CHAPTER 4

Multiplicity within the Tradition
Account of the Methodology and Quantitative Results of the Survey

Methodology

General Procedure
In 2010 a pilot survey was carried out to gain information on the varieties in shape and composition that could be found in the manuscripts in the Leiden collections written in Arabic script. A preliminary sample of manuscripts was selected by assessing the first hundred books of every thousand. All manuscripts with original Islamic structures and bindings—any minor repairs or adaptations notwithstanding—within this range were examined. From this initial survey the structural and material elements could be established which would need to be incorporated in a database for the larger survey on which the present study is based. The pilot study also provided a most welcome experience to build an adequate database for this purpose. Additionally, the preliminary assessment served to answer some questions concerning the criteria for selection: what degree of historic interference or damage was acceptable, and when was a repaired manuscript disqualified from being valuable for this research? Lastly, decisions as to which features needed to be included and which details could or should be ignored were largely based on this pilot. Of course, not all the functionalities could be foreseen that the database eventually required, and several anomalous features only gradually appeared to deserve their own entry field in a database record. Thus, as was to be expected, even after starting the assessment small changes and additions to the database design proved to be necessary.

The database was designed to contain concrete and visible facts about each manuscript’s structure, in order to generate objective and consistent descriptions and allow for cross-searches and comparison. It was built so as to leave no room for subjective interpretation; for example, either a binding is covered in full leather or it is not—in which case it is probably a partial leather binding,

1 General results of this initial survey were presented at the conference New approaches to book and paper conservation, Horn, May 2011, and published in the preprints: K. Scheper, ‘Refining the classification of Islamic manuscript structures’ (2011). For the initial survey Access 2000 was used. For the definitive survey, forming the basis for present analysis, the database was extended and redesigned in Filemaker Pro 10.0v1.
although there is an option “other” for the few diverging volumes. Subjective qualifications were avoided. As a consequence, the ornamentation of the binding was not classified, because ‘rich’, ‘fine’ or ‘common’ are hard to measure or define. Moreover, it is extremely difficult to keep a fixed, consistent standard for subjective qualifications over a long period of time, and as the assessment of a thousand manuscripts unavoidably stretches out over a substantial period, unintended differences in classification would have to be expected. Nevertheless, it was accepted that now and then a remark would have to be made concerning the quality of the work when it was remarkably clumsy or crude, or, on the other side of the scale, very refined. The main reason for noting such impressions was to allow for easier reference or selection in a later stage of the survey, when cross-comparisons between manuscripts with similar features were to be made.

While setting up the project, it was tempting to combine the description of the physical make-up of the manuscripts with a condition or damage survey. The underlying idea of a combined survey would be to make the most of the opportunity: the physical condition of many of these manuscripts may not otherwise be brought to a conservator’s attention. Given the intrinsic value of the selected volumes—they represent part of the history of Islamic book-binding—their preservation is of major concern, which argues in favour of an extension of the survey. On the other hand, within the overall Arabic manuscript collection the selection forms only a minor part, and other, deselected manuscripts may have condition problems that are more urgent for different reasons. Additionally, it was not to be expected that extra means were to be found to tackle the condition issues, so the records would only provide data that support a theoretical opportunity to address preservation problems, and not be directly applied in practice to develop a conservation programme. For those reasons, it was decided to abandon the idea of diagnosing the condition, and confine the survey to a coherent description of the material and structural composition of the manuscripts.

Every item in the Arabic manuscript collection was inspected in order to decide whether it should be selected for this study, starting with the first acquired volumes and ending with the latest acquisitions. The triage was first carried out on the basis of the book’s visual appearance; bindings evidently

2 A model for such a combined survey project is that of the bound manuscripts in the library of the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai. See: N. Pickwoad, ‘The condition survey of the manuscripts in the monastery of Saint Catherine on Mount Sinai’ (2004), pp. 33–61.

3 The UBL’s conservation workshop has a limited capacity and to embark on a conservation project such as this, extra hands and budget would be required.