

Salvaging the Rational Heritage of Islam: The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition Project

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Introduction

Reducing the intellectually rich and diverse Islamic literary heritage to a bare minimum of what is seen as allegedly authentic is a strategy that is characteristic of Wahhabism, Salafism, and jihadism and their respective proponents, including al-Qa'ida and its offshoots and the Islamic State group. Whatever goes against their interpretation of Islam is classified as "heretical" and banned from distribution. Moreover, libraries holding books and manuscripts that are seen as containing deviant views are targeted for destruction, as is also the case with historic monuments, shrines, and religious sites, which have been destroyed over the past decades by Muslim extremists in an attempt to allegedly "purge" Islam.

To cite Irina Bokova, Director-General of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), "[t]he destruction of culture has become an instrument of terror, in a global strategy to undermine societies, propagate intolerance and erase memories. This cultural cleansing is a war crime that is now used as a tactic of war, to tear humanity from the history it shares."

Mention should be made, for example, of atrocities such as the destruction of some threehundred graves and shrines of Sufi saints in Timbuktu, Mali, during the Islamic militants' reign over the city since the summer of 2012 and their attempt to destroy some of the important manuscript collections of Timbuktu as they fled from French paratroopers in January 2013. Since many of the Timbuktu shrines are considered UNESCO world heritage, the destructions at the hands of the extremists evoked an international outcry. It was mostly thanks to the courageous attempts of

the people of Timbuktu that most of the thousands of manuscripts, among them a considerable amount of Sufi literature, alongside important titles in nearly all disciplines of Islamic religious learning, were clandestinely saved and smuggled out to Bamako.

Another example has received less public attention, though the significance of the literary material and the level of destruction go far beyond the case of the Timbuktu collections. It concerns the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, which is primarily preserved in the numerous private and public libraries of Yemen. Many of these libraries have been severely damaged, looted, or even destroyed over the past decades, and the continuing war in the country, with its daily bombardments, constitutes an imminent threat not only to the local population, but also to the cultural heritage of the country, including its libraries.

Who are the Zaydis?

The Zaydis are named after the great-grandson of ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet Muhammad and historically the fourth caliph of the Muslim community. This Zayd b. ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 740) rebelled against Umayyad rule in Kufa in 739/40. Since the Zaydis endorse the notion that the religio-political leadership is a prerogative of the descendants of the Prophet Muhammad, they can rightfully be characterized as a Shī‘ī community. However, their overall doctrinal outlook situates them between Twelver Shī‘īs on the one hand and Sunnis on the other. As a result, Zaydis entertained over the centuries closer intellectual relations with their Muslim fellows, beyond the narrow confines of their own denominational subgroup, than had been the case for other Shī‘ī groups and for mainstream Sunnis.

Since the ninth century, the Zaydi community has flourished mainly in two regions, namely the mountainous Northern Highlands of Yemen and the Caspian regions of Northern Iran.

The Zaydis of Northern Iran were intimately familiar with the intellectual trends of their time—and often actively participated in them. One of the leading intellectual centers during the second half of the tenth and during the eleventh century was Rayy, the capital of the Buyid dynasty at the time and the center of the leading rationalist movement of the "Mu'tazila", a movement that not only enjoyed the patronage of leading government officials but that also attracted the Zaydi elite.

By contrast, the Zaydis of Yemen remained over several centuries largely isolated from their coreligionists in Iran as a result of their political isolation and the country's geographical remoteness.

In the early twelfth century, a rapprochement between the two communities began which eventually resulted in their political unification. This political development was accompanied by a transfer of knowledge from Northern Iran to Yemen that comprised nearly the entire literary and religious legacy of Caspian Zaydism.

