Islamic Codicology: an Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Script

seals, whereas in the twelfth/eighteenth century most seals became rectangular. Persian seals of the eleventh/seventeenth century were often oval and rather small; by the twelfth/eighteenth century, however, they became rectangular or square, and very small in size (like the seal of Mirza Mahdi Khan Astarabadi, the famous book lover and manusi to Nadir Shah; see illus. 139). In Qajar Iran (nineteenth and early twentieth century) there were many large seals of oval or rectangular shape (illus. 138 and 141), most of which featured inscriptions in nasta’liq script.

Reading the mottoes on the seals and the dates found there, as well as identifying their owners when possible, can provide important clues to the itinerary followed by a manuscript, thereby complementing study of any handwritten notations and ex-libris that may be found along with them.

Codicology and the History of Collections

Theoretical approach

The field of application

Alongside the analysis of the material conditions of the production of manuscript books, another function of codicology is to establish the history of libraries and collections: that is, to gather data on how books circulated after they were made, reconstructing as far as possible the chain of owners of a manuscript or set of manuscripts, and determining the provenance or places where the volumes were kept. These questions directly concern Oriental manuscripts—especially those in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish—in public and private libraries and collections in both East and West.

The need for a history of collections: a multidisciplinary field

The history of collections is part of a broad field of scholarly endeavour. By progressively reconstructing the history of a volume or set of volumes, by seeking to learn which text (or group of texts) entered and became known in, say, France—along with when and by whom, and based on which copies—codicology can provide keys to the history of ideas and their dissemination, to the inter-relationship of cultures, and to a better knowledge of Oriental studies in Europe and of the heritage of the Oriental countries.

1 Most of this chapter was written by Annie Bérhane, with a final section by Marie-Genéviève Guesdon. 2 A ‘library’ is used here in the general sense of an organised assortment of books held either by a public institution or private individual, while ‘collection’ refers to a particular group. Thus ‘the history of collections’ refers to sets of manuscripts and documents artificially united on the basis of shared features (language, subject matter, etc.); a collection might be assembled from a variety of sources and is generally held by an institution, whether public or private. 3 Charles Samaan’s L’Histoire des mille mots (Paris, 1985) refers to a field of study of sets of manuscripts having a shared origin or history, which mutually explain one another. Samaan closely relates this field to codicology, which, for lack of a better term, will be called the ‘archaeology’ of manuscripts. Nowadays the term ‘history of collections’ is more appropriate.
The special nature of Oriental manuscripts held in Europe

The physical nature of Oriental manuscripts held in Europe is characterised by the fact that marks, alterations and restorations of text or changes in binding may have a double origin – Eastern or Western – testifying to their itinerant background. In studying such manuscripts, scholars encounter problems relating to both Eastern and Western codicology, and they must therefore be competent in multiple fields, including a familiarity with all the key reference works. Deciphering and identifying various collating marks, both Oriental and Western, might at first sight seem to depend on highly specialised analyses, given the languages and scripts involved, yet in fact such tasks are closely interrelated and the problems to be solved are highly similar from a methodological and technical standpoint. Moreover, although some Oriental volumes now in Europe have undergone significant alterations (change of covering, for instance), a good many have retained their original appearance, which means that studying them can directly contribute to the history of Oriental manuscripts; indeed, in Eastern lands the various conservation measures applied to manuscripts down through the ages have often considerably altered their appearance if not their Oriental nature. Since Oriental collections in Europe and the East do not share the same history, the analytical methods employed when examining them must be adapted to their specificities.

What constitutes an Oriental manuscript?

