, a number of specialised texts were composed in which artists' names are listed, while the teaching system, mirroring that found in the religious sciences, introduced the fajrâ, the possession of which served as an equivalent of a calligrapher's 'certification'.4 Such sources make it possible to identify a given calligrapher, but they are far from covering the entire Islamic world: such texts are indeed a relatively recent phenomenon and do not cover all areas. There are many old manuscripts, exhibits or illustrations in books about calligraphy, with colophons bearing the name of a copyist unrecorded in the surviving corpus of biographical sketches of scribes. Does that necessarily mean that the individual concerned was not in fact a calligrapher?

There is no need, therefore, to invent a whole new class. As Selchim has suggested,5 a better course of action is to subsume calligraphers under the umbrella term 'professional copyist', a group whose diversity is outlined below. The author of a history of Cordoba compiled in Unnayad Spain reports that in the Eastern suburb of the city alone 'one hundred and seventy women were occupied transcribing Qur'âns in Kufic characters.'6 It is tempting to imagine that individuals such as these earned their means of subsistence from copying. An important and familiar figure had emerged at an early period — that of the marrâq, although it remains difficult to place this prototypical character in any one fixed category. Johannes Pedersen has documented a number of incidents in which the marrâq played a part somewhat resembling that of a modern publisher.7 Though a marrâq might have run the store and sold books, it is more difficult to ascertain whether he was also involved in actual copying.8

A measure of versatility seems to have been the rule in the book trade: for example, there exist manuscripts transcribed by copyists whose colophons state that they were marrâqs (among them the 'Qur'ân of the Master15), dated 410/1019-1020 and MS. Manshâd 'Asânî Quds 431616 from...
According to these colophons, both 'All ibn Ahmad and 'Uthmán ibn Husayn respectively copied the text, punctuated it, and illuminated and finally bound the manuscripts concerned. It may be that during the early centuries it was the nārā'y's role to oversee every stage of a manuscript's production. More than a century after the above examples, at the end of the sixth/seventh century, Rāwandi, author of the history Rāhāt al-sulāṭ and himself a calligrapher, declared that he 'had learned seventy types of script and practised as a copyist of the Qur'ān, an illuminator and a bookbinder, skills [he] had acquired to perfection.' Not quite such an all-rounder as some of his predecessors, the copyist of one manuscript (Montreal McGill ISL 91, dated 967/1560) was also nonetheless an illuminator; this combination of roles was fairly common. On the other hand, were the tasks performed by the nasībī who signed a manuscript in London (BL. Add. 22026) in 672/1274 any less wide-ranging than those of the nārā'y mentioned above? The sources indicate that professional copyists set up shop in the market-place, though when the term nārā'y is used it is not always easy to tell whether it refers to copyists or to book-sellers. By the beginning of the seventeenth century in Central Asia, there were plying their trade in the bazaars.

On occasion, colophons introduce practitioners of other trades concerned with book production: the copyist of MS. London BL. Add. 7214 dubbed himself al-madākhī (the illuminator), while that of MS. Paris BNF suppl. persan 1411 and 1528, a certain Darwis Mahmūd, describes himself as a naqīfī 'painter': he must have both transcribed the text and executed illustrations in both volumes.

Another writing professional, the kā'tīb, or scriber, also sometimes copied texts. In 562/1167, a certain 'All ibn Ja'far ibn Asad al-kā'tīb transcribed a Qur'ānic text which was endorsed as nāfšī by Abū l-Qāsim Mahmūd ibn Zaklī. Marginally later, a figure practically contemporary with the calligrapher of the aforementioned Kātīla wa-Dīmān, a kā'tīb, Amir Hājj ibn Aqsuqur al-Qānawī, copied a manuscript now in Paris (BNF suppl. persan 1447), MS. Paris BNF suppl. persan 2105 (completed in 1167/1754), was copied by Háis Ibn Aḩīnī, kā'tīb of the tāmpūsh at the fortress in Khaṣaīn, Ciretche. The name of Sayyid Muhammad al-Masūfī too, who copied a number of manuscripts in a style closely related to Aṣ qayyūlī chancery scripts, should not be forgotten. These figures, though, were only following in the illustrious footsteps of Ibn Muqlah: chanceries offered an opportunity for writing specialists to exercise their profession under the auspices of the prince, even if that meant working – depending on the requirements – for a government office or the prince’s library. In MS. Paris BNF arab. 6997, Abī al-Qādir al-Shākir emphasizes his position as calligraphy master at the Sublime Porte.

Scholars and amateurs

Yūsūf al-Hamawī earned his keep as a copyist, as had the philosopher Yahyā ibn ‘Adī before him. Scholars and students alike were induced to transcribe texts to earn money. It sometimes fell to such individuals to copy manuscripts for study purposes: besides solving the problem of obtaining the texts they needed, copies might also become channels through which knowledge could be transmitted, as shown by occasional reading or audition certificates appended to manuscripts. The final appearance of a manuscript thus might differ greatly depending on circumstances: since a hand is rarely unintelligible to the writer himself, copying for oneself is quite different from working for another party, a task requiring a higher standard of legibility. External features, such as the way a script is laid out and the page composed, can convey additional data in this regard, though these too should be treated with caution. Occasionally, a colophon recording that the copyist carried out the work bi-nafshi, for him- or herself, goes some way to filling this information gap. Of course, not all manuscripts transcribed for this purpose were copied in a slapdash manner. Finally, there were the ‘amateurs’ who occasionally turned their hand to copying: this is especially frequent in the case of Qur’āns and other pious works. As Shadman Vahidov and Afsardin Erkinov have noted in the case of late thirteenth/nineteenth-century Central Asia, many of those who worked for Sādīrī Dīyā were their friends: ‘a qādī, a mufti, a mudarris, or anyone else who wrote a fine hand could transcribe books, either to order or for his own use.’ A manuscript in the hand of the author (an autograph or holograph) belongs to a special category and will naturally command the special attention of anyone editing, studying, or transcribing a text.
Internal evidence of a personal nature

Only rather rarely do colophons in Arabic-Islamic manuscripts offer pointers to the personality of the copist or to the conditions in which transcription took place. One may sometimes glimpse the odd biographical detail, as in MS. Berlin SB or. 4794, where the copist proclaims that his father was khatib of the mosque of Ahmad Pasha;32 while in MS. Paris BNF arabe 1612, it is the copist himself who was ina‘a‘ and khatib of the mosque at Qānā in Egypt.33 Details concerning the manuscript used as a model were customarily held in high regard by copyists, as for example in MSS. Istanbul Kütüphanei 949 and 956.34 There are instances, admittedly few and far between, when the pen lets slip details of a more personal nature. Max Wezweiler (for Arabic manuscripts)35 and Angelo Michele Piemontese (for Persian examples)36 have traced passages in verse conveying personal sentiments, though they tend to be rather conventional, such as pious exclamations or an appeal to the reader to show compassion and indulgence towards the copist’s shortcomings.

By comparison, colophons in Christian Arabic manuscripts were far more forthcoming. As Gerard Troupéau has stressed, while the place of copying is more commonly mentioned in this corpus, it is the many self-deprecating adjectives applied by the copyist to himself, as well as the pleas he addresses to the reader, that puts these colophons in a tradition quite distinct from that of Islamic manuscripts in Arabic.37

Places of transcription

Ordinarily very few clues survive as to exactly where a copyist performed his or her labours. The sources do provide the occasional insight, but, by and large, they remain too fragmentary. Indications in colophons may also allow the environment in which the copist worked to be more exactly pinpointed. The name of the city where the manuscript was transcribed is, however, seldom mentioned, and remarks as to the specific location where copying was undertaken are yet less common. When such data does appear, however, it makes it easier to imagine the circumstances in which the scribes performed the various tasks demanded of them. Scarcity of information itself is reason enough for prudence: though tempting, generalisations and extrapolations are ill-advised. For example, the use of the notion of the ‘scrittorium’ to characterise the way bookmaking in the orbit of the princely courts may have been organised in the Arabic-Islamic world has recently met with a degree of respectability. This term, however, is used by mediævalists to designate primarily ‘a room in a religious house set aside for the copying of manuscripts’.38 Quite apart from the fact that the reality covered by this word is very different in the Western medieval context, efforts should be made to guard against the misuse of terms that carry the risk of distorting our approach to the study of how manuscripts were copied in the Muslim East.

Workshops

Genuine ‘workshops’ or ‘ateliers’ of variable size did nevertheless spring up. Reference has been made above to a document stating that in Spain at the time of the Umayyads and in an eastern suburb of Cordoba alone ‘one hundred and seventy women were occupied transcribing the Qur’an in Kufic characters’. Unfortunately, it has not yet been possible to determine whether these ladies worked independently or collaboratively in workshops. For Pedersen, there can be no doubt that earring going in the process of translation of the passage in Ibn al-Nadim provides no insights into how exactly their activities were apportioned. The copyist of a manuscript in Fez (Qarawiyyin 874) was certainly a slave – indeed, slave to a master renowned for his liking for books, the Umayyad caliph al-Hakam II.39 It might reasonably be asked whether this slave too practised in an atelier environment. Although various authors have suggested that the Illustrious library that bore the caliph’s name employed copyists, there is nothing to suppose the existence of an institution resembling a scriptorium.40 While in this case it is especially difficult to know whether the work was carried out for the Umayyad caliph’s benefit alone, in others it is clear that copying took place in workshops and fulfilled commissions from a bibliophilic prince. The taste for books displayed by the

32 Quiring-Zoche, Arch. Hs., 3, p. 35. 33 Savarin and Baty-Guesdon, Cat. 5, pp. 159-160.
great and the good was sometimes extremely keen. Not satisfied with collecting ancient and costly texts, they would also on occasion arrange for copyists to ensure a steady flow of manuscripts in accordance with their wishes. The supreme instance of this category of patron is without doubt the Timurid Baysunghur, son of Shah Rukh, who gathered round him in Herat the most distinguished artists of his time, including illuminators, painters and calligraphers. Although the objectives of this prince’s workshop (which functioned in tandem with a library or kütüban) were not limited to the art of the book, the manuscripts produced there seem to have served as a benchmark for later book lovers.

Manuscript artists also encountered arrangements providing regular means of subsistence around the Palace in Istanbul. Though archive research to date has focused more closely on the activities of painters, surviving records also supply valuable information on the production of the more lavish manuscripts. It may be that such workshops are portrayed in miniatures such as an illustration in a copy of the Akhlaq-i Nâzîr by Nasîr al-Dîn Tûsî in the Prince Sadruddin Aga Khan Collection, which shows various artists and craftsmen all together in the same locale. Workshops might well be of more modest size: some time in the mid-sixteenth century, a Persian traveler told of how book production was rationally organised in family-based workshops which together completed each stage in the process. “There are in Shiraz of many writers of nasûf-iq, all copying one another, making it impossible to distinguish between their work. The women of Shiraz are scribes, and if illiterate, they copy as if they were reading. The author [of these lines] visited Shiraz and ascertained for himself that in every house in this city the wife is a copyist, the husband a miniaturist, the daughter an illuminator and the son a binder. Thus any kind of book can be produced within one family.” So far, however, no colophons that might confirm the existence of working methods of this kind have been met with. It transpires from this description of manuscript production organised on a quite extraordinary footing that a single house was converted into an integrated workshop. These workshops were admittedly busy producing high-quality manuscripts, and work of a less opulent nature would not have called for such a concentration of specialised artisans. In fact, manuscripts were more frequently transcribed by isolated individuals who, depending on circumstances, could operate from all kinds of premises. Many copyists would surely have worked in locales such as their dwellings or shops. Unfortunately the only sources of information pertaining to this issue are of an indirect nature. The inventory7 drawn up in Cairo during the thirteenth century offers some idea of what a copyist’s shop might have resembled. It seems to have been an activity that did not require particularly specialised premises: ‘Yâqût recounts how Ibrahim al-Harbi spent his whole life in contemplation and transcribing texts in his humble dwelling. Similarly, the same source has it that Ismâ’il ibn Sâbitî installed a nûrûq in one of the houses he owned in order to copy books by Abu ‘Ubaydah which he had managed to procure. It is probable that in the larger cities, districts where booksellers congregated would also have possessed their fair share of copyists.80

Libraries

In several of the examples quoted above, the image of a library can be seen in the background. Together with educational establishments in which books naturally had pride of place, libraries were undoubtedly one of the most important places where manuscripts were copied. This may have been particularly true of the Bayt al-hikma to which one or even more copyists95 seem to have been attached. The Fatimid library in Cairo supplied all the materials necessary to anyone who wished to transcribe a text. In twelfth to eighteenth-century Morocco, the royal library of the Alawiah had a room reserved for copying, and scribes were recruited to transcribe valuable manuscripts. As Pedersen points out, until recent times copyists in the larger libraries in the Middle East would offer their services to any scholar desiring a copy of a given text. An interesting colophon in this connection is that of MS. Paris BNF arabe 6690 which states that the transcription of the text was completed in the library of the Atabakiyah Madrasa at Zanjân (in northwest

Mosques and religious foundations

Copies, especially of the Qurʾān, were frequently made in mosques, since at an early stage jurists had ruled that it was licit to transcribe the scripture in such institutions. 63 Evidence from colophons demonstrates that the range of texts copied in mosques was actually far wider. 64 The transcription of the first section of Imām Mālik’s Muwatta 65 was completed at the Great Mosque at Granada in 542/1147–1148. There are several cases in Persian manuscripts of copyists recording that their work was completed in a mosque: for instance, in those at Karbala, 66 Isfahan, 67 Surat, 68 or al-Azhār in Cairo (the text transcribed – Ḥusayn Vā’iz Kūshī’s version of the Ridpūd fables – seems to have been somewhat at odds with the customary concerns of a mosque, but al-Azhār was and is a university where many subjects are studied). 69 Manuscripts were also copied in other places of worship, such as, in no particular order, a ʿāṯār, 70 a mazār (tomb or cemetery), 71 a Sufi centre, 72 73 a khanqah (meaning the same thing) 74 and a nameless cell (ḥujra). 75 Among the aims that Rashīd al-Dīn assigned to the foundation he established in Tabriz was that of copying his own collected works. 76 The text does not specify exactly where the copyists were meant to work; but we know that the originals were held at a library in the Bab-i Rashīdi quarter of Tabriz while the copies went on display in the mosque.

Other places where manuscripts were copied

There are also colophons that allude to other, less conventional, situations. Indeed, it appears that copyists sometimes worked in buildings of a kind that may sound unsuitable to such an activity. Fortresses, for instance, appear more
than once in the records: in Narmoudar,44 Mohanpur45 and Ahmedabad,46 at Samarkand47; and at Vadin in Bulgaria.48

Copying work-rates and methods

Unfortunately, the paucity of information available militates against the possibilities of satisfactory discussion of these subjects. Though in literary sources references to the ‘production’ of a copyist,49 and more still to that of an author50 are legion, prudence should be exercised when these records in fact concern writers who also copied texts, either to earn their keep or to furnish their personal libraries. As he himself averred, Ibn al-Jawzi would write four ‘quires’ per day;51 after his death, the reed-pens he had used up in his prodigiously productive life were burnt to boiler the water used for washing his body.52 But because Ibn al-Jawzi was also an author it is impossible to determine what proportion of this activity was copying and what represented original composition.

Copying speeds

The sheer speed of executing Arabic script was a source of amazement to observers from early times; in the Fihrist, al-Kindi explains: ‘It also makes possible greater speed than can be attained in other forms of writing’.53 This criterion seems to be had some pertinence in the eyes of medieval authors such as Ibn Bādis, who explains the terms denoting certain scripts in reference to how quickly they could be written down: ‘If the master of the decorative letter (tīmūr) pen writes a letter in a certain time, then the master of the two-thirds (shubhitayn) pen can write it in two-thirds of the time. The master of the half (nīf) can write it in half the time. The master of the third (shubhi) can write it in a third of the time’.54 To date, no studies concerned with copying speeds have been undertaken; a systematic examination of manuscripts with intermediate colophons would permit a more precise evaluation of rates of production. It is worth quoting recorded figures pertaining to copyists from Central Asia for the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries. Sadr-i Diya‘ regularly noted in his library catalogue the number of volumes transcribed by a copyist: according to this source, Damūllā Mirzā ‘Abd al-Rahmān A‘lām Mūllā transcribed nearly a thousand different texts, Siddīq-Jān, five hundred, Damūllā Rahim-Jān, two hundred, ‘Inayat Allāh, more than one hundred and fifty, and his brother, Mirzā ‘Ekhmat Allāh Māhmūd, more than three hundred and seventy. Unfortunately, as the catalogue does not record the length of the works in question it is impossible to gauge the exact quantities these copyists turned out. Scribes themselves occasionally indicated the length of time it took to copy a text, either by noting the date on which they began their labours, or else by inscribing the duration of the whole process. Darvīsh-i dardamand ‘Allī ibn Muhammad, for instance, declares, in a colophon (to MS. Paris BNF persan 256) that he took a fortnight to copy on two hundred and seventy-three leaves the Madinazā‘ of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī.55 There are literary works that dwell on exploits of this kind: at the beginning of the thirteenth/nineteenth century, a certain Fudayl-i Diwānī (’Crazy Fudayl’) is said to have executed, on orders from the emir of Bukhara, a copy of the works of Bīḍīl in forty days, all the while taking an abridged version of the corpus for himself during the night. As for ‘Inayat Allāh – copyist, mutif and nukarrī – he is alleged to have transcribed the Muḥtāzar of the IFṣāṣī (an abridgement of a commentary on a major textbook of Hanafi law) in a single night.56

The instructions left by Rashīd al-Dīn Fadl Allāh convey an idea as to the rate of work that might be expected by a patron with considerable sums at his disposal: they stipulate that every year two fine copies were to be transcribed of each of the six treatises composed by the Il-Khāned vizier, works sometimes comprising more than one volume.57 The surviving manuscripts, richly illustrated and/or illuminated, give ample proof of the enormous labour involved in compiling such codices.58


Individual labour or team effort?

The manuscripts demonstrate that transcription was largely a solitary pursuit, a single individual carrying out the entire copying process from beginning to end. Examples of group work do exist, but identifying them is not always easy unless the colophon provides details. A change in handwriting, particularly at the end of the manuscript, does not invariably signal a change of copyist. Conversely, as the teaching of writing was very largely based on imitation and several texts stress the skill of certain individuals in mimicking the hands of their contemporaries or predecessors,89 it can be hard to detect whether a given work was a joint effort or not. Except for insignificant details, calligraphers in particular made it a point of honour to iron out their idiosyncrasies. Indeed, there is even anecdotal evidence of the abuses this propensity could lead to: in the seventh/thirteenth century, for example, the Egyptian master Ibn al-Walid would put his pupils to work for a pitance before signing the manuscripts and pocketing a handsome fee from his patron.90 There was also a student of Shaykh Hamd Allah, the great Ottoman calligrapher, who slipped work for his own hand among others by his master, letting him sign the manuscripts before drawing his attention to the trick he had played.91

From the very first century of Islam, there is no dearth of cases of manuscripts produced by more than one copyist. Fragments of two very early Qur’ans from the second half of the first/seventh century (Paris BNF arabe 328 a90 and Sant’A DaM inv. 01-25-11)92 are cases in point: the first was copied by three different hands and the second by two. The desire to adopt a homogeneous approach was obviously not felt strongly by the scribes here since each remained wedded to his own personal style. Later on, manuscripts of less exceptional quality could also be transcribed collectively: MS. Sarajevo HBB 142 and 155 to 159, a copy of the aforementioned al-Waṣṭaṣ by Mahbūb Ibn Šadr al-Shari’a, is a particularly striking instance.93 The text was transcribed by twenty-five copyists who combined their labours in answer to a commission financed at Fès in 996/1589 by a group of ‘patrons’, some of whom also personally copied out parts of the text. In 1089/1679-80, thirteen copyists worked together in order to achieve MS. Zawiya al-‘Ayyākhiyya 955 in Morocco.94 Sometimes catalogues record that a volume is in two or more different hands:95 these, however, do not necessarily represent cases of collaboration, but may be due to restoration or missing folios or other circumstances. For example, in an early copy of al-Muhkamar fi akhār al-buhur (Paris BNF arabe 1511), the eighty original leaves missing from the beginning of the text were restored by a second copyist.96 Such possibilities do not of course alter the fact that variations in script can always be ascribed to the part of the codicologist; the same applies to changes in ink and/or paper, from which it may sometimes (but not always) be inferred that the manuscript under study was transcribed by more than one copyist.

The conditions of manuscript copying

Most extant manuscripts were transcribed from a source manuscript which the copyist kept in front of him as he worked. This familiar notion becomes more tangible when the colophon includes precise notes regarding the source copy.97 Some manuscripts, however, were produced in different conditions. Besides the special case of originals written in the author’s own hand, the place of dictation in the copying process should not be overlooked. This is amply illustrated by an anecdote concerning al-Farrā’ (died 207/822), who, in the course of his public lectures, transmitted the contents of a tafsīr, with two wārṣātīs taking down the text.98 In this case, as in so many others, the wārṣāt appears to have acted as something like an author’s secretary – although, as Pedersen has stressed, the links between these two parties could otherwise be relatively loose. A copyist might also take down text from dictation, since any person who wanted to transmit a work might choose this method of distribution— as was the case with MS. Tashkent IOB 3105, dating from 649/1251.99


105 Bichler, op. cit., p. 106 and 181. 106 See e.g. the index to Sellheim, Materiales 2. Several hands can be identified in both of two Qur’anic fragments from West Africa, the MSS. Paris BNF arabe 4854 and 5035 (Dérôme, Cat. E1, pp. 49-51, no. 337 and 340). Watan documents a Yemeni copy of the first half of the Qur’an transcribed by three different hands, in Manuscripts & Manuscripts [5] Qur’An fragments from Davārán (Yemen), MME 4 (1989), p. 161, no. 32 and fig. 19. 107 Saun and Baily-Guend, Cat. 5, pp. 62-63. 108 For example, in MSS. Istanbul Köpekti 540, dated 1582/1583, and 1550/1, dated 1729/1732, etc.; see Sežen, op. cit., p. 203, no. 26; p. 207, no. 32. 109 Pedersen, op. cit., p. 45. 110 fATMAAO 250.
Writing posture

There is an independent Persian miniature that depicts all the various operations involved in the production of a manuscript, including a scribe performing his abulations (Washington D.C., A. M. Sackler Gallery S86.0221, c. 1540).11 Several sources insist on the need for the copyist to be in a state of ritual purity when engaged in his trade, especially if the texts to be transcribed treat subjects of a religious nature.12 Examining the way scribes are portrayed in miniature painting offers important insights into how copyists settled down to work, though admittedly it is occasionally difficult to be absolutely sure that the scene depicted is of a book being copied and not some other task. Generally speaking, the scribe is depicted seated and steadying the leaf on which he is writing against his right thigh; the angle between his upper body and thigh varies, depending on the region and period.13

Ottoman Turkish miniatures tend to portray copyists in front of items of low furniture (perhaps tables or trunks) upon which all their implements are laid out.14 The problem of how copyists held the reed-pen is, on the other hand, much more intractable, and this question—an extremely significant one—for a correct approach to certain palaeographical questions—does not seem to have received sufficient attention from scholars.

