

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) Project Digitizing the Collections of Yemeni Manuscripts in Italian Libraries*

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The literary tradition of the Zaydi community, a branch of Shi'i Islam that originated in Kufa and later developed in Northern Iran and Yemen, is among the richest and most variegated strands within Islamic civilization and at the same time one of the least studied due to issues of preservation and access. The ZMT project is an attempt to create a digital library of the literary tradition of Zaydism.

Zaydism and its manuscript tradition

Zaydism has flourished mainly in two regions, the mountainous Northern Highlands of Yemen and the Caspian regions of Northern Iran. The two Zaydi states that were established in the third century/ninth century CE initially constituted separate political and cultural entities. The situation changed in the early sixth/twelfth century, when a rapprochement between the two communities began that eventually resulted in their political unification. The 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. While Yemen largely replaced Northern Iran as the intellectual center of Zaydism, the Zaydi communities in Iran experienced a gradual decline, though scattered documentary and manuscript evidence confirms that the tradition of Zaydi learning continued in Iran at least until the tenth/sixteenth century.¹

As a result of their continuous presence in Yemen since the third/ninth century, the rich and still largely unstudied manuscript tradition of the Zaydis has largely survived until today: Zaydi Yemen is characterized by a religio-dynastic continuance that stretