CHAPTER 3

Comparative Study of the Historic Sources and Recent Literature on the Making of Islamic Manuscripts

Historic Sources

Introductory Remarks

Next to autopsy there is, of course, a supplementary method to obtain information on how the manuscripts were made. Written sources, originating from the period and culture of the objects involved, shed an interesting light on book production. On the making of Islamic books and their bindings in particular, five historic sources are known.1 Although the texts are well known amongst scholars working within the field of Islamic manuscript studies, they have not been analysed comparatively before. Nor were they evaluated from a binder's or a conservator's point of view. My approach in studying these sources is a craft-based perspective. To explain the possibilities and limitations of this way of exploring the treatises, it is necessary to start with some remarks, which will also set my viewpoint in context.

First of all, the original texts have been made accessible to non-Arabic readers, either in edited versions or direct translation, through the efforts of excellent scholars, who were compelled to work from later copies preserved in sometimes dire conditions. The way the original sources have come down to us are affected by this in one way or another. My inability to read Arabic left me dependent on the available translations or summaries, adding of course a stratum between me and the sources in which changes in interpretation can occur. On the other hand, my capacity as a book conservator with the practical experience of making Islamic book models gives me an insight into the material that adds a new dimension to the texts. Because of my specialism, concerning techniques, structures and materials, I examined the treatises differently

1 The authors are Ibn Badis (d. 1062), Bakr al-Ishbili (d. 1231), Al-Malik al-Muzaffar (d. 1294), Ibn Abi Hamidah (fifteenth century), and al-Sufyani (treatise is dated 1619). Full descriptions are given in Chapter One, footnote 38. Extended bibliographical information can be found in A. Gacek, ‘Scribes, amanuenses, and scholars. A bibliographic survey of published Arabic literature from the manuscript age on various aspects of penmanship, bookmaking, and the transmission of knowledge’ (2004).
than the original translators. While reading the series of steps described in the bookbinding procedures, I visualised the process and evaluated it in light of the technical possibilities. As a result, it was possible to interpret some technical descriptions in a different way than had the original translators. Also, when the procedures, as described in the texts, appeared rather incomplete or impractical, these passages are indicated and possible explanations are made.

Secondly, it is useful to look critically at the authors’ names and social positions. It appears that in two cases the authors were rulers, not binders. Although princes and rulers were introduced to certain respected trades or crafts as part of their general education, it remains unknown if the two rulers involved—Ibn Badis and Al-Malik al-Muzaffar—were actually trained in how to bind books. It is quite possible that they were, but it is equally possible that the treatises bear the ruler’s name although they were actually written by someone more adept at this craft. One of the three other treatises is written by a man of letters and a poet, Bakr al-Ishbili, who knew how to make books, since bookbinding provided him with additional income. The writer of the didactic poem on bookbinding, Ibn Abi Hamidah, states himself that he was not trained as a binder. Only one of the five authors, Sufyani, is known without a doubt to have been a craftsman; he even wrote his instructions out of frustration over his unappreciative apprentices.² We therefore can conclude that at least three of the primary sources are not meant to be manuals, they are merely descriptive accounts of a respected craft. Being aware of the nature of the writings helps to understand their incompleteness. Furthermore, the five sources do not cover the total breadth of the Islamic world at the time; three of them were produced in the Maghreb (Algeria and Morocco), one in Yemen and one of uncertain origin was possibly written in Syria.³ Consequently, we lack accounts of the bookbinding tradition from important cultural centres in Egypt, Anatolia, large parts of the Arabian Peninsula, Persia and further east. Even so, comparing the contents of the known treatises allows for some interesting conclusions and the shape of the Islamic bookbinding tradition emerges quite clearly from the discussion.

Lastly, the primary sources that came down to us are copies of the original texts, some of them written centuries later. Multiple copies of a single source attest, in their divergences from each other, that the originals were not always repeated word for word.

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