The process of transcription

Not all copyists were literary men; as Białdąg Qazwini’s text points out, some might even be ‘illiterate’, though there is actually no need to resort to such an extreme explanation to account for the numerous errors with which some manuscripts are riddled. Transcribing a text is a exacting business and the concentration of the finest copyist can falter. When the transcript was made from an existing manuscript, some of the errors can be explained by difficulties encountered when reading the source manuscript: as Jan Just Wittom has shown, producing the unique extant manuscript of Ibn Hazn’s Ta’ziq af-hamāna (MS. Leiden BRU Or. 927) must have involved considerable effort in that it involved converting an original in Maghribi script into an Eastern cursive.115 Ideally, the work of the copyist calls for a grasp of palaeography, though in practice this may prove inadequate. Other types of error—dictographia,116 haplographia,117 saut du même au même (jumping to repetitions),118 and intervention119—are as well known to some copyists themselves as they are to text editors, and can be rectified on rereading. Interpolations120 and substitutions, however, are harder both to detect and correct. Manuscripts sometimes bear the marks of these oversights: the copyist of MS. Leiden BRU Or. 14424 omitted a passage on f. 127, a lapse corrected by the addition of the missing text in the margin of the affected page.121 Concerning the copyists who, until comparatively recently, still offered their services in the larger libraries of the East, Pedersen noted that ‘individuals could be found among them who felt it their duty to correct in their transcriptions real or imagined errors in the manuscript they were copying, so that one could not always be certain of receiving an accurate representation of [the original].112

Copyists and the role of market conditions

The above discussion leaves open the question of how the business of copying was actually organized. For workshops attached to a palace, and for the occasional copyist fulfilling a specific commission, the issue hardly arises. For professionals working independently, however, it remains difficult to ascertain whether copying involved much in the way of forward planning: manuscripts (with the possible exception of Qur’ans and a few popular texts such as al-Jashāb’s Dalā’il al-khayrāt, prayers invoking blessings on the Prophet) seem to have been generally executed on request. The so far seemingly exceptional example of mid-seventeenth-century Shiraz, however, does show book production anticipating demand; the study of manuscripts of ‘popular’ works, which still remains to be undertaken, might perhaps cast further light on the subject.

115 ‘Establishing the stemma: fact or fiction?’, MMF 3 (1988), pp. 90-92. 116 The unintentional repetition of a letter or series of letters or words by a copyist. OED, s.v.; see Muzelle, Vocabulaire, p. 120, s.v. ‘dictographie’. 117 The unintentional writing of a letter or word, or series of letters or words once when it should be written twice. OED, s.v.; Muzelle, Vocabulaire, p. 120, s.v. ‘haplographie’. 118 An error associated with homophones in which, when a word or phrase occurs twice in close proximity, the scribe copies the text directly after the second instance straight after the first, omitting the intervening words; see Muzelle, Vocabulaire, p. 120, s.v. J. J. William records two such cases in Qur’ānic fragments from the Yemen (op. cit., p. 158, no. 5 and p. 159, no. 14). 119 Muzelle, Vocabulaire, p. 121, s.v. ‘intervention’. 120 ‘To introduce words or passages into a pre-existing writing, esp. to insert spurious matter in a genuine work […]’. OED, s.v.; see Muzelle, Vocabulaire, p. 121, s.v. ‘interpolation’. 121 This page is reproduced in Wittom (Cat. 5, p. 512). 122 Pedersen, op. cit., p. 53.
Painters and illuminators

The professional and cultural environments in which illuminated or ornamented manuscripts were made differed widely. Economic factors weighed heavily on the types and distribution of talent and materials available, as well as impacting on patrons and affecting the remuneration on offer – all issues that surely deserve more thorough investigation in future studies. A brief outline of the variety of copying conditions has been offered above: a similar diversity applies also to both illumination and ornamentation. Inevitably, information is more plentiful regarding the means marshalled to produce the finest copies than for the great mass of everyday manuscripts. Clearly the most important patrons established their own workshops in which artists, together with their assistants and apprentices, worked under the direction of one or more masters. Several Ottoman sultans produced manuscripts in this manner, and documents preserved in the Palace archives at Istanbul detail the fees remitted to the different contributors to the work. The salary of a first-rank artist could be considerable, but their assistants received no more than a few aqadas per day, a paltry wage even at the time. At the height of its splendour, in the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries, the imperial workshop employed many craftsmen skilled in manuscript decoration, each with their own narrow speciality: ruling and marginal illumination, drawing and gilding arabesques, and so on (see illus. 72).

