OMAN

by

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INTRODUCTION

The importance of the Islamic manuscripts that exist in Oman today is largely ascribable to the fact that they represent the original sources for the theological and juridical literature of the Ibadite sect (Al-Madhab al-Ibadī), which has prevailed in Oman since the 8th century CE. These manuscripts also contain works of particular interest for the history of maritime commerce in the Indian Ocean and along the coasts of East Africa.

There are two main collections of Islamic manuscripts in Oman (see below), containing about 7,000 items. However, the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture estimates that there are another 30,000 manuscripts still scattered throughout the country in the hands of private owners, who are unwilling to give them up because they regard them as family heirlooms. The exact locations of these unidentified manuscripts cannot be confirmed, but the general impression shared by many Omanis is that among the possible holders of manuscripts are the tribal shaykhs and some Ibāḍī `ulamā’.

UNION CATALOGUES & SURVEYS


INDIVIDUAL COLLECTIONS

MUSCAT

Dār al-Makhtūtāt wa-ʾl-Wathāʾiq (National Library of MSS & Archives)

PO Box 668
Muscat

Date of establishment: 1976
Status: Governmental
Conditions of access: The use of MSS is restricted to serious researchers and scholars with written approval from the Director.
Opening hours: Saturday–Wednesday, 07:30–14:30.
Total number of Islamic MSS: 4,500 (4,198 Arabic; 2 Persian).

Description of collection: The national effort to collect Oman’s rich cultural heritage, including the abundant Islamic manuscripts, began in 1976, on the establishment of the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture in Ruwi. The aim was to promote the recovery and preservation of the estimated 35,000 manuscripts scattered in private hands. The work of collection was facilitated by a Royal Decree issued in 1977 restricting the export of manuscripts.

Concomitantly, all individuals who held manuscripts were urged to hand them over to the Ministry, which offered fair amounts of money in compensation to the owners. As most people were unwilling to part with their manuscripts, only 4,500 were collected. They are all written on paper; no examples of parchment or palm-leaf manuscripts have been discovered in Oman.

Before 1980, the manuscript collection was stored in two rooms at the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture in Ruwi, Muscat. In 1980, a new building was constructed, as part of a complex of buildings for the Ministry, where the manuscripts are now housed.

The library is headed by the Director of Manuscripts and Archives. He is assisted by two librarians, four binding and conservation technicians and two other support staff.

The present storage area for manuscripts consists of a 13 m x 10 m room on the ground floor of the building, which is located a short distance from the sea: humidity is extremely high during the summer, and the area is also sandy and very dusty. In order to provide satisfactory storage conditions for the manuscripts, the air-conditioning is kept running continuously and is always set at 18°C. The room is reasonably protected against dust and is always kept clean. Dust is also reduced in the neighbourhood of the building by landscaping. There is no equipment to measure relative humidity in the room, but the air-conditioning seems to be capable of keeping it at about 60%. All the windows in the manuscripts room are fitted with special glass and blinds to exclude harmful ultraviolet light.

The shelving on which the manuscripts are stored is metal with a fine finish and no sharp edges or projections to damage the manuscripts. The ends of the shelving are fitted with stops to prevent the manuscripts from falling off the shelves. There are no similar stops at the backs and some manuscripts seem to have been damaged as a result of falling off the shelving. The overall height of the shelving is 170 cm. The bottom shelf is raised above the floor level by 23 cm which permits the free circulation of air. The shelving is arranged in runs which are separated from the walls by 100 cm of gangway. The distance between shelving runs is 150 cm.

About 70% of the manuscripts are bound; some of them retain their original leather bindings. A quick examination of some of the bound manuscripts revealed that most of them need repair to their contents. It is evident that much of the damage was caused as a result of the inappropriate conditions in which the manuscripts were stored before they were purchased by the Ministry. Some of them were damaged by insects, others have torn pages or signs of damage caused by acidity and a high proportion were spoiled by water or mould.