The historical sources inform us in detail about the mechanisms of this process. Throughout the twelfth century various prolific Zaydi scholars from the Caspian region were invited to come to Yemen. They brought along numerous books by Northern Iranian authors and acted as teachers to the community's spiritual and political leaders, the imams, and to other scholars in Yemen. At the same time, Zaydi scholars in Yemen left for Iran and Iraq for the purpose of studying. During the reign of Imam al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ʿAbd Allāh b. Ḥamza (r. 1197-1217), the knowledge transfer to Yemen reached its peak. Some of the libraries in Yemen that

were founded during this period continue to exist up until today. This is the case, by way of example, for the library that was founded by Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh in his capital Ḥafṣ. The library grew steadily over the centuries and was transferred during the early twentieth century to the newly founded al-Khizāna al-mutawakkiliyya, nowadays the "Library of Religious Endowments" (*Maktabat al-Awqāf*) or the "Eastern Library" (*al-Maktaba al-Sharqiyya*), located on the premises of the Great Mosque in Sanaa in an annex building that had been constructed for this purpose by order of Imām Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn (r. 1904-1948).

The Zaydi Literary Tradition

The Zaydi literary tradition is among the richest and most variegated ones within Islamic civilization and at the same time one of the least studied. The literary production by Zaydi scholars stretches over more than a thousand years covering a wide spectrum of traditional disciplines such as Qur'ānic exegesis, law and theology, legal theory etc. Moreover, Zaydis were at all times familiar with the surrounding intellectual strands beyond the confines of their own community and actively involved in them. The typical library of a Zaydi scholar would therefore comprise not only works belonging to his own religious tradition, but also an array of titles of authors from other communities, including the literary legacy of the Mu'tazila, one of the most important rational schools in the history of Muslim theology. The Yemeni manuscript collections thus constitute a unique treasure trove for large segments of the Islamic intellectual tradition—Sunni as well as Shī'ī—much of which has not survived anywhere else in the Islamic world.

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition—A Heritage Under Threat

It is fortunate that the majority of Zaydi literature is still extant, mostly in the form of manuscripts. On the downside, the Zaydi manuscript tradition is widely

dispersed and for the most part poorly documented. The most significant and by far largest collections of Zaydi manuscripts are housed by the numerous public and private libraries of Yemen (estimates range between 40,000 to 100,000 manuscripts).

As a result of the geographical isolation of Yemen, the scholarly exploration of its political and intellectual history and of its rich manuscript holdings started later than in most other parts of the Islamic world. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, a number of European explorers and merchants travelled to Yemen where they gathered considerable collections of manuscripts that they later sold to European libraries. Mention should be made of the Austrian Eduard Glaser (1855–1908) who visited Yemen on four occasions between 1882 and 1894 and sold his nearly 900 manuscripts to the State Library of Berlin, the British Museum in London, and the Austrian National Library in Vienna. The most significant collection of Yemeni manuscripts outside of Yemen (ca. 1,700 manuscripts) was brought together by the Italian merchant Giuseppe Caprotti and donated at the beginning of the twentieth century to the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan, Italy. Important collections of Zaydi manuscripts from Yemen are also owned by Leiden University Library, the Bavarian State Library in Munich, the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Princeton University Library, and Yale University Library. Taken together, the libraries of Europe and North America hold some 11,000 manuscripts of Yemeni provenance that are relevant to Zaydi studies—among them countless unique or otherwise exceptionally precious codices. Of importance are, moreover, the many libraries of the Middle East, especially in Egypt, Syria, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Iran and Iraq, as well as India, with substantial holdings of Zaydi manuscripts.

The history of the libraries and manuscript collections *inside* Yemen still needs to be written, a difficult task in view of the turmoil the country has experienced over most of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and continues to be exposed to.

Many of the libraries of Yemen were time and again affected by instances of loss of books through theft, confiscations, and even destruction of entire collections. Incidents of destruction of private book collections occurred, for example, during the Ottoman occupation of major parts of Yemen, between 1547 and 1629 and again between 1872 through 1918. Moreover, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, manuscripts became a highly valuable commodity when European, Turkish, and Saudi merchants and travelers to Yemen began to purchase thousands of manuscripts which are nowadays housed by libraries outside of the country. In fact, one of the principal purposes behind Imam Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn's previously mentioned founding in 1925 the Khizāna al-mutawakkiliyya in Sanaa where he had the remains of the former ruler's library in Ḥafār transferred to was to put a stop to theft and other losses—the numerous codices that had originally been produced for the library of Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh and were sold at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century to various libraries in Europe indicates that this was indeed a serious concern.

Confiscations of private libraries also frequently occurred over the course of the twentieth century, as was repeatedly the case for example under the reign of Imām Aḥmad b. Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn, 1948 through 1962. Following the coup d'état of 1962, the former palace library and the personal collections of the members of the royal family, as well as the collections of former ministers and other government officials were confiscated and eventually transferred to the newly founded Dār al-

makḥṭūṭāt ("House of Manuscripts"). The unpacking and arranging of the thousands of codices, as well as the assignment of shelfmarks was a slow and gradual process—over the decades the shelfmark system of the "House of Manuscripts" holdings was changed repeatedly, as is reflected in the two catalogues of its holdings, of 1978 and of 2005. During my visit to Ṣan‘ā’ in July-August 2009, yet another attempt was made to recatalogue the collection and to assign new shelfmarks to the codices. Moreover, the collection still seems to be growing—a large number of "confiscated" codices (3,380 volumes) were handed over to the "General Organization for Antiquities and Libraries" as recent as 2014. The history and the holdings of the many private libraries and libraries that were attached to mosques and *madrasas* throughout Yemen remains largely undocumented, and their current situation is in most cases uncertain. Only a fraction of the smaller libraries of Yemen have by now been catalogued, and the few available catalogues seem to cover only portions of the holdings of the relevant libraries.

There are other factors which need to be taken into account. Family libraries change ownership from generation to generation and are often divided among the heirs as a result. It is often unclear whether a library, quoted in the earlier literature, still exists, and, if so, under whose ownership.

Moreover, for centuries manuscripts have been a commodity in Yemen, and illicit trafficking in cultural objects, including manuscripts, continues up until today. Over the second half of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first century Yemeni authorities have been constantly fighting manuscript dealers, trying to prevent them from smuggling manuscripts out of the country. In addition to this, many of the libraries of Yemen have been severely damaged, looted, or even

destroyed over the past decades as a result of the political turmoil and wars that Yemen has witnessed, and the continuing war in the country, with daily bombardments, constitutes an imminent threat not only to the local population but also to the cultural heritage of the country, including its many libraries.

[Salvaging the Zaydi/Yemeni Manuscript Tradition, 1951 through 2017](#)

In view of the richness and the uniqueness of the manuscript holdings of the many public and private libraries in Yemen, various international projects have been launched since the early 1950s to salvage some of these treasures. In 1951-1952, in 1964, and again in 1974, scholarly expeditions from Egypt were dispatched to Yemen. They explored the holdings of some of the most important public and private libraries in Sanaa and other cities, and produced microfilms of selected manuscripts which they brought back to Cairo. In 1982 and 1985, delegations from Kuwait assessed and partly microfilmed the manuscripts of the al-Aḥqāf Library in Tarīm and the "House of Manuscripts" in Sanaa. Iranian governmental and private institutions also engaged in filming significant numbers of Yemeni manuscripts at the turn of the millennium.

The various initiatives to produce surrogates of manuscripts, be it in microform or digitally, did not aim at preserving the manuscripts—the intention was rather to make them accessible to the respective local scholarly community in Egypt, Kuwait, or Iran, hence the selective approach in all those endeavors. Characteristically, the surrogates are housed in the respective institution that was in charge of filming them in the first place with no attempt to make them available to a larger audience. It is only in the case of Iran that the digital surrogates prepared were also made available to the Imam Zayd b. Ali Cultural Foundation in Sanaa whose personnel continued to digitize the holdings of additional private libraries. Two

more recent digitization efforts supported by the German Foreign Office and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities also aimed at capturing a select number of private collections. Again, only a fraction of these digitized materials are available through open access to date.

With few exceptions, the earlier microfilming and digitization projects did not include any of the European collections, and little (if any) thought had been given to the question how Yemeni scholars might gain access to the Yemeni / Zaydi holdings of libraries outside of their country. Even when they are aware of the existence of manuscripts outside the country that are relevant to their work, it is virtually impossible for Yemeni scholars to gain access to them. And although some Western libraries with significant holdings of Yemeni manuscripts adopt an open access policy, only a fraction of the Yemeni manuscripts in Europe and the US has so far been digitized and is available online. I am not aware, for example, of a single critical edition prepared by a scholar of Yemen in which manuscripts from Europe have been consulted alongside copies from Yemen.

"The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT)" aims at salvaging the Zaydi literary tradition by gathering digital surrogates of as many Zaydi manuscripts as possible in a single repository and providing comprehensive and systematic open access to them for scholars worldwide, regardless of whether the physical manuscripts are preserved in Europe or in North America, in Yemen or elsewhere in the Middle East. The ZMT is a joint project initiated by the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), Princeton, in partnership with the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library (HMML) at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Work on the ZMT began in September 2016 and to date the project comprises some 1,000 digitized manuscripts from several

European and Yemeni libraries which are accessible online through the project's Portal and HMML's *virtual* reading room. The initiative consists of two components: (i) a Digital Portal on the IAS website that serves as a comprehensive research guide to relevant collections of Zaydi manuscripts, providing precise information on the location of each collection with a full list of its holdings and the relevant bibliography for every single codex. The Digital Portal further functions as a *gateway* to (ii) the manuscript surrogates that are available in HMML's *virtual* reading room (vHMML), which serves as a repository of digital surrogates of manuscript codices and will eventually include full metadata for the manuscripts through its cataloging tools.

[The Library of the Shrine of Imām al-Hādī, Ṣa‘da](#)

Among the collections that have recently been processed for inclusion in the ZMT project are the manuscripts of the library of the Imām al-Hādī mosque in Ṣa‘da which was bombed in May 2015. The manuscripts were rescued and are nowadays safely stored away in an unknown location in Ṣa‘da or its vicinity.

The history of the collection is characteristic for many manuscript libraries of Yemen, private as well as public. While the mosque was constructed still during the lifetime of Imam al-Hādī in the ninth century CE, the library was set up only during the early twentieth century, together with the "religious school" (*madrasa ‘ilmiyya*) which is also located on the premises of the mosque. While the library was counted at some point among the most important mosque libraries of Yemen, the situation began to deteriorate some time before the revolution of 1962 with the appointment of *al-qāḍī* Ḥasan [b.] Ṣalāḥ Dabbāsh as its custodian, who was succeeded after his demise by his son, Ṣālīḥ. During their terms the library suffered from neglect and was subject to regular incidents of burglary and theft. The

situation improved again during the 1990s following the appointment of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shāmī (1926-2013) as minister of religious endowments and guidance (*wazīr al-awqāf wa-l-irshād*). Al-Shāmī took measures to salvage the library and encouraged the preparation of a catalogue of its holdings.

In his survey of manuscript libraries of Yemen on 1993, ‘Abd al-Wahhāb ‘Alī al-Mu’ayyad (d. 2005) gives the total number of manuscripts in the collection as "ca. 100", adding that "the collection has been halved over the last thirty years owing to several factors, including war". The figure provided by al-Mu’ayyad is corroborated by a catalogue prepared by ‘Abd Allāh Ḥammūd Dirham al-‘Izzī (completed before 2000 and published in 2004). The highest shelfmark recorded by al-‘Izzī is "218" while his catalogue covers a total of only 131 codices. Assuming that the collection has again grown since 1993, this would confirm al-Mu’ayyad's statement that the collection had been halved over the past three decades.