Ateliers working for the open market were generally modest in size, and yet their production, though less spectacular than that of the royal workshops, could attain high levels of craftsmanship. Styles of painting and illumination associated with Shiraz, for example, enjoyed tremendous popularity, and obviously influenced artists in India and other areas – an observation not confined solely to mass production during the Safavid period. As stated above, copyists sometimes also executed the illuminations in a manuscript. In addition to ‘Ali ibn Ahmad al-Warrāq and ‘Uthmān ibn Ḥusayn al-Warrāq al-Ghazawī, who have already been mentioned, one may cite Sa’d ibn Muhammad al-Karkhī, whose name appears in a Qurʾān manuscript (London BL, Or. 13092, dated 402/1013). The later case of Rāzhbān Muhammad al-Ṭab’ī al-Shirāzī shows that this practice persisted at least into the tenth/sixteenth century. Two additional categories may be identified: the first group includes professional copyists operating alone, or ‘booksellers’ who might provide some of the less ambitious illuminations. The second comprises those who copied out manuscripts for their own personal use and added decoration. Though their work is often unprepossessing, examples displaying a reasonable degree of mastery do exist.


Bookbinders

The copyist of MS. BNF arabe 6883 of 640/1242, a certain 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Majallî, was undoubtedly a genuinely multitalented maker of books, like the men referred to in the preceding paragraphs. Manuscript copying must have represented a welcome complement to his bookbinding business, though it is not known whether he engaged in this sideline on a regular basis or only sporadically. In general, however, it is difficult to acquire a clear picture of the position of craftsmen binders as will been seen in a subsequent chapter, they rarely signed their works, and available information about them derives primarily from literary sources. There is a paucity of information in the technical treatises too, since they are mainly late works devoted to calligraphers and painters, though in passing they may touch on an exceptional bookbinder.\(^{126}\)

Of course, the craft did enjoy a certain status, and the passage in the Fâvrît mentioning masters from the early era (such as Ibn Abî I-Harîsh, who worked for the ‘Abbâsid caliph Al-Mu’âzin) is well known.\(^{127}\) Yet, in the last analysis, the conditions under which its practitioners worked remain obscure.

Were it not for the marginal drawings in the album of Jahângîr,\(^ {128}\) it would be well-nigh impossible even to visualise how the techniques were applied, since the very few miniatures specifically representing bookbinders provide no more than a superficial depiction of the workshops or the tools used.\(^ {129}\)

Scripts

"Apart from some remarks on the most obvious peculiarities of the scripts, I have had to refrain from giving a palaeographical analysis of these specimens. This is due to the fact that in this field even the most basic work still remains to be done. No adequate criteria for the description of Arabic handwriting do as yet exist. The mere fact that all scripts presented here may conveniently be called 'naskh' proves that this name is hardly of any use and might just as well be discarded. Not even the roughest guidelines as to provenance and dating of Arabic manuscripts have been drawn, and this work can not be done without taking Persian and Turkish palaeography into account."

J. J. Wiluam, Seven Specimens of Arabic Manuscripts (Leiden, 1978), p. 18

As briefly mentioned in the introduction, the palaeography of Arabic book hands cannot be divorced from codicology. We have yet to see, however, the development of a serious and coherent body of research in this field. Hence in this chapter we shall simply attempt to familiarise readers with the aims and methods of palaeography, to offer an assessment of existing research, and to indicate potential lines of further investigation.

The aims and methods of palaeography

The word palaeography is roughly contemporaneous with the birth of the field, defined as "the science or art of deciphering and determining the date of ancient documents or systems of writing."\(^ {11}\) It was used, in fact, in the title of a book by a French Benedictine scholar, Bernard de Montfaucon, De palaeographia graeca.\(^ {2}\) This work was published in 1708, some thirty years after Jean

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