The copyists’ working pace:
Some remarks towards a reflexion on the economy of the book in the Islamic world

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Les copistes sont en grand nombre en Perse, surtout dans les grandes villes; mais le né-
tier leur donne à peine du pain; ils n’y gagnent d’ordinaire que 15 sols par jour, à écrire
du matin jusqu’au soir. Le plus qu’on puisse écrire, quand on est très expert et qu’on
travaille sans interruption, est de cinq à six cents distiques par jour ... [Le plus grand in-
convénient] consiste en la multiplication des fautes, qui souvent sont telles, qu’on ne
trouve point de sens à ce qu’on lit. Ces fautes arrivent par l’ignorance des copistes, et
par leur inattention, à force d’aller vite, en ne prenant pas garde à leur original, et en ne
reliant pas.¹

From these remarks by Chardin who travelled to Persia during the 18th century,
it appears that the speed with which the scribes were working was not without
consequences on the transmission of the texts. Within the scope of this confer-
ence, I felt that this topic could be addressed, since the actual conditions of the
copyists’ work and more generally the whole economy of the handwritten book
should not be neglected by the philologist. In some instances, they might even
provide him with a clue for what he is actually seeing on the manuscript.

At the beginning of the Islamic period, scholars started discussing whether it
was lawful or not to receive wages for the copying of the text of the Qur’an:²
professional copyists, that is persons making a living out of the copying of texts,
were already at work and their work was perceived as part of the economic
sphere. The speed with which they were copying became obviously part of the
issue. That this question was addressed at an early date makes one hopeful that
data relating to the cost of the copy, to the price of the books and so on would
have been collected over a long period of time and duly commented upon by
scholars. Unfortunately, things evolved differently and, as we shall see, informa-
tion about the wages of the professionals who were transcribing texts are lacking,
and that about the organisation of their work is very limited and scattered. Un-
derstanding how professional copyists were working will certainly take much
more time and effort; I shall limit myself here to a low-key approach of the pace
with which the texts were written, that is only a part of the larger question of the
economy of the book. I only intend to offer a few comments on the conditions
under which the copyists were working and on the sources available to estimate
their working pace.

¹ Chardin 1811, 281-282.
² Ibn Abi Da’ud, Kitab al-ma’asibī, 131-133.
In order to answer the latter question, one has first to note that all copyists were not working under the same conditions. Among those who contributed to the enormous handwritten heritage of the Islamic world, some were earning a living by copying texts for paying customers whereas others were amateurs transcribing texts for their own use, or for a relative or a friend. This does not mean that the quality of the copies made by copyists belonging to the latter group was always inferior, as far as writing is concerned for instance. Since one of the goals of classical education was precisely to achieve a certain level of proficiency in calligraphy, it is no wonder that copies made by ‘amateurs’ for their own use reached sometimes very high standards. But time was not a factor as important for them as it was for those who were expecting some money for their work – and Chardin’s text indicates that they were in a real predicament in the 18th century. It is to this group that we shall devote our attention, as far as we can identify them: a scholar or a student who was earning a living in this way could also make copies for private use, becoming ‘amateur’ for a while. In later times, we know instances of this kind, but when we rely only on the colophons to decide if the manuscript was the work of a professional or not, things tend to become difficult.

Working conditions are influencing heavily the copying pace: we shall briefly recall some of the most obvious factors, beginning with a definition of the sources used. Quite often, the manuscripts we are dealing with are the result of the transcription from an original which the copyist had in front of him; this ‘normal’ situation becomes sometimes more ‘real’ when the colophon describes his model. Anyhow, copying is not reproducing exactly the original: it is indeed unusual to find copies of the same work with identical features (page setting, for instance) on each single page. In the introduction to this translation of the Fihrist, Bayard Dodge wrote: “Arabic scholars have explained that when a medieval scribe copied a manuscript he reproduced not only the words, but also the handwriting of the author and the arrangement of the page.” This remark was probably an explanation of the note found on the oldest extant copy of Ibn al-Nadim’s work, ms Dublin, CBL 3315, where a note (bihiyya ba’ati al-manatnih) found on the title page of various chapters suggests that the copy was a facsimile. However, this situation is quite exceptional and in fact we can wonder whether the note was not meant to enhance the value of the manuscript. For the copyist, trying to reproduce the script or the layout would obviously have been a hindering factor. An opposite situation has been analysed by Michele Bernardini who suggested that copies of Hāfīz’ work were customized, the work being adapted to the particular wishes of the patron – in this case affluent people but in no way high-ranking individuals. Under such circumstances, the work would have been obviously slower.

