CHAPTER 5

Mapping the Variations in Time and Place
Datable and Localisable Features and a Further Interpretation of the Findings

So far, the quantitative overview of the survey results has outlined the diversity of materials and techniques used to make books in the Islamic world. Already the UBL collections inform us that the diversity is significant. Now, when we focus on only those manuscripts that have retained their original binding and whose origin is known, certain trends can be recognised, and tentative or even firm conclusions can be drawn that gradually paint us an image of the development of the Islamic bookbinding tradition. These specific manuscripts provide building blocks for the codicological framework. From the changes in the use of materials and methods in this ‘elite’ selection, we can see patterns occurring and start exploring the reasons behind these transitions.

**Sewing**

*The Ratio of the Different Sewing Structures*

As stated before, not much is known about the sewing schemes in the first centuries of the Islamic tradition, and no examples from this period can be found in the UBL. However, since the development of the so-called Type Two binding, it is clear that the predominant sewing structure consists of a link-stitch on two stations; the first chart illustrates the ratio of the different sewing structures in general, without being corrected for repair sewings. [chart 1]

When undated and resewn volumes are deselected from the survey results and the remaining data is divided according to sewing structure, and then arranged by date of occurrence, it becomes clear that the link-stitch sewing on two stations is predominant throughout the centuries.¹ [chart 2] This chart also illustrates the gradual introduction of an important variation on the unsupported link-stitch sewing, the specific version on four stations. In addition, it demonstrates the relatively high number of variant sewing structures in the

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¹ In Chapter One the history of the Oriental collection was outlined, and there it was explained that few acquisitions were added during the eighteenth century. Even though in the nineteenth century, and especially in the twentieth century the collections increased significantly, the effect of the ‘quiet eighteenth century’ is visible throughout the results.
eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, and the fact that the unsewn textblocks with connective strips were almost solely used in the nineteenth century. The twentieth century shows a continuous use of the dominant link-stitch, as well as the variety in techniques, though the number of stabbed manuscripts has increased.

As explained in Chapter Four, the information on places of origin is more limited than data on dates, which hinders the ascription of sewing structures to regions. It is clear, however, that the link-stitch sewing on two stations is predominant in most regions of the Islamic world, though it seems to have less relevance in certain parts of North and West Africa. Remarkably, in Southeast Asia this sewing scheme was not found at all. [chart 3]

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2 In the UBL collections, the majority of the manuscripts explicitly described as having a North African origin are Berber manuscripts which were stabbed. These manuscripts are often nineteenth-century volumes and the overview of the Maghribi sewing structures is therefore probably not representative of the actual production of the manuscript structures from that region. Of course, the link-stitch sewing is hardly found in sub-Saharan Africa where the manuscripts largely consist of loose leaves and are kept in wrapper bindings and pouches or bags.