INFORMATION AND COMMUNICATION TECHNOLOGIES FOR THE PRESERVATION AND VALORIZATION OF MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS IN MOROCCO

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The use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) constitutes the backbone of e-Maroc 2010, a national strategy championed by the Moroccan Ministère des Affaires Economiques et Générales (Département de la Poste, des Télécommunications et des Technologies de l’Information, SEPTI) to build a knowledge economy, reduce the digital divide and carve out a place for Morocco in the information society.¹ In recent years, several sectors in Morocco have integrated the use of ICT as a key component in their strategic agendas (e.g., e-gov., e-learning, e-commerce, etc.). However, the use of ICT for the preservation of manuscript collections was not on the e-Maroc 2010 agenda. And today, except for a few on-line portals of key content holders such as the Bibliothèque nationale du royaume du Maroc (BNRM) and the Qarawiyyn Library in Fez (hosted by the Web site of the Ministry of Cultural Affairs), and scattered personal Web pages and blogs, Moroccan manuscript collections are still far from crossing the digital divide.²

This chapter will start with a review of major Moroccan manuscript collections and their contents, followed by a historical outline of the book trade in Morocco and the origin and evolution of the Maghribi script. It will continue with a critical assessment of recent ICT initiatives, both institutional and individual, for the preservation and valorization of manuscript collections in Morocco, with a special emphasis on The Manuscript Treasures in the Kingdom of Morocco Project

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² Although not specifically designed for dealing with documentary heritage, the Strabon Project (Multilingual and Multimedia Information System for The Euro-Mediterranean Cultural Heritage and Tourism) is one of the highlights of international partnerships between the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and the Ministry of Tourism in Morocco and the EU-MEDIS Initiative (a European program to contribute to building an Information Society).
(Dhakhāʿir al-makhtūtāt bi al-mamlaka al-maghribiyya), to date the most important ICT-related initiative of this kind in Morocco. Championed by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs and sponsored by UNESCO-Rabat Office, it targeted the selective digitization and complete cataloging of ancient manuscript collections hosted at three heritage libraries (bibliothèques patrimoniales): the Qarawiyyin Library in Fez, the Ibn Yūsuf Library in Marrakech, and the Library of the Great Mosque of Meknès. The chapter will conclude with a brief discussion of most recent research in automatic text transcription, indexing, searching and retrieval of Arabic historical manuscripts, followed by some concluding remarks and recommendations.

Manuscript Collections in Morocco in Historical Perspective

The corpus of Moroccan manuscripts is estimated at more than 80,000 titles and 200,000 volumes held at a number of public and private libraries—mostly religious institutions and zawāyā. These collections are invaluable both as repositories of human knowledge and memory and for their aesthetic value in terms of calligraphy, illumination, iconography and craftsmanship. Several medieval authors position Morocco as an important center in the Muslim West (al-Gharb al-Islāmī) for manuscript production, illumination, binding and exchange. However, except for a few scattered publications, a history of North African Arabic calligraphy (al-khatt al-maghribī) remains to be written. By providing the tools for making these collections readily accessible to the scholarly community in the Maghrib and beyond, ICT will make possible the study of North African scripts within the broader context of Arabic calligraphy and the Islamic arts of the book in general.

The two main manuscript collections in Morocco are hosted at the National Library of Morocco (Bibliothèque nationale du royaume du Maroc, or BNRM, formerly General Library and Archive) in Rabat (12,140 titles), and the Qarawiyyin Library in Fez (5,600 titles, 3,157

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3 Based on official figures provided by the BNRM.
4 For example, the libraries of the Zāwiyya of Tamgrūt and the Zāwiyya of Sidi Ḥamza in south-eastern Morocco, both administered by the Ministry of Endowments and Islamic Affairs. For further details, see Latifa Benjelloun-Laroui, Les Bibliothèques au Maroc (Paris: Maisonneuve et Larose, 1990), 280–5; 288–95.