Copyists are not only relying on written models. Dictation also played a role as shown by an anecdote about al-Fara’i (died 207/822): during public talks, he was transmitting the text of a tasrif while two srawāy were writing down his words. Colophons actually note that the text was dictated by a transmitter, as is the case in a manuscript dated 649/1251 now in Tashkent. In our first example, it is evident that professional copyists, here srawāy, were working in this way. We also have to take into account that in a society which was giving a very important role to the memory in the educational process, some copyists knew by heart the text they were transcribing, the more so when they were copying it frequently. The case of the Qur’ān is particularly interesting in this respect. And to make things more simple, the possibility of a double source (dictation and copy from a model) should not be left aside.

Economic factors also influenced the pace of the work: time is money and affluent patrons could spend money in order to have a copyist devote the time needed for the best result. There are many anecdotes about famous calligraphers spending much time in order to copy a text – even if things may have been quite different in real life. According to D. James, between twelve and eighteen months were needed in order to complete the first seven jam of the Qur’ān which ʿAlîyūl had ordered for his mausoleum. But this example is very far from the daily experience of the common copyist in the Islamic world.

One also has to take into account the possible team work, which completely altered the pace of the copying process – either working in turns, or dividing the copy between people working simultaneously. In the great majority of the cases, copying was a solitary experience: the same man or woman usually transcribed the text by him or herself from beginning to end. But instances of collective work do exist, even if it is sometimes difficult to reach a certainty when there is no colophon. When dealing with copies of the highest calligraphic level, there may be a doubt. One of the goals of the student calligrapher was to reproduce the script of his master: the great Egyptian calligrapher Ibn al-Wahid, in the 7th/13th century, had his students copy the text, then added his name at the end; they received almost nothing from him, but he was paid huge fees by the patron.

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3 Cf. for instance FEMMOD n° 40, 55, 56, 57...
4 Şeyh 1997, 202-203, n° 24, 26, 27; see also Rosenthal 1947, 23.
5 Dodge 1970, XXVII.
7 Pedersen 1984, 45.
8 FEMMOD n° 254 (JOB 3105).
9 James 1988, 95.
10 See for instance Déroche 1995, 83.
As recalled by Rosemarie Quiring-Zoche\(^\text{11}\) or Ayman Fu'ad Sayyid,\(^\text{12}\) instances of team work are rather numerous, even in the earliest period. Two fragments in the ḥijājī style, one in Sanâa,\(^\text{13}\) the other one in Paris,\(^\text{14}\) were respectively transcribed by three and by two persons; in both cases, the various copyists did not even bother to find a common style. Later manuscripts of an ordinary level of craftsmanship may also be the result of team work: a copy of the Wāṣiṣṭy by Maḥbūb b. Saḍr al-Sharīʿa is particularly interesting in this respect. In 996/1587, 25 copyists started working jointly in Focâ;\(^\text{15}\) they seem to have been all ‘amateurs,’ but the same situation on a more limited scale may have occurred in workshops.

There is a last element which also should be investigated, since it may have been interfering with the pace of the copying process. In the BN collection, an ‘Abd al-Wâḥîd b. Mâwâlânâ ʿArab Mâyadâshi transcribed twice the same historical text, while Mîrzâ Ali b. Muẓaffâr Jaʿfar Kâtîb Khâtûnâbâdî copied an impressive list of historical texts between 1588 and 1627.\(^\text{16}\) Were both men copyists specialised in historical works? Were there in the Islamic world copyists who were specialists of certain texts? This course has been the case with the Qur’ânic manuscripts, but it might have happened with other texts.