The concept of Oriental manuscript obviously covers books produced by Orientals in the Orient for their own use, as is the case with most volumes, yet also those produced for use by Westerners in a form that might often be adapted to their specific use. The notion of Oriental manuscript also extends to books written in Arabic script by Europeans, constituting the special field of Western Orientalist codicology. For instance, the so-called ‘translations collection’ in the Oriental Section of the Manuscripts Department at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France comprises Oriental-style volumes produced in the early eighteenth century by the ‘jeunes de langues’, young students who received scholarships from the French government to study interpreting in Constantinople; an Ottoman Turkish text with a French translation would be bound into a single volume with fore-edge flap and envelop flap. Furthermore, manuscripts in Arabic script were sometimes produced in Europe by Orientals who were temporary or permanent residents there, as exemplified by a version of the New Testament copied in Paris by the Syrian Hannâ Shaûl in 1660 (MS. BNf suppl. turc. 1–2 and 7), based on a Turkish translation of the Gospels printed in Oxford in 1666. Finally, there are the grammar books and dictionaries written by Westerners either in Paris or on their travels to the Orient.
The history of collections and the current state of cataloguing

The emergence and development of codicological knowledge has had a major impact on the organisation of catalogues of manuscripts, which is why the subject is addressed here. Broadly speaking, it became essential to revise the old catalogues compiled in the West due to the need for an exhaustive material description of each item. A catalogue entry could no longer overlook any of the elements that might contribute to the establishment of an increasingly accurate history of the document, which meant giving, in chronological order, all useful information on the libraries and collections in which it figured. This revision also entailed the standardisation of entries—at least on a European level—as well as the regular updating of relevant literature. In addition to correcting putative errors and inaccuracies, one of the roles of descriptive entries in the new catalogues is to provide information on the history of the volume and its permutations; the new catalogues are also designed to contribute to the filing of all this data in abstracts based on the systematic organisation of entries and the production of summary tables. Generally speaking, the new generation of catalogues integrate new data as a function of new categorisations that each require appropriate resources.

A manuscript entry is always a reflection of immediate needs—it is a functional item that mirrors the general scholarly trend of each period. In Europe, beginning in the eighteenth century, the appearance of the notion of scientific investigation and the systematisation of knowledge influenced the constitution of catalogues, which became increasingly exhaustive and increasingly accurate; 'observe' and 'measure' were the two watchwords of a man like the Comte de Volney, the eighteenth-century promoter of cultural research and of a system for transalating Oriental languages. Specialised fields, notably the scientific study of the Orient, emerged in the nineteenth century shortly after the invention of the metric system, whose general adoption, it should be recalled, dates back just 120 years. To take a French example, the first volume of Catalogus Manuscriptorum Bibliothecae Regiae (Catalogue of manuscripts in the Royal Library), published in 1739, was entirely devoted to Oriental manuscripts and featured entries that were extremely brief yet contained all the main ingredients found in modern descriptive catalogues: not only author and title but also type of support, format, and provenance; previously, any indications of the contents of a manuscript, written in French or Latin, had often been placed in the book itself, on either the inner cover or the flyleaf (illus. 114a). Sometimes the entry would be printed on a little piece of paper glued to the inner cover; nineteenth-century catalogues such as the one compiled by MacGuckin de Slane, were written in French but used Arabic letters for the titles of books in both entry and index, and details concerning the history of the volume were somewhat fuller. Modern catalogues—from the early twentieth century to the present—exhibit impressive progress in the amount of codicological information provided as well as in its classification. Computerisation of catalogues, now making major strides in terms of the use of original alphabets and their transliteration, as well as digitised images, should be of considerable benefit to codicology in general and to the history of collections in particular.

Writing the history of collections of Oriental manuscripts

Methods

A rigorous methodology and various material tools now enable codicologists to conduct an investigation that should provide a maximum number of clues for establishing the most complete possible history of a volume. The history of a volume or set of volumes should be based on several observations: examination of marks made on the books (see illus. 155–158), which must be identified and/or compared with other similar marks found elsewhere, in order to constitute groups and to establish, as far as possible, transcriptions, which only became more accurate with Volney's catalogue and with the development of Oriental typefaces by the Imprimerie Nationale in France (despite the earlier efforts of Samyn de Beiau in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries). Reference to relevant literature is a very late innovation in catalogue entries. 11 Catalogus codicum manu scriptorum Bibliothecae regiae (Paris, 1739). 12 W. MacGuckin de Slane, Catalogue des manuscrits arabes (Paris, 1888–1905). 13 E. Blochet, Catalogue des manuscrits arabes des musées acquis en 1884–1924 (Paris, 1925). Blochet, Catalogue des manuscrits persans… (Paris, 1905–1934). Blochet, Catalogue des manuscrits turcs… (Paris, 1922–1935). G. Vajda and V. Stevanovic, Catalogue des manuscrits arabo… (Paris, 1978–1985). 14 See below. 15 In particular, see the many publications by Gilbert Ouy, and more generally the publications in recent decades on Greek and Latin codicology.
a chronological classification; examination of the binding and any potential alterations; examination of modifications of all kinds in every part of the volume. In accomplishing these tasks, two things are imperative: knowing, as thoroughly as possible, the collection on which one is working and, if possible, other related or similar collections; understanding and assembling – indeed, designing – the right tools for the job.