On the basis of al-‘Izzī's catalogue (in which the individual shelfmarks are recorded), the arrangement of the manuscripts in the library looks as follows:

[TABLE IN PPT]

In addition to these, the digital collection of the Imām al-Hādī library comprises twenty-one codices that are not described in al-‘Izzī's catalogue. The possibility that these constitute later additions to the library cannot be ruled out, though it might be more plausible that al-‘Izzī's catalogue covers only a part of the library's holdings. The actual size and scope of its manuscript collection thus remains uncertain—an observation that applies to most if not all published catalogues of manuscript collections in mosque libraries or of collections in family ownership in Yemen.

Al-Izzī's partial catalogue of the collection and, more importantly, the digital surrogates that are now accessible through vHMML provide a sound material basis to study the curriculum that was taught at the "religious school" (*madrasa ʿilmiyya*) in Ṣaʿda. The majority of titles represent the standard canon of Zaydi scholarship at the turn of the twentieth century, with a clear focus on Islamic law that is suggested by the proportionally high percentage of works on law, legal theory and inheritance law.

At the same time, the Imām al-Hādī library houses a number of rarities by authors both within the Zaydi tradition and beyond.

A noteworthy work in the field of theology within the Zaydi tradition is *ʿUmdat al-mustarshidīn*, a theological summa by the prominent thirteenth-century Yemeni/Zaydi theologian Abū ʿAbd Allāh Ḥumayd b. Aḥmad al-Muḥallī (d. 652/1254) that is preserved in only a few manuscripts. Of special value is further *al-Masāʾil al-nāfiʿa bi-l-barāhīn al-qawīyya al-ṣādiʿa*, by the 19th-century Zaydi theologian al-Ḥasan b. Yaḥyā b. ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. Qāsim al-Qāsimī al-Muʿayyadī al-Ḍaḥyānī (1863/64-1924/25), which was transcribed from the author's rough copy, on 14 Rabīʿ II 1316/September 1898.

For the Muʿtazilite tradition, the library holds an incomplete copy of the first part of the theological summa, *K. al-Muʿtamad fī uṣūl al-dīn*, by Rukn al-Dīn Maḥmūd b. al-Malāḥimī al-Kh^wārazmī (d. 536/1141), the principal representative of the school of Abū l-Ḥusayn al-Baṣrī (d. 436/1044); volume two of the latter's work on legal theory, *K. al-Muʿtamad fī uṣūl al-fiqh* which was popular among the Zaydis of Yemen; and an incomplete copy of the last volume of Abū Saʿd al-Muḥassin b. Muḥammad b. Karāma al-Bayhaqī al-Barawqanī's ("al-Ḥākim al-Ġiṣūmī", d. 494/1101) *Sharh ʿUyūn al-masāʾil*, an encyclopaedic theological summa with

detailed discussions of substances, physics and biology from a Muʿtazilite theologian's point of view. This last part of the *Sharḥ al-ʿUyūn* is otherwise only attested in two manuscripts that are preserved in Sanaa and in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.

The library also has a copy of *K. Nuṣrat al-shīʿa ʿalā ahl al-madhāhib al-shanīʿa*, by a certain "ʿAbd al-Maḥmūd b. Dāwūd". The author's name is a pseudonym of the renowned thirteenth-century Twelver Shīʿī scholar Raḍī al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Mūsā Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 664/1266), and the work in question is his polemical anti-Sunni text *al-Ṭarāʾif fī [maʿrifat] madhāhib al-ṭawāʾif*. It is only among the Zaydis of Yemen that this otherwise famous work circulated under a different title that is attested in this manuscript.

The oldest codex in the collection is a multitext volume containing, among other things, the *K. al-Maqāmāt* of Abū Muḥammad al-Qāsim b. ʿAlī al-Ḥarīrī al-Baṣrī (d. 516/1122) (dated to Jumādā II 653). It is followed by a precious copy of Abū l-Ḥasan al-Māwardī's (d. 450/1058) *al-Aḥkām al-sulṭāniyya* that was completed in Rabīʿ I 627. Both works are extremely popular all over the Muslim world—they have been printed repeatedly and have been translated into several languages. And yet none of the editors of any of the two texts was aware of those two precious copies in Ṣaʿda, which count among the earliest witnesses.