Where did our copyists work? Here again, a wide range of situations can be identified. The workshop/studio close to the royal patron is well attested in the sources and the manuscripts. Integrated commercial workshops like those of Shîrâz in the 10\(^\text{th} /11\text{th}\) century are for the moment an isolated instance: “in every house of 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.”\(^\text{17}\) But the trades involved in the process suggest that the Shîrâz workshops were producing only higher quality manuscripts; were the texts accurately transcribed or were the conditions so poor that the books were full of errors, like those in Chardin’s time?

Copyists were usually working alone, in a variety of places.\(^\text{18}\) For many professional copyists, home or possibly a small shop was the working place. Quite a few colophons witness this situation: for instance, a section of the Ḫâmis al-sabīṭ was completed by Ahmad b. Muḥammad … al-Wâdi-Ashi in his house, close to the Great Mosque in Almeria, in 723/1323.\(^\text{19}\) Texts also document situations of this kind: Yaṣūṭi tells of Ibrâhîm al-Ḥarbî who was spending his time meditating and transcribing texts in his poor dwelling.\(^\text{20}\)

A first answer to our question about the copyists’ pace can be gleaned in the texts. According to biographical sources, Ibn al-Jawzi is said to have covered daily four quires with his writing, some sources even stating that it was actually nine quires;\(^\text{21}\) but the man being also an author, it is difficult to distinguish between his work as a copyist and that of original literary composition. Not infrequently, the treatises on calligraphy record the number of Qur’âns and/or of other texts which were transcribed by such and such calligrapher during his life. al-Zâbîdî’s Hilâmat al-sabrâdî which was written towards the middle of the 12\(^\text{th} /13\text{th}\) century took over a fair amount of information from an Ottoman model as yet unidentified.\(^\text{22}\) Some of the entries include the number of Qur’âns written by a calligrapher, but always remain vague about other texts (either Qur’ânic extracts or devotional works); the only exception in the latter case being ʿ Seyy Hamdullah who is said to have copied thousands books of this kind.\(^\text{23}\) Are the figures reliable? A closer look shows that the same ʿ Seyy Hamdullah transcribed 44 Qur’âns, but Derviş Ali, nicknamed ‘the second ʿSeyy’ wrote significantly enough twice as much, that is 886.\(^\text{24}\) A few lines later we even hear that this 886th Qur’an was in fact completed by a student of Derviş Ali, Isma’il Efendi Halife, who was himself responsible for 44 copies of the text.\(^\text{25}\) A Ramazan b. Isma’il is said to have produced 360 Qur’âns.\(^\text{26}\) From the generation after ʿ Seyy Hamdullah, Muḥyî al-Din Celâl-zâde transcribed 97 times the Qur’an, Hüsam al-Din Halîfe 89 and Recep Halîfe 93.\(^\text{27}\)

When we turn to the period closer to the author’s time, we find that Ahmad Ef. Kazancîzade only wrote 19 Qur’âns and Ahmad Ef. ʿ Seyyhzade 17.\(^\text{28}\) al-Zâbîdî’s almost contemporary Husayn Ef. al-Jâzâʾî wrote a Qur’an in 30 ‘azr and 2 one-volume Qur’âns;\(^\text{29}\) he even started writing the third when he died, so that it was left to his pupil, Hasan al-Dîyâʾî to complete it.\(^\text{30}\) From this short sample, we can conclude that figures were obviously important to people interested in calligraphy; they conveyed information which helped estimating a calligrapher’s

\(^{11}\) Quiring-Zoche 2003.

\(^{12}\) See his paper in this volume.

\(^{13}\) DÂM inv. 01-25-1 (Masâfiṭ Šan‘a‘ 1985, 60).

\(^{14}\) BNF Arâbe 326a (Déroche 1983, 59-60, n° 2; see the facsimile Déroche & Noja Noseda 1998).