The distinctive features of a manuscript

Thanks to certain detectable signs – visible and invisible – the history of a volume or set of volumes can be reconstituted. The appearance of bindings ought to be closely examined, whatever their date or origin, in search of a characteristic mark or decoration making it possible to identify a volume’s geographical location, date, or owner (coat of arms, monogram, letters, emblem, motto, etc.; see illus. 47). Search should also be made for an ex-libris (a sign of ownership – usually a standard phrase – placed on the inner cover or first page of a book) or any other indication of possession (a simple handwritten name; illus. 113a and 114a), stamps or seals (illus. 157), dedications, statements of bequest (illus. 156), various notarial signatures or initials, and references to place of purchase, sometimes accompanied by an indication of price (illus. 158). In particular, study should be made – based on identical scripts – of annotations and readers’ marks whether written in the margins, on blank pages, or on the inner covers; the type of writing should help to situate, perhaps even identify, one or several hands and even help – along with textual content – to date a work, to document its presence in a given place or to attribute it to an owner at a given period (via financial accounts or else allusions to a birth, an earthquake, or a visit from a friend). Close attention should also be paid to old shelf-marks (illus. 114a and 157), mentions of inclusion in one or several libraries (in the form of a phrase or stamp), as well as any erasures or overwriting, and anything inscribed on the edges. Any alterations to the volume should be noted: pagination and foliation (sometimes superimposed) of potentially diverse origin and hands, trimmed margins, inversion of folios or quires, anything cut out or pasted in, and damage of all kinds, from traces of dampness...
or fire, stains, spilled liquids, and finger marks. Finally, information can be gleaned from papers and other items added to or sometimes left in a volume (issue paper, bookmarks, tassels, loose leaves, pictures, letters, blotting paper), as well as documents occasionally found in the binding materials.  

Aids to the identification of various elements

As the examination progresses, a list should be made of the marks encountered, which may be of Oriental or Western origin, and may have been made by individuals or institutions.

Such marks can be identified through the use of three aids. First, comparison should be made with identical marks found on other manuscripts where they may be clearer and more easily identifiable or already known (their decipherment perhaps requiring knowledge of Eastern and/or Western palaeography). This approach raises the notion of links between one specific collection and another; at the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, for instance, when investigating provenance, manuscripts in the Turkish collection will first be compared with one another, then with the Persian and Arabic collections, and finally with Western manuscripts (including Latin, French, and Italian volumes), if it is known that a given collector owned books in several languages. Next, the major reference works must be consulted: catalogues

16 See the illustrations with examples.

17 As was the case with the late sixteenth-century scholar Gilbert Gaubin, for example.
(even old ones) of manuscripts, handwritten or printed inventories, and lists of stamps and old marks, not forgetting exhibition catalogues and divers articles. Lastly, other sources can be profitably employed whenever they exist: library acquisition records (noting purchases, bequests, and exchanges) can be valuable aids and can lead to complete lists; similarly, lending registers, some quite old, may provide dates of consultation and the names of readers. The archives of libraries and individuals can be extremely rich in information (estate inventories, sale catalogues), so it is crucial they be consulted whenever access is granted. Restoration ledgers provide information on the state of a volume at a given date, as well as the restoration concerned; when elements of a manuscript become detached they are henceforth filed under the same shelf-mark as the manuscript to which they belong, listed as "pieces."

