

Reading Practices and Libraries in the pre-Ottoman Middle East

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Abū Zayd in the library (al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt*, 634/1237). Paris, BnF, MS arabe 5847, fol. 5v

The societies with which Middle East Medievalists are concerned were arguably the most ‘bookish’ cultures of their period. All of us are working in one way or another with their vast textual legacy in Arabic and Persian. Whether we are working on geography, ulamaology, law or any other aspects of history, scarcity of texts is generally not one of the main challenges we face in our research. Speaking for my own research, the challenge is rather how to process the enormous data of biographical dictionaries of the Middle Period (c. 1000-1500); it is not uncommon for one title alone to comprise tens of thousands of entries.

Despite the ubiquity of the written word in the medieval societies of the Middle East, scholarship on its reception and circulation has only started to develop in recent decades. For the early Islamic centuries we now have a set of studies (especially Ali (2010), Schoeler (2009), Günther (2006), Toorawa (2005) and Touati (2003)) that are concerned with the development of a ‘writerly culture’, to borrow Toorawa’s term, and its interplay with oral and aural practices. However, for the Middle Period cultures of reading, reading practices and the circulation of the written word have remained virtually unstudied.

This discrepancy between the salience of the medieval written word and the low number of modern studies on its reception is partly bound to the problem that reading leaves few traces. The act of reading by itself, the leafing through a manuscript and the browsing through the stacks of a library is rarely documented. As Fortna (2011) put it: ‘Like a ship moving through the sea, reading leaves behind little to mark its passing.’ The main traces of reading that have been used so far for the pre-Ottoman period have been in narrative sources, especially chronicles and *adab*-encyclopedia. As their authors acted in a thoroughly bookish

environment their texts contain an impressive amount of material on the circulation and consumption of the written word. Yet at the same time these texts display the standard problems of narrative texts, such as the social myopia of their authors and problematic quantitative data. Non-elite consumers of the written word rarely appear in these texts and the numbers of copies of books held in a given library are – perhaps not coincidentally – generally multiples of either the symbolic numbers four and seven.

In my research over the last few years I have thus tried to identify documentary sources that allow additional insights into reading practices beyond narrative sources. In my book *The Written Word in the Medieval Arabic Lands* (paperback 2013) I employed in particular certificates of audition (*samāʿāt*) in order to gain a better understanding of the social composition of reading audiences. These included not only scholars, but also traders, craftsmen, workmen and slaves. An added bonus was that these documents give detailed insights into the practicalities of reading sessions. For instance, they inform us how social and cultural prestige structured the order of seating in a given reading group (clay workers ever so rarely sat in the front row) and how often this group met to complete yet another part of the work they were reading. Most astonishing is the sheer doggedness of these

groups: It was not uncommon for them to meet over a period of ten years or more in order to plough their way through the massive encyclopaedic works of the medieval period.

In *The Written Word* I argue on the basis of such documentary, and also narrative, sources that the Middle Period experienced the parallel processes of textualization and popularization. Taking the examples of Egypt and Syria it is evident that the uses of the written word significantly expanded in this period. This process of textualization went hand in hand with popularization, as wider groups within society started to participate in individual and communal reading acts. New audiences attending reading sessions, changed curricula in children’s schools, increasing numbers of endowed libraries and the appearance of popular literature in written form all bear witness to the profound transformation of cultural practices and their social contexts.

A second set of documentary sources for understanding the circulation and consumption of the written word are library catalogues. During my research for *The Written Word* I came across what is arguably the earliest Arabic library catalogue, dating to the mid-seventh/thirteenth century. Hidden in a collective manuscript in Istanbul’s Suleymaniye Library

this document lists the books that were held in the Ashrafiya Mausoleum, a minor teaching institution north of the Umayyad Mosque in Damascus. This catalogue is of outstanding importance as it is the earliest known documentary source that allows insights into the actual holdings of a medieval library and the way such libraries were structured. For the pre-Ottoman period hardly any other inventories and catalogues are known, except for the seventh/thirteenth-century catalogue of the mosque library in Kairouan, in modern-day Tunisia, with only 125 titles and some late Mamluk endowment records that also mention a small number of books. It is only in the Ottoman period that we start to see genuine library catalogues such as those for the book collections endowed by Maḥmūd Pasha, Grand Wazir of Sultan Mehmed II, after the conquest of Constantinople and the library of Sultan Beyazit II. (d. 918/1512). The noteworthy exception from this void of documentary evidence for pre-Ottoman libraries is the evidence of catalogues for Jewish book collections (e.g. Allony (2006).

The scarcity of such documentary sources is all the more astonishing as such documents do exist for a significantly less bookish region, medieval Europe. Despite a paucity of books for Anglo-Saxon England we have at least thirteen inventories of libraries that were written before 1066. From



Abū Zayd in the library (al-Ḥarīrī, *Maqāmāt*, first half of the 7th/13th century?).

St Petersburg, Academy of Sciences, C. 23, fol. 13r.

continental Europe the evidence is even richer: From the ninth century alone we have inventories for the libraries of monasteries such as Saint-Riquier, Reichenau, St Gallen, Lorsch, Murbach and Cologne. Yet the largest of the Anglo-Saxon inventories listed just 65 books, while the *fihrist* of the relatively minor Ashrafiya Mausoleum included more than 2,000 titles and more than 3,000 volumes.

At the moment I am in the process of editing and ‘translating’ this almost unique window on pre-Ottoman book collections. The two main striking features of this catalogue – besides the considerable size of such a minor library – are its thematic profile

and its sophisticated organization. For a library that was housed in an educational institution focusing on Koran recitation, a surprisingly low number of books (less than 3 per cent) are actually concerned with the various Koranic fields of knowledge, such as *iqrāʾ*, *iʿrāb* and *tafsīr*. Taken together, all the books from the fields that can be classified as belonging to *al-ʿulūm al-naqlīya* (i.e. Koranic disciplines, *ḥadīth*, law, mysticism and theology as well as prayer books and pilgrim guides) constituted only one fifth of the library’s stock. The large majority of the works in this library did not belong to the transmitted sciences, but to either *adab* or poetry. These two fields constituted together some 60 per cent of the collection and

included all the grand pre-Islamic poets such as Imruʾ al-Qays b. Ḥujr, al-Mutalammis, ‘Alqama b. ‘Abada and Umayya Ibn Abī Ṣalt as well as the grand early Islamic poets such as al-Mutanabbī, al-Buḥturī, al-Sarī b. Aḥmad al-Raffā’ and Abū Tammām. The library’s users were seemingly particularly interested in Abū Tammām’s *al-Ḥamāsa*, held in ten copies, and their undisputed favorite author was al-Mutanabbī with over 34 copies. These authors easily overshadow the *ḥadīth*-collections by Muslim and al-Bukhārī, but also the oeuvres of later authors who were mainly active in the fields of the transmitted sciences such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn al-Jawzī. At the same time users could access ‘non-scholarly’ titles such as a

copy of *Dalīla the Crafty*, which was to be included into the *1001 Nights* but appears here as an independent work.

The second striking issue is the sophisticated organization of the catalogue (and thus arguably the library) according to three criteria. All titles were – not very surprisingly – organized by alphabet and size. More interesting is the third criterion that assigned most books into one of fifteen thematic categories, such as law, history or pharmacology/medicine/veterinary medicine. As the narrative sources give us little insight into how libraries were organized (they only tell us that *fihrist*s were written for many libraries) this catalogue offers a glimpse into the organization of knowledge beyond the grand

theories of the classification of sciences like al-Fārābī’s *Iḥṣā’ al-‘ulūm*. Most importantly, this document provides an entirely new perspective on the circulation, availability and consumption of the written word in the medieval Middle East.

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