\(^{15}\) Ms Sarajevo, HB 142, 155-159 (Dobrâca 1973).

\(^{16}\) I owe this example to F. Richard — to whom I express my thanks. It is illustrated, inter alia, by the ms Paris BNF Suppl. persan 225 and 164.

\(^{17}\) Akimushkin & Ivanov 1979, 50.

\(^{18}\) See a short survey in Déroche et al. 2000, 204-209.

\(^{19}\) The Qur’an 1999, 40, n° 20.

\(^{20}\) Kâtîb al-sabrâdi, 39.

\(^{21}\) Hartmann 1989, 25; Ibn Khallikân, 141.

\(^{22}\) al-Zâbîdî, 62-98.

\(^{23}\) al-Zâbîdî, 89.

\(^{24}\) al-Zâbîdî, 92.

\(^{25}\) al-Zâbîdî, 93.

\(^{26}\) al-Zâbîdî, 92.

\(^{27}\) al-Zâbîdî, 89 and 90.

\(^{28}\) al-Zâbîdî, 93 and 94.

\(^{29}\) al-Zâbîdî, 94.

\(^{30}\) al-Zâbîdî, 94.
status. They were then to some extent symbolic as indicated by some of the figures. They were however not completely alien to the actual production of a copyist – except in the case of Ramazan b. Isma'il; the information from the colophons of Ottoman Qur'ans give almost the same results – the symbolic left aside.

But all these texts record preferably the exceptional, they pay more attention to the records – speed as well as slowness. Anecdotes relying on this kind of feats are more likely to be found than what is close to the usual. At the beginning of the 13th/19th century, a professional, Fazîl dîwânà (‘the mad’), is said to have transcribed in 40 days a manuscript of a text by Bidîl which had been ordered by the emir of Bukhara; in the same time, but during the night, he made an abridged copy of the same work for his own use.31 According to a catalogue describing a copy of the latter, it contained the Nikâh, dîwan and qasî, which even abridged were certainly still a fair amount of verse. Another man, who was muqaddim and muqaddim, was able to copy in one night the Mukhteşar of the Wâfiyya.32

Chardin’s text is another source of information about the copyists’ pace: travellers in the East saw these men at work, and when they were themselves trying to buy manuscripts they were sometimes interested in the way in which the copyists were actually working. From Chardin’s report, we hear that a daily output of 500 to 600 하야 was the most which could be achieved; O. Akinushkin, A. Khalidov and E. Rezvan consider that 100 to 250 was the normal amount of verse copied in a day, adding that it was even less if the copy was carefully written.33 The waqfâyâ of Râgh Pâsà reminds us that other sources of income (in this case teaching) were available and took time off from the transcription of texts.34

Archive documents provide important information about the work in the palatial workshops; they concern a limited part of the production, usually outstanding manuscripts which are of little help when it comes to evaluating the average copyist’s pace. The arrangements set out in Rashid al-Din’s waqfâyâ are nevertheless interesting as they give an idea of what a powerful and wealthy patron could ask for:35 every year, it was expected that two carefully executed copies – one in Arabic, one in Persian – of each of the six treatises which the Il-khanid vizier had written should be produced; some of the works extending over a few volumes. The waqfâyâ includes very carefully defined specifications on the copying process, but the task of recruiting the copyists was apparently left to the supervisor of the foundation. Their number was not stated in the document; Sheila Blair notes that they were not enjoying a high status.36 The whole process seems however to have taken more time than foreseen and Rashid al-Din had to put pressure on his staff. One wonders if the copyist of the Maqâyâ in the BNF, who styled himself “the speedy writer from Baghdad” (sid-r navis al-Bâghdâdî) was hired on account of his ability to write fast.37

Other documents contain relevant information about our subject. It is the case of the catalogue written by the end of the 13th/19th century and beginning of the 14th/20th in Central Asia by the bibliophile Şâdî-i Dhiyâ.38 He often included in this register information about the number of works which the copyists he knew and hired now and then had transcribed. A Dûnâlûlî Mirzâ ‘Abd al-Rahmân A’lâm Mûlâ copied 1000 works on various topics, Şâdî-qân 500, Dûnâlûlî Şâdî-qân 200, ‘înâyâtallâh more than 150 and his brother Mirzâ Hikmatallâh Muḥâmid over 370.39 Unfortunately, these figures cover works of various sizes, so that they cannot help us in evaluating the production rate of these men.