A well-trained visual memory is a valuable asset – the examination of the external appearance of volumes (bindings, old shelf-marks, the look of old labels) helps to constitute groupings within the same collection or across different collections; observation and comparison of identical marks found in several volumes can lead to the affiliation of scattered volumes into a single collection even when the name of the collector remains unknown. This approach supposes a good working knowledge of the contents of manuscript collections and therefore the greatest possible contact with original volumes.

A scholar must display inventiveness in devising and arranging personal tools of research: making manual copies of marks encountered (either freehand or copied onto tracing paper); taking photographs, which are useful only if the scale is indicated (the photocopying of manuscripts being usually forbidden); and making rubbings of bindings (usually permitted).

This data, whether filed on small cards, in folders, in notebooks, or on a computer, must always include a clear mention of the document's shelf-mark, the place where the document is held, the folio or page concerned, the exact location of the mark on the page, and the date the observation was made. This painstakingly gathered information will constitute an invaluable database for research; if possible, the data should be compared with that of other scholars encountered at seminars and symposiums, or published in books and articles.

Material means of observation

A thorough codicological description of a volume must be based on examination of the original manuscript, but when it comes to the history of a collection, the gathering of images is necessary at a given point in the analysis, and examination of reproductions forms a legitimate stage of research. Operations impossible to conduct on an original document can be done on reproductions, such as photos, slides, microfilm/microfiche, facsimiles, digitised images. Especially important are reproductions made by a scholar for a specific purpose, such as sketches, tracings – which can be superimposed for comparison – photocopies of microfilm, enlargements, scans, etc.

Organising data

When it comes to classifying identifiable elements, catalogues of manuscripts now contain indexes of owners plus illustrations showing examples of various hands, but there do not yet exist lists that combine these indexes on an extensive scale. Stamps and seals, meanwhile, both Oriental and Western, are identified in published articles. Some libraries have published lists of their dated marks. There also exist repertories of numerical systems employed.

When classifying unidentified or undated features, until such time as that situation can be rectified, they should be categorised according to shape (the round, angular, or linear form of a signature, plus the first letter of a signature when recognisable), according to technique (handwritten, embossed, stamped), according to chronology (presumed date), and according to geographical origin when relevant and possible.

This still-limited range of tools is sure to expand. National and international meetings of scholars are crucial because of the fruitful and constructive exchange they encourage.

Modern tasks

Developments in recent decades have imposed new tasks on scholars and curators in both East and West, mainly involving teaching and the transmission of knowledge – it is important to make students and doctoral candidates aware of new tools and methods. But the new tasks also concern research: ensuring that resources are available on site, and implementing new methods and techniques elsewhere. This means establishing links between the old and the new, encouraging communication between scholars thanks to databases that...
Catalogues of manuscripts

Lists and catalogues of manuscripts fulfil two functions: they locate and describe the documents. Listing focuses on the first function only – they identify the manuscripts found in a library or collection, giving a shelf-mark and limited information such as title and author, perhaps a brief description. They may have been compiled for the benefit of librarians as much as users. The term 'catalogue' will be reserved for registers where descriptions are more developed, whether presented in codified form or written out. Descriptions should inform scholars about the manuscript in such a way as to indicate whether it is relevant to their research in terms of the edition of the text or its history, or the history of the book or of codicology. A catalogue thus represents a genuine research tool. Generally, a catalogue entry includes the bibliographic, historical and physical details of a manuscript. This distinction remains theoretical, however. In the absence of descriptive standards such as ISBD,23 each institution has developed its own tradition for cataloguing manuscripts that curators refine in their own way. Catalogues of manuscripts therefore come in very different forms. Some contain a freely written description combined with a short entry of regular format; others are more standardised in the sense that the descriptive elements are presented in a precise order and in a uniform way.24 Still others have a highly codified presentation, with a list of categories.26

The catalogues of the N. D. Khalili Collection of Islamic art in London invariably reproduce a page from each manuscript next to the entry,27 while others only publish illustrations felt to be significant28; most catalogues, however, do not include any images of the documents described therein. The features that figure in the description vary: for example, certain catalogues make no mention of the presence or absence of a binding. When a manuscript is updated, sometimes a cataloguer may propose a date, sometimes not. The computerisation of catalogues is nevertheless now imposing further reflection on – if not yet standardisation of – the content of catalogues.

