Overview of describing manuscripts

An Introduction to Islamic Manuscript Culture | Session 5

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In this session

Fundamentals of describing manuscripts: skills, guidelines, tools & techniques, resources

Description is essential for documenting manuscripts as sources

Descriptive exercises (characterizing features of manuscripts) are also an important means of developing codicological / palaeographical knowledge and knowledge of manuscript cultures
Considerations

Level of description
- Essential level with increasing detail according to time available
- Ranging from observations noting presence of a particular feature, to detailed characterization noting locations, providing transcriptions, etc

Access and handling
- Permitted to examine physical manuscript or only images?
- Photography permitted?
- Limitations on number of manuscripts to request / consult?

Data entry
- Worksheet / template
- Reliable internet access?
- Paper / pencil as well as device
- Backup for device
- Careful file naming
Examination

Strategies
● Work from exterior to interior
● Follow worksheet (eg workshop handout, eg version of Gacek’s data-sheet)
● Examine while collating (if possible)
● Document using photographs as you go (where permitted)
● Follow reading room guidelines!

Tools
● Clean hands (or nitrile gloves for metal cases / bindings etc)
● Ruler / tape measure
● Light source(s)
● Weights and supports
● Pencil and paper and electronic device for recording notes
● Device for photography
Examination

Techniques

- Measurement (page, binding, text block, written area, mould characteristics of paper)
- Collation
  - Simple: note number of folios or pages as enumerated
  - Detailed: analysis of quires and their structure
- Viewing in transmitted light: assessing watermarks, laid/chain lines, etc
- Viewing in raking light: assessing blind ruling, pricking, other aspects of paper/binding surface
- Gentle handling (where possible) following guidelines of reading room / repository
- Otherwise, careful attention to supplied images
Descriptive elements

(bibliographic, codicological / physical, historical)

Worksheet to guide description (eg https://tinyurl.com/uclIslamcMSShandson)

- Shelfmark / collection details*
- Format / size
- Binding
- Gatherings (quires) ie collation
- Writing material (support)*
- Layout*
- Ornament (painted decoration etc)
- Script & hand*
- Contents (text/composition & visual content)*
- Transcript, History & Transmission (colophon, paratexts & annotations esp owners’ marks)*

- References
- State of preservation
- Other observations
Hands-on exploration : Discussion

What was most exciting for you to observe or discover?

What was most challenging for you to observe / explore?

What differences did you observe in the two manuscripts you worked with?

What similarities?
MS M105 Sharḥ al-Khulāṣah al-Alfīyah, 1079 [1668 or 1669]
Collection 1147 Box 19

MS M140 Ravādiʿ al-nufūs, 1244 [1828 or 1829]
Collection 1147 Box 23

MS M211 Naqd al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ naqsh al-fuṣūṣ, 1036 [1626 or 1627]
Collection 1147 Box 32

MS M23 Majmūʿah
Collection 1147 Box 3

Cataloguing


Compare Catalogues

Princeton (Bonmariage, Soufi, et al) >> main catalogue search / browse

Michigan (Kropf et al) >> main catalogue search / browse

Leipzig (Liebrenz et al)

Wellcome Arabic Manuscripts Online (Serikoff, Pierazzo et al)

Staatsbibliothek Orient-Digital (Rauch et al)

Fihrist (UK+ Union Catalogue of Manuscripts from the Islamic World)

Ahwardt, Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften

Gacek, Persian manuscripts in the libraries of McGill University: a brief catalogue

Perho, Catalogue of Persian manuscripts (COMDC 8.1) + Catalogue of Arabic manuscripts (COMDC 5.2)

Rieu, Catalogue of the Persian manuscripts in the British Museum & Catalogue of the Turkish manuscripts in the British Museum

Schmidt, A catalogue of the Turkish manuscripts in the John Rylands University Library at Manchester

Tottoli et al, Catalogue of the Islamic manuscripts from the Kohle Collection in the Department of Oriental Studies of the University of Turin

Witkam, Inventory of the Oriental manuscripts in Leiden University Library

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