Let’s now turn to the manuscripts themselves. The colophons are an important if yet underused source of information. These short texts provide us with data ranging from the more general indications to an accurate evaluation of the pace with which a precise manuscript has been written. As ‘general information,’ I would mention here the Ottoman Qur’ans since the calligraphers often state that the copy they just completed was number X in their production. Here are a few instances. The manuscript Leiden, University Library Or. 1245 was copied in Iran or Anatolia by Ibn Muḥâmmâd Ḥusayn Muḥâmmâd Şâdîq in 1083/1672: 3: it was the copyist’s 95th Qur’an.40 Hâfiz Šâlî Şâlîş finished his 125th Qur’an in 1213/1798-9.41 As for Kayışzade Hâfiz Osman Efendi, he completed his 60th Qur’an in 1290/1873,42 according to Üğur Derman, he copied another 46 Qur’ans during the 21 years he was to live after this date, which means that he needed 5 or 6 months to transcribe a Qur’an. If we take what I called the standard Ottoman Qur’an (=ayet ber-kenar system) as the basis for an estimate, it means that the last mentioned calligrapher wrote daily from 3 to 4 pages of 15 lines. In order to make comparisons easier, this can be converted into letters per day: according to one of our sources, the Qur’an contains 321,250 letters, which means that a page of our standard Ottoman Qur’an contains roughly 535 letters. Three pages are then the equivalent of 1605 letters, four to 2140. This kind of information is valuable, but relies too heavily on estimates. Was the calligrapher devoting part of his time to other works? In the above mentioned instances, the copyists seem to have been working at least continuously, even if they did not spend all the day on the transcription of texts. We also have to consider the

31 Vahidov & Erkinov 1999, 147.
32 Ibid.
33 De Baghdad à Isphahan 1994, 49.
34 See N. Kaya’s paper in this volume.
36 Blair (in press).
37 Paris, BNF Arabe 2324.
38 Vahidov & Erkinov 1999.
39 Vahidov & Erkinov 1999, 147.
40 Winkam 1993, 62.
41 L’empire des sultans 1995, 70.
42 Calligraphies ottomanes 2000, 130.
possibility of interruptions for various reasons: five years were necessary to copy the 12th-century Qur’an, but the juz’ of the first half of the text were completed in 706/1306-07, those of the second half bearing dates from various months of 710/1310-11.43

We can even get a little closer to the actual conditions of the copyists’ work with other colophons which indicate not only the day on which the copy was completed, but also the day when it was begun – or the number of days devoted to the transcription. It is then no longer a question of estimates, we can compute the pace at which the work has been progressing. The copyist of BNF Persian 266 thus says that he spent 15 days transcribing the 273 folios of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī’s Mathnawī;44 with almost 450 lines per day, he is closer to what Chardin reported than what Akimushkin, Khalidov and Rezvan’s estimate. In the colophon of a Qur’an completed in Dhū al-Qa’da 912/March 1507, ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Šāhī al-Dimashqī states that three months and twenty days were necessary for the copying and illumination of the manuscript, which means that he wrote the equivalent of almost 82 lines of standard Ottoman Qur’an per day at least (the time devoted to the illumination has to be taken into account), or 2915 letters.45 This figure is slightly higher than Kayiszade Hafiz Osman Efendi’s output, and closer to the estimates by Akimushkin and his colleagues. There still remains a doubt about both copyists’ status: the colophon contains nothing which could allow us to conclude that they were indeed professional; and we had to rely on a highly subjective estimate of their work in terms of legibility and regularity to decide about it.