At the very least, a bibliographical description generally gives the title and author of the work (or works) contained in the manuscript. The single codicological entity enclosed by the binding of a volume does not always correspond to a single text: just as a single book may be spread across several volumes, several texts may be contained in a single volume. Either a scribe copied them one after another at the same time, or else an owner, for various reasons, may have decided to compile an ad hoc anthology by binding together texts of similar format but diverse origin. Most catalogues provide bibliographical references on the author or work,29 to which should be added, in principle, editions of the text and its translations, publications that include a reproduction of the manuscript, and sources used by the cataloguer to compose the entry. Increasingly, the incipit – or opening words of the text – is included in catalogues, because this constitutes a key element for identifying texts and their recensions. The catalogue of manuscripts in Berlin compiled by Wilhelm Ahlwardt in the late nineteenth century is an invaluable tool in this respect, since the incipits were not only transcribed but also indexed.30 Explicit, or the closing words of the text, can also function as an identifying feature, but they are harder to index. When a manuscript lacks its original beginning or end, the first or last words figuring in the manuscript provide a point of reference for anyone with access to another edition of the text or a different manuscript.

As far as the history of a given manuscript goes, catalogues should be consulted for details on the circumstances surrounding the copying of the text: date, place, name of scribe, description of collating marks (see illus. 159 and 160), the original text from which the copy was made, and so on. If the date is not indicated on the copy itself, cataloguers usually try to assign an approximate date based on a certain number of elements (which should be specified in the entry so that a reader can assess their pertinence). A catalogue may also include a description of the script (style, the presence or absence of vocalisation and/or punctuation, the colour of ink used for text and titles) and an indication of

24 This section was written by Marie-Genoveve Guédon. 25 The International Standard Bibliographical Description (ISBD) can be used for books and other non-book items such as audio-visual material. The ISBD makes it possible to find edition established in the same way, with the same details presented in the same order, in any library in the world. 26 For example, M. Götz, Islamische Handschriften. Vol. 1: Nordbein-Westfalen (Stuttgart, 1999). 27 As is the case with Vajda and Suraian, Cat. 2 and 3, at the Bibliothèques Nationale de France. See the catalogues published by the Al-Farqūn Islamic Heritage Foundation, for example M. Hayth, al-Farqūn makhtūbih Muhibb ad-Din Makbūzum, vol I: Qur'an ma ‘ṣaḥīḥ and vol II: Qur’ān al-ṣāḥīḥ (London, 1994). 28 The N. D. Khalili Collection of Islamic Art: F. Déroche, The Abbāṣid Tradition: Qur’āns of the 8th to 10th centuries (London, 1995); D. James, Master Scribes: Qur’āns from the 11th to 14th centuries (London, 1995); James, After Timur: Qur’āns of the 15th and 16th centuries (London, 1997). 29 G. Khan (Rills, letters and decay: Arabic papyri of the 7th to the 11th centuries (London, 1993); M. Bayani, A. Corradini, and T. Stanley, The decorated word: Qur’āns of the 17th to 19th centuries (London, 1993); S. Salwan, The Art of the Pen: calligraphy of the 14th to 16th Centuries (London, 1995).
Physical description is often limited to an indication of the material used as writing surface, the number of folios in the volume, and their dimensions. Recent codicological research tends to extend such descriptions, and research may in turn be facilitated by the explicit mention of features that will later enable scholars to locate manuscripts relating to a specific line of research. Some catalogues offer a detailed description of the support: type of paper, watermark if any, the collation and numbering of quires, the use and arrangement of catchwords, the surface area allocated to text (measured from the top line to the bottom line), the number of lines, the colour of ink, and the type of ruling. Unfortunately, all too often the binding is not described. These physical features, apart from their interest to scholars, are often the ones that enable a catalogue to assign an approximate date to a manuscript, so it is only natural that, for this reason at least, they are included in a catalogue entry.

