Recent Books on Indonesian Manuscript

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Karin Scheper, The Technique of Islamic Bookbinding. Methods, Materials and Regional Varieties. Leiden: Brill, 2015, xii + 428 pp. [Islamic Manuscripts and Books 8]. ISSN 1879964, ISBN 9789004290921, price EUR 146.00 (hardback); 9789004291119, 143.00 (e-book).

Recently, four books were published that discuss a variety of aspects of Indonesian and Malay manuscripts and bookbindings. They deserve attention together as one discusses aspects that contribute to information provided in another. Two of them are in English, one in German and Indonesian while the fourth is in Indonesian. All four have been lavishly illustrated with many photographs showing the wide variety and beauty of these manuscripts. Collections have been used from Germany (Wieringa and Hanstein), Malaysia and Indonesia (Farouk Yahya), Yogyakarta, Central Java (Saktimulya) and Java
The German-Indonesian bilingual catalogue Schrift Sprache/Aksara dan Bahasa presents pictures of 46 manuscripts from Indonesia from the collection of the Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin Preußischer Kulturbesitz and is a welcome addition to the limited number of picture books about Indonesian manuscripts. The catalogue is divided into eight parts. The first part presents a number of stone inscriptions from the IV to XVI centuries written by Tri-gangga. The second part illustrates paper manuscripts in jawi (Arabic script adapted to Malay) by the hand of Edwin Wieringa as is the part that groups together the manuscript traditions of Java, Sunda (West Java), Bali, and Lombok on paper and palm leaf (lontar) in Javanese and Javanese-derived scripts. Part four, also by Wieringa, displays paper manuscripts from South Sulawesi written in Buginese and Makassarese script. Part five, by U. Kozok, takes the reader to manuscripts from the Batak area in North Sumatra inscribed on Batak tree bark and bamboo. Wieringa continues in part six with manuscripts from Lampung in South Sumatra on bamboo in Lampung script from South Sumatra, and part seven explores Chinese manuscripts. He ends the catalogue (part eight) with manuscripts in Latin script.

The catalogue starts with a brief introduction which chronicles the history of the Berlin collection where we learn of the main collectors: Johann Carl Schoemann (1806–1877), John Crawfurd (1783–1868), August Wilhelm von Schlegel (1767–1845), Sir Thomas Phillipps (1792–1872), Karl Bernhard von Sachsen-Weimar-Eisenach, and lastly Nicolaas Dirk Schuurmans (1838–1908). On page 14 the authors state that manuscripts once owned by John Crawfurd (1783–1868) are also in the Berlin collection but it remains unclear what manuscripts they are and unfortunately the publications the catalogue mentioned written by Phillipps are not included in the bibliography. Each manuscript is introduced, its origins are described, and a short description of its contents is added, which makes the catalogue more accessible to those unfamiliar with Indonesian manuscripts.

The history of the cataloguing of the manuscripts in the Berlin collection has been included in the introduction of this catalogue as well. The first catalogue was made by Schoemann of his own collection as early as 1851. A catalogue by Dietrich George and Hartmut-Ortwin Feistel from 1977 that is mentioned here and which was made to accompany an exhibition of Southeast Asian manuscripts is also unfortunately not to be found in the bibliography. This is a pity as it inspired the exhibition in Berlin in 2015, for which the present catalogue was compiled and published.