CHAPTER 6

Considerations and New Perspectives

Recapitulation

This study set out to challenge the idea that bookbinding structures in the Islamic world were unchangingly made as weak or faulty constructions, based on the simplest link-stitch sewing system and a case-binding design with only limited connection between textblock and binding. In my conservation practice I found convincing evidence for a very different premise: the Islamic book tradition consists of and displays several different local traditions, a variety of structures, and there is a development over the centuries in the use of materials and techniques. Moreover, these structures are, in general, adequate and strong. To substantiate that new idea, all volumes from the Middle Eastern manuscript section and the manuscripts in Arabic script from the Southeast Asian section of the Oriental collections in the Leiden University Library containing original bindings and sewing structures, were assessed and relevant data was organised in a searchable database built for the occasion.

What this study also wanted to investigate was the possibility of classifying the Islamic bookbinding tradition with a more refined system than the ‘Three Types’ introduced by François Déroche. The box-binding (Type One) may irrefutably be an easily identifiable phenomenon, it is also a binding type that was only made in the very first centuries of Islam of which few specimens have survived. The other two categories (Type Two and Three) are distinguished solely by the presence or absence of the fore-edge and envelope flaps. It was felt that this subdivision was not so useful. First of all, the manifestation of a flap on a typical Islamic binding does not make that binding more Islamic than a typical Islamic binding without a flap. Additionally, the assumption that Islamic bindings without a flap are products of the last few centuries, made under the influence of Western books, was refuted by the UBL collection, since a substantial number of flapless bindings were found in the Warner collection, which came to Leiden shortly after 1665. Moreover, other distinctive characteristics were noticed, leading to the idea that such physical particularities might represent distinctive local and/or datable traditions. From conservation experience and preliminary investigations in the collection prior to the present study, it seemed at least possible to single out the Southeast Asian insular tradition as a specific and identifiable bookmaking culture. With regard to that particular region, further questions arose: What binding elements were due to the
Considerations and New Perspectives

‘foreign’ influences, and what features were of local origin and unique? And in addition to these questions, it seemed logical to ask: What other regional specific traditions—even if they were used for only a limited time—can be identified in the rest of the vast Islamic world? The assessment of the Leiden Oriental collections was designed to address these questions, and to examine the idea of a refined classification system.

It was felt that the point of departure, due to my technical interest and experience as a conservator, would guarantee a novel, craft-based approach and an insight into material aspects which have not been used to examine Islamic bookbindings, or the historic treatises on the Islamic bookbinding practice, so far. Additionally, I widened the scope of the research by verifying or testing findings from the physical assessment and the literature analysis through the making of models. This practical component in the study provided a unique opportunity to scrutinise actually used techniques and technical details or unexpected divergences. It also formed a basis to analyse the few existing historical treatises on Islamic bookbinding from a different perspective, and thus, already known sources proved to offer new insights into the bookbinding tradition. It is important to note that this method of analysis is not yet exhausted; the historic sources are not completely available in translation and as a consequence, the present study was based on only those parts or summaries accessible in English.

Development of the Tradition

The Archetypal Islamic Manuscript Structure and Binding

The results from the survey testified that an archetype of the Islamic bound manuscript can be defined, but the multiplicity of techniques and materials used was also demonstrated. The Islamic manuscript is predominantly sewn with an unsupported link-stitch sewing, the textblock spine is lined and the lining material supports a traditional endband, consisting of a primary sewing and secondary, decorative sewing. The sides of the lining, projecting beyond the width of the textblock spine, are also used to strengthen board attachment. Furthermore, we have seen that most bindings were built on the textblock in stages, which could involve the partial preparation of the individual boards, separate from the textblock. By using this common language, bookbinders produced artefacts with a clear cultural identity, and as the structures of these manuscripts were functional, fairly durable and not complicated as a binding procedure, there was little further need to develop or alter the construction. Nevertheless, within the basic and archetypal binding structure the craftsmen