In European libraries, the manuscripts are usually catalogued according to a so-called 'topographical' organisation, namely the order of shelf-marks, which itself generally reflects the order in which the library acquired the manuscripts. In Arab countries, manuscripts are usually classified systematically according to branch of knowledge. Works contained in anthologies may therefore appear under different categories or even volumes. Whatever the system of classification used, an index or concordance should always make it feasible to find manuscripts pertaining to a given field and to locate the description of a manuscript whose shelf-mark is known.

Indeed, it is largely the index that transforms a catalogue into a useful tool of research. When it comes to identifying texts, indexes of authors, titles, and incipits, as well as a systematic index by field of knowledge are all essential. A concordance between shelf-marks and catalogue numbers is also often necessary. Codicologists would like to find at least an index giving date and place of production, names of individuals (scribes, owners, readers, transmitters), and illuminated copies; they are positively delighted when they come across an index of undated manuscripts and supports.

Numerous catalogues of manuscripts have been published in the past twenty years, thanks largely to support from institutions such as the Institute of Arab Manuscripts (part of ALECSO in Cairo) and the private Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation in London. This output has been accompanied by an effort to standardise the content of entries, which are tending to become fuller.

Libraries are currently working on the computerisation of catalogues. The manuscripts at Dār al-Kutub in Cairo have been catalogued since 1992 in a database containing 50,000 titles, which can be consulted on the spot. Other libraries have launched projects that remain at the experimental stage. In Morocco, the Bibliothèque Générale et Archives has produced a CD-ROM with a description of manuscripts from the Qarawiyîn mosque, and has developed a still-experimental database for cataloguing its own manuscripts. Algeria is also currently considering a database. In France, the Bibliothèque Nationale de France has developed a descriptive format of the InterMARC

Richard, Cat. 1, pp. 391–432. 34 Arab League Educational, Cultural and Scientific Organisation.
type, which may be implemented in a system employing non-Latin letters. In the United States, manuscripts in the Library of Congress are listed in the OCLC® database in a USMARC format that has not been adapted to manuscript books and therefore has very limited entries. The blueprint for a virtual Mediterranean library (Medlib) unveiled by UNESCO should result in a collective computerised catalogue—accessible via Internet—of Arabic manuscripts in libraries in the Mediterranean regions; consideration of the content of entries is currently under way.

Furthermore, consideration is being given to the reproduction of manuscripts accompanied by descriptive entries. In Spain, two CD-ROMs have been issued pertaining to Arabic manuscripts in the CSIC library in Madrid and in two libraries in Cordoba. The potential of new technology to combine digitised images with verbal description will probably also lead to a reconsideration of the role of description. Rather than evoking the features of a decoration, script, or stamp, descriptive entries will probably establish the pertinent criteria for indexing images in a way that allows for meaningful cross-referencing, comparison and contrast.

Catalogues of manuscripts have now been listed in a repertory entitled World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts, published between 1992 and 1994. This listing contains practical information (address, telephone number, etc.) concerning libraries holding manuscripts in Arabic script; an estimate of the number of the manuscripts held by each one and a list of published catalogues. Two reviews, Nouvelles des manuscrits du Moyen-Orient and Manuscrita Orientalia, have also made it their task to announce the publication of new catalogues of manuscripts.

35 Machine-Readable Cataloguing (MARC) formats are used in most libraries for printed books and other documents. They contain a certain number of fields designed for pre-defined indexing and offer the possibility of linking a title or name (author or other) to bibliographical entries in such a way that searches may be undertaken for all possible variants of name and title. 36 Online Computer Library Centre 37 Some university libraries in France can access OCLC entries. 38 Biblioteca, Instituto de Filologia (Madrid). Colección de manuscritos árabes y aljamínidos de la Biblioteca del Instituto del CSIC [CD-ROM]; Maria del Pilar Martinez Otano (ed.), Los manuscritos de la Junta (Madrid, 1988). 39 G.J. Roper (ed.), World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts, 4 vols. (London, 1992-1994). 40 Nouvelles des manuscrits du Moyen-Orient (Paris, 1991)—. 41 Manuscrita Orientalia: International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research (St. Petersburg, 1995—).