An Introduction to codicological studies

20 May 2019
Evyn Kropf
In this session

Laying the groundwork

*What is a manuscript?*
*What is a manuscript culture?*
*What is a codex?*
*What is codicology?*
*Why codicological studies?*

Brief introduction to field of Islamic manuscript studies

Workshop practicalities
What is a manuscript?
Manuscripts

Copied and produced by hand

Documents = witnesses for particular authorial texts

But manuscripts also possess:

- significant paratexts and annotations (often details which speak directly to their history of circulation / ownership / use)
- compelling material qualities (including script, layout, ornament, structure, writing material, binding, enclosure, repairs, etc)
What is a manuscript culture?
Manuscript culture

Contexts of production / circulation / reception in which texts were primarily circulated in manuscript

Coalescence of human efforts and intentions at particular moments in particular places for production and later interaction and intervention as a hand-recorded text (and any visual content) is read, handled, stored, presented, purchased, divided, recomposed, etc

Codicology and other approaches to the study of manuscripts permit us to “read” this record of efforts and intentions along with the words (and images) carried by the manuscript
What is a codex?
Codex (pl. codices)

Type of book, namely the now familiar form consisting of gatherings (= quires) of leaves (= folios) sewn together* with a cover applied to them.

Each gathering typically a nest of bifolia (= folded writing material forming two folios) or single folio with stub that can be stitched through the fold.

Each folio / single leaf is composed of two parts corresponding to each side of the piece of writing material = a recto (front / first side to be read) and a verso (back / subsequent side to be read).

*May also encounter unsewn gatherings brought together in a wrapper or pouch.
What is codicology?
What is codicology?

The study of the book as a material object

A type of book archaeology that involves extrapolating back from material, textual, and visual evidence within a particular codex (or group of codices) to details concerning the production and circulation of that codex (codices)

Subdomain of palaeography: the study of writing; characterizing and classifying particular scripts and hands, deciphering handwritten texts, and dating and placing manuscripts on the basis of their handwriting

What is codicology? (cont.)

Concerned with investigating and documenting the material qualities of books for the purposes of being able to elaborate cultures of production and to contextualize, ie to date and place otherwise undated / unlocalized copies and associated phenomena.

Evocative of analytical bibliography but for manuscript books.

Particularly interested in codices but also other formats (rolls, concertina, etc).

Utilize range of techniques: visual inspection in various lighting environments, more sophisticated spectral analysis / image processing, material / chemical analysis for covering materials, media, damage, etc, modeling / replication of observed features to explore techniques.

Readily applied to the domain of manuscript culture given what it can ascertain.
Why codicological studies?

More rigorous exploration of manuscripts as a means of interrogating the evidence within manuscripts that touches on

- the recording and early formation of texts (and associated visual content) in particular places at particular times
- a text’s reception and function via details on a particular copy’s (witness’s) production & later interactions
- craft practices, cultural practices / paradigms of production / ownership / circulation of books

All points to significance of distinctions between witnesses (e.g., UCLA MS M229 & MS M245, two copies of *al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ*, may also compare *Isl. Ms. 220*)

Particularly valuable for otherwise undated witnesses

Together, this evidence speaks to how the text took shape & evolved, its spheres of influence, & how it was appreciated, studied, taught, interpreted, consulted, repurposed, revered, etc.
What do we mean by Islamic?

(eg Islamic manuscript culture, Islamic codicology, Islamic manuscript studies, Islamic manuscripts, etc)

Produced in historically Islamicate cultural areas

Chiefly Islamic communities but not only

Focus on Arabographic / Arabic script manuscripts but other important palaeographic traditions are represented as well
Islamic Manuscript Studies: Resurgence in the West

Resurgence since the early 1980s when a colloquium on palaeography and codicology organized by François Déroche (with the support of the BnF and the French Institute for Anatolian Studies) was held in Istanbul.
Followed by several significant research initiatives and publications, including a number of published catalogues in print and eventually electronic format as well as

1. the first Western language journal devoted to the study of Middle Eastern manuscripts
2. the first comprehensive world survey for Islamic manuscripts
3. the first monograph on the codicology of Arabographic manuscripts
4. the first Western language handbook on Arabic manuscript studies
5. the first Western language monographic series dedicated to Islamic manuscripts and books
Islamic Manuscript Studies: Resurgence in the West (cont.)


5. *Islamic Manuscripts and Books* (Leiden: Brill, 2009-)

Sampling of initiatives supporting scholarship and preservation

- Al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation (est. 1991)
- The Islamic Manuscript Association (est. 2006, active 2005)
- Institute of Oriental Manuscripts, St Petersburg (reorg. 2007, active 1818)
- Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (COMSt) (2009-2014, present)
- Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures, Hamburg (2011-present)
Islamic Manuscript Studies: Foundation

Vitally significant scholarly & practical contributions in Eastern languages (especially Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Japanese, etc etc), which continue the much longer established scholarly traditions in the field, particularly out of the Institute for Arabic Manuscripts in Cairo (المعهد المخطوطات العربية) & the Written Heritage Research Center in Tehran (مركزَ پژوهشی میراث مکتوب)

Essential literature, scholarship, initiatives and ongoing work which must not be neglected but actively engaged
Islamic Manuscript Studies: Development

Steady progress, but field still remains in its early stages with hundreds of thousands if not millions of manuscripts yet to be explored, and a vast amount of codicological and palaeographical data for various regions and periods yet to be collected, analyzed and contextualized within the larger projects of manuscript cultural history, intellectual history, social history, philology, art history etc for the various locales, cultures and literary outputs.

Last 10-15 years and ongoing, the field has seen a surge of digital initiatives focused chiefly on digitization and the production / dissemination of digital surrogates, but also on cataloguing and specifically the production of digital catalogues for various manuscript collections.

These digital projects have focused mainly on digitization as a preservation strategy and as a means of mediating access to collections. A number of projects have endeavored to extend wider support for scholarship in the field by offering digital access to companion resources and by offering opportunities for codicological and palaeographical training.
Workshop practicalities: Core reference works

Déroche et al, *Islamic codicology*


---

Gacek, *Vademecum*


Workshop practicalities: Resources

**Islamic Manuscripts Reference Library** (Prof Jan Just Witkam)

**Islamic Manuscript Studies Research Guide** (Evyn Kropf)

>> especially **Reading Lists**, Bibliographical Resources, Manuscript Description, etc

Descriptive data for **Islamic Manuscripts Collection** preserved at University of Michigan Library (Special Collections Research Center)

>> accessible through **online library catalogue**, esp recommend **legacy catalogue**