Other than that the majority of the manuscripts in the collection were produced during the 14th through 19th century, in addition to eight manuscripts were transcribed, according to al-ʿIzzī, during the twentieth century. The overall ratio is again typical for the majority of Yemeni libraries.

Conclusion

The ZMT project will help to bring more of the enormous richness and intellectual diversity of Islamic culture to the forefront and make it accessible for users worldwide. Moreover, it is particularly the rational heritage of Islamic thought, epitomized by the doctrinal thought of the Mu‘tazila which had been embraced by the Zaydis since the ninth century, that is exclusively preserved in the Yemen. Salvaging this material and making it accessible to a wider audience in the Islamic world will thus render a service to Muslim intellectuals in their attempts to formulate new vistas to harmonize religion and modernity.

Let me end with yet another quotation from Irina Bokova, Director General of UNESCO, "World heritage is built on the idea that there are cultural and natural heritages of universal value that we must protect together." This is a responsibility we all share, and I believe that scholars can and should play a central role in this endeavour.

This immediately ties in with the mission statement of the Institute for Advanced Study as expressed, for example, in a memorandum submitted on April 18, 1941 by the Institute's "Faculty of Humanistic Studies":

"... In these days of crumbling values it falls to the lot of humanists to save learning and scholarship from extinction and it is the privilege of Institutes like ours to become the asylum particularly of those studies which a period of upheaval considers of no use whatever. ... it may be the destiny of our Institute and of similar centers to rescue what they can of a civilization about to suffer ship-wreck. If the lights are not to go out for good and all, it will be because of the small handful of scholars here and elsewhere who are devoted to learning for its own sake. This is a point of view which is not popular just now: it is, however, of the utmost

importance that it be understood and appreciated by those who have the future of the Institute in their hands."

While those dramatic words were uttered against the background of the Nazi regime in Germany going into its eighth year and most of continental Europe having been invaded by either German, Soviet or Italian troops, the core message of the faculty's statement has still some bearing in our days, and has immediate relevance for scholarship that addresses threatened segments of the common intellectual history of mankind, as is the case with the Zaydi manuscript tradition and the rational heritage of Islam.

Efforts such as the "Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: A Digital Portal" require technical as well as financial support. My sincerest thanks go to Father Columba Stewart, director of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library, and his entire team, which serves as the repository for the Zaydi manuscripts. HMML was established some 50 years ago, and is nowadays the leading institution of its kind. It provides the latest technology and guarantees lasting sustainability for the ZMT project. I also gratefully acknowledge the enthusiastic support of a growing number of libraries who agreed to contribute their materials to the project. To date, we have agreements with the State Library of Berlin, the Austrian National Library, Leiden University Library, the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei e Corsiniana in Rome, the Columbia University Library, the Perry-Castañeda Library at the University of Texas at Austin, and the Bavarian State Library in Munich, and negotiations with additional libraries are under way.

Thanks are also due to the Carnegie Corporation of New York who graciously agreed to fund the development of the software application that runs the Digital Portal on the IAS website.

I would also like to thank the Institute for Advanced Study and particularly its IT department whose staff has supported the evolution of this project from the very beginning and continues to play an active role in its future development. Several years before I was appointed to the IAS I had already started to entertain the idea to create a virtual library of the Zaydi manuscript tradition that would bring together the material that is dispersed all over the world and to make it accessible to scholars worldwide—but it is only here at the IAS that I received the necessary technical support to realize this dream. For this I am very grateful.

Apart from this, the ZMT project which by now has close to 1,000 datasets, is a labor of love that is based on donations of digitized materials from libraries, institutions, and individuals, as well as considerable personal funds. Its continued success will eventually depend on future donations.