CHAPTER TWO

THE MANUSCRIPT

THE PHYSICAL COMPOSITION OF THE
MANUSCRIPT

The Kitāb naʿt al-hayawān, Or. 2784, is composed of 258 folios, and is illustrated with 86 paintings. The original binding, the incipit and the colophon are missing; it therefore provides no information about the author/compiler, the dedicatee (if any), the scribe, place of production, or date. As already mentioned, in his 1894 catalogue entry, Rieu refers to the confused arrangement of its folios, and it seems likely that the manuscript entered the British Museum (later Library) as it is today.2 According to Colin Baker, Head of Near and Middle Eastern Collections of the British Library, the manuscript has not undergone re-binding or any other type of conservation since its accession. There is no record of any conservation work, either in the accession notes, or in Rieu’s catalogue, or on the manuscript itself.

THE CODEX AND ITS PAPER

The codex has a modern binding in red leather with a decoration of stamped medallions with relief decoration in “oriental” style on a gilded background.

The size of the book is 24.5 × 16 cm, and it is 6 cm wide at the spine. The pages (which have been trimmed) now measure between 23 and 23.5 × 15.5 to 16 cm. Each page is laid out in nine lines, and the text block measures 19 × 11 cm.

It is possible to notice on several folios the impression left by a dry point or a mastar, faded but clear guide marks for the text block that the scribe has followed, with lines at a distance of 2 cm. On fol. 106v (197v, present foliation), for example, which has the painting of the Unicorn, one can clearly see the incisions on the empty spaces surrounding the picture.

The margin between the text block and the edge of the page is from 3.2 to 3.3 cm to the outer edge, 2.8 cm to the top and 2.3 cm to the bottom. But there is evidence of trimming, as some original Arabic inscriptions (as on fol. 118r/208r) as well as the later Persian marginal inscriptions are cut, as can be seen on fols. 159r (18r), 165v (24v), 181v (40v), 184v (43v), for example. This points to the pages being trimmed and repaired at the time of binding.

The paper, now of a pale straw colour, is thick and of good quality. It is wove paper,3 with vertical rib shadows, barely visible (for example on fols. 154 (13), 180 (39), 93 (185)), at a distance of 7 cm (from mid-point to mid-point), typical, therefore, of Arab paper used in manuscripts from the eleventh century down to the end of the Mamluk period. On the basis of the direction of these rib shadows one can assume that the paper has been folded once.4 Sometimes on the paper there are lumps of the starch used to coat it (for example at fols. 163r (22r) and 175r (34r)).5

Some torn pages have been restored, but for others it has proved impossible to make good the damage completely, so that parts of the text

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1 The following descriptive notes attempt to give as many technical details as possible, hoping to fulfill what my dear friend, the late Don Baker, “would like scholars to say when they study a manuscript” (Baker 1989, p. 67). The observations on paper and pigment have been made after naked eye examinations conducted over a number of sessions with Don Baker, both at the British Library and in his studio. These have now been supplemented by the observations made at the Conservation studio of the British Library by Paul Garside and David Jacobs.

2 See Chapter One, footnote 7.

3 Even if in a few cases it is possible to see traces of the laid. On the matter of medieval Arab paper being either laid or wove, or mixed, see Baker 1991, especially p. 30; also Loveday 2001, Chapter 3. On production more generally see Bloom 2001, Chapter 2.

4 The presence of the shadows makes it possible to observe how the paper has been cut from the whole sheet. See Baker 1991, pp. 30–31. On the question of Arab paper sizes, see ibid., p. 30; also von Karabacek 1991 and Loveday 2001, pp. 52–53.

5 Although the process is completed, when dry, by polishing with a glass burnisher (see Baker 1991, p. 31), some lumps may remain.
and a few illustrations are still defective. Further, the detailed examination of the manuscript leading to the reconstruction proposed in the Table below has established that there are a number of missing pages and (consequently) lost paintings, those of the Dog, Monkey, Wolf, Partridge, Snakes, Beetles, Spider and Badger.

The codex is now marked with a late European foliation, situated at the external upper-left corner of the page. There is no trace of Arabic numbering, and this is probably why it has been wrongly paginated: in any event the sequence of the folios is much altered from the original. The catchwords at the left bottom corner of the page are in the same hand and in the same ink as some of the Persian inscriptions, but with many margins cut down not all the pages have preserved these catchwords.

In accordance with medieval Arab custom, the text is generally continuous, without gaps between its various sections, although sometimes paragraphs are separated by a punctuation symbol, in red or black ink. The paintings are most frequently placed immediately after the heading, but occasionally within the text, which is then either above, beneath, or, on occasion, wrapped around them.

The script is clear, large and regular, in a calligraphic naskh. Sometimes there are corrections or additions in the same hand, while certain other notes (for example, the translation into Persian of some names of the animals) are in different hands. From the nature of the script and the quality of the ink, it may be concluded that some of the Persian notes are not later than the fourteenth century, while others are considerably later.

**Persian Inscriptions**

The Persian inscriptions are in a variety of scripts, such as nastalīq (the most frequent), shikasta, and a sort of slanted naskh. Accordingly they vary in date, probably from the fourteenth to the nineteenth century, indicating that the manuscript remained in a Persian environment from a relatively early stage, and, interestingly, that several readers deemed it appropriate to mark it in this way. I have had the good fortune of having Alexander Morton look at these inscriptions, and the observations below result from his discussions of them with me.

In thirty-four consecutive folios from the present fol. 97r (marked as 6) to fol. 131r (marked as 40), we also find in the middle of the outer recto margin a numbering in a later, Persian hand, using an abbreviated chancery system combining ciphers and letters. These indicate an attempt to reconstruct the original order, for these folios should indeed have had those numbers: if one counts back from 6 one arrives at the first two frontispieces as fol. 1v and 2r. So, this numbering may have been added after the manuscript had been already arranged in the present form by someone who read the text and understood that the foliation had been altered, although why it should stop at 40 is unclear.

The inscriptions on the flyleaves (see below for details) mention the title of the book, which is otherwise missing, as Kitāb naʿt al-hayawān (Fig. 3). One of them also mentions the name of a preacher who lent the manuscript to an unnamed recipient in 1272/1855. Unfortunately, it is not possible to determine who this personage was, and the two seals present in the manuscript, one above this inscription, and another one towards the end, on fol. 257v, are only partially legible, and do not yield useful documentary information.

**Paintings**

The paintings are mostly well preserved; the colours are still vivid and the palette is rich. On occasion pigment offsets are found on the facing page. Apart from the full page frontispieces, they often occupy a large portion of the page, especially with mammals and birds, and their sizes range between 16 × 15 cm (Bull and Cow, Cat. 11) and 1.5 × 4.5 cm (Cockroach, Cat. 86) (for measurements of each painting see Appendix Two).

**Inks, Colours and Gold**

The following account, building on the examination made together with Don Baker, has been rendered more precise by the technical analyses conducted by the British Library conservation scientist Paul Garside. His results are presented in Appendix One.

In some cases, as a result of oxidization, the colours of the paintings, together with the red lead used for the titles in the text, have become grey on the margins of the page. For example,