About 600 manuscripts are very badly damaged. These are currently stored separately, awaiting repair. On inspection, I noticed that several of them are being kept in cloth bags or wrapped in paper covers attached to them by adhesive tape or staples which have resulted in further damage. These manuscripts need major repair and conservation work, which at present cannot be provided by the existing facilities.

Manuscripts are regularly fumigated to destroy mould and insects. A small fumigation room has been installed adjacent to the manuscripts storage area. Tests for solubility of inks and acidity are also performed and affected manuscripts are deacidified. A conservation laboratory has been established within the premises of the library, but does not appear to have all the appropriate equipment and materials to undertake repair work on the severely damaged manuscripts. A member of staff has been trained in preservation techniques.

Space and equipment for binding have been provided and staffed by one skilled bookbinder. Although about 70% of the collection is bound, many of the MSS need repair or rebinding because their previous bindings had been affected by insects, water or dryness.

It was possible to examine the subject catalogue (see below) for 2,875 manuscripts that have received full cataloguing. Of these, works on Islamic theology and law (fiqh, Shari‘a and fi‘lawi) constitute the majority of the collection (about 1,628 MSS). Many of these belong to the Ibadiya. There are also 165 copies of the Qur‘an; 167 works on literature, grammar, and language; 76 works of poetry; 82 works on medicine; 95 works on applied sciences in-
cluding navigation, astronomy and astrology. Works on Islamic philosophy amount to 179; 129 items on the Omani irrigation system known as the aflaj; 186 works on history and biography and about 168 manuscripts on miscellaneous topics including magic, onciromancy, physiology and geomancy.

The manuscripts cover a wide period, ranging from 617 AH / 1220 CE until this century. The bulk of them belong to the past two centuries.

Published catalogues:
With indexes of authors and titles.


Reprinted 1985 (without additions).
Contains some 300 manuscript titles arranged under broad subject categories. Each entry includes the author, title, name of scribe, date of copying and the number of pages in the manuscript.

Unpublished catalogues: The work of cataloguing the manuscripts was started by an expatriate curator. Of the 4,500 manuscripts that were collected, 2,875 were catalogued. Another 600 items have received cataloguing, but their respective card sets and labels had not been typed at the time of preparing this report owing to the lack of a typist.

The catalogues of the manuscripts consist of author, title and subject files. All catalogues have been prepared on 15 x 10 cm cards and filed in wooden cabinets. The library also maintains an Accession Register of all the manuscripts that have been acquired since the collection was started. The catalogue cabinets are located in the staff workroom at the entrance to the manuscripts storage room.

The title of the manuscript is given as it appears in the work, followed by the complete name of the author and the name of the scribe. A brief quotation from the opening words and colophon of the manuscript is also given for identification of its contents.

The subject of the text(s) is given on the right hand top corner of the card. No extensive subject headings are used, merely the main classes of the Dewey Decimal Classification divisions.

There is no description of the type of paper used in the work, and although some manuscripts are nicely decorated or illustrated, illustration details are not noted. Where the place and date of writing are mentioned in the manuscript, this information is recorded. Information about the source of the manuscript, its previous owner and the year of accession to the library are not given in the catalogue. These data are, however, recorded in the Accession Register.

The dimensions of the manuscript are given in centimetres and the number of pages as well as the number of lines on each page are noted.

Some manuscripts have been published by the Ministry of National Heritage and Culture, but the publication details are not given in the catalogue. Information about the physical condition of the manuscript—for example, whether it has missing parts, is damaged or bound—is also not recorded.

Manuscripts are classified according to a simple system adapted from the DDC. The notation, which is used as a location symbol for the manuscript on the shelves, is a combination of Arabic letters and numbers. All manuscripts are clearly labelled on the spine.

The Library of Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ahmad al-Būsā'īdī

Date of establishment: 1987 (as separate institution)
Status: Private
Conditions of access: Access to the library is granted on the personal permission of Sayyid Muhammad ibn Ahmad.
Opening hours: Daily (except Fridays), 07:00 – 11:00; 16:00 – 20:00.
Total number of Islamic MSS: 2,500 (Arabic; few Persian).
Description of collection: The second largest manuscript collection is privately owned by the Personal Consultant to H.M. the Sultan for Religious and Historical Affairs.
SAYYID MUHAMMAD, who is a member of the Omani Royal Family, started collecting rare manuscripts for his home library more than fifty years ago. In 1987, a new library building was constructed to house the collection which by then amounted to about 2,500 MSS. The library is staffed by one full-time librarian, two part-time assistants and a bookbinder.

Of the 2,500 manuscripts, 2,000 are bound. A high proportion of these have been kept in their old bindings. The other 500 are either not bound at all, or their original bindings are in poor condition, having been damaged by insects or water.

A detailed examination of 300 bound manuscripts revealed that many of them need repair to their contents. The cause of damage seems to be consistent in all the manuscripts in Oman: the majority of them have been damaged by insects and damp because of the conditions in which they were stored by their previous owners. As has been mentioned earlier in this report, humidity is extremely high in the coastal regions of the Sultanate, and this has resulted in most of the damage to the manuscripts.

The present storage conditions of the manuscripts are satisfactory. Temperature in the room where they are housed is continuously kept at around 18°C. There is no equipment to take readings of the relative humidity inside the room, which is located close to the sea (where humidity can reach up to 90% during the summer). The room has large glass windows but the manuscripts are protected from direct sunlight by blinds.

The manuscripts are stored on wooden shelving fixed to the walls of the room. The overall height of the shelving is 245 cm and is divided into smaller units 90 cm in width. All the shelving is closed with glass which does not allow the free circulation of the air.

There is no laboratory where the manuscripts can be tested and fumigated against mould and insects. There is, however, a small room where simple attempts are made to restore the leather bindings which provide a temporary protection to the manuscripts. Some manuscripts whose contents are badly damaged also receive “first-aid” repairs. Torn pages and those with insect holes are laminated between two sheets of transparent plastic.

About 2,000 manuscripts have been fully catalogued (see below). Of these, 516 items are works on Islamic law (fiqh and related fields); 280 are works of Ḥadīth; 251 are on theology; 291 are on Arabic language and grammar; 140 are works of literature; 190 are works of history and biography; there are 88 copies of the Qurʾān and 69 commentaries on the Qurʾān (tafsīr); 95 works of applied sciences and 80 titles on miscellaneous topics.

The majority of the manuscripts belong to the 18th and 19th centuries. The oldest item in the collection dates from 722 AH / 1322 CE.

Unpublished catalogues:
The work of cataloguing bound manuscripts is adequate. Out of the total collection of 2,500 MSS, 2,000 have been catalogued. The catalogue includes author and subject files. Each file is arranged alphabetically in Visible Indexing units. The codicological details given in the catalogue include the title of the work, full name of the author and name of the scribe, date and place of writing, the dimensions of the work, the number of pages and the number of lines on each page and the call number. The catalogue cards are handwritten with blue ink.

In addition to the author and subject catalogues, there is a title catalogue prepared in book, rather than card format. The register is divided alphabetically into sections. Each manuscript that has been catalogued will be registered in the appropriate section according to the first letter of its title. Obviously, the titles within a section will not be arranged alphabetically, which makes searching the register by title a rather cumbersome task.

The most useful feature of the register, however, is that it contains some of the codicological details that have been omitted from the author and subject catalogues; these include the person for whom the manuscript was copied, a description of the overall condition of the manuscript, the type of ink used, and details of the price and source of the manuscript.

BIBLIOGRAPHICAL APPENDIX


Dalīl fihāris al-makhtūṭāt fi ʿl-Maṭnaʿ al-Malikī li-Bibittūt al-Ḥadīrān al-
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**PAKISTAN**

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