Still more interesting for our purpose are the manuscripts with intermediary colophons: in the case of works divided into broad textual units (books, sections and so on), the copyists sometimes indicated the date of completion of each unit. This is for instance the case of the manuscript BNF Arabe 3280 with six colophons dated between the last Wednesday of Rajab 616/9 October 1219 and the last Friday of Shawwāl in the same year/3 January 1220.46 We can therefore follow the progress of the work for the last five sections – the copyist does not indicate when he started working. His pace is somewhat irregular, varying from 1,32 pages to 2,9 pages (that is almost 3 pages) per day, the average running at 1,95 pages (almost 2 pages), that is 41 lines of text (which are roughly equivalent to 2870 letters, the lines in bigger letter size being excluded of this calculation). This figure is lower than the lower speed indicated by Akimushkin, Khalidov and Rezvan, but the two best results by our man (namely for section 3 already mentioned and section 5 with 2,7 pages per day) are well within their estimates. On the other hand, this average speed is very close to ‘Abd al-Rahmān al-Dimashqī’s pace. Why these variations? Obviously, many parameters are lacking: illness, feasts… Moreover, the copyist of Arabe 3280 was working for himself.

The Qur’ānic manuscripts are obviously a field for further research, even if one could object that they are too specific and would distort the picture of book production in the Islamic world. There is a number of Qur’āns in multi-volume sets, of which the juz’ are certainly giving the most detailed view of a copyist’s work. In the BNF collection, one can find the juz’ 23 to 29 of an Egyptian Qur’an from the 12th/13th century.47 The size of the text in each volume is almost equivalent, which greatly helps estimating the copyist’s speed. Our man was working rather regularly: he needed nine days to complete juz’ 24, eight days for juz’ 25 to 27, seven days for juz’ 28 but twelve days for juz’ 29. On the other hand, his pace is rather slow: if we consider that he has been working every day, his output does not exceed two folios of nine lines, which seems quite low. The completion of the whole Qur’ānic text can be tentatively estimated on the basis of a juz’ in eight days; 240 days were therefore necessary and the rubricated frames for the text were certainly not delaying the progress of the copy. Anyhow, he was slower than this ‘Abdallah mentioned earlier who transcribed the same text in less than 4 months, than Kayiszade Hafiz Osman Efendi, who needed 5 to 6 months; if we convert this amount into letters per day, he wrote only 1340 letters against the former’s 2915 and between 1605 and 2140 for the latter. And our copyist cannot even claim that the high quality of his script explains his slowness. Others are certainly working even at a slower pace, like the calligrapher in charge of the huge Qur’an which ‘Abdallah ordered for his mausoleum: as indicated previously, the first 7 juz’ were completed in at least 12 months – but the script is really of outstanding quality.48

It is of course impossible to reduce the copying of manuscripts to figures. Many factors should obviously be taken into account when trying to evaluate this process; some of them are closely connected with the individual’s history and will therefore definitively remain outside of our reach. Others are known, but difficult to assess: this is for instance the case of calligraphy which might have been slowing down the copyists’ pace in a variable proportion. The actual conditions under which the manuscripts were transcribed need to be better investigated in order to get a better understanding first of the transmission of the texts, then more broadly of the economy of the book in the Islamic world which was aptly described by Muhammad Arkoun as a “société du livre.” But this goal can only be reached if more attention is paid to these “minute details” of the manuscripts which are so relevant for the historian of the book.

The Arabic script allowed copyists to write faster than their colleagues from other Middle Eastern manuscript traditions: such was the opinion of al-Kindi,

44 Richard 1989, 277.
45 Rares manuscris 1999, lot I.
46 See Fī/MMOD n° 142.
47 Ms Arabe 534-536, 538-540 (see Déroche 1985, 80-81).
48 James 1988, 95.
quoted by Ibn al-Nadim in the IVth/Vth century: "[The Arabic writing] makes possible greater speed than can be attained in other forms of writing." Did it make our copyists' lot happier? Chardin's remarks suggest that they only tried to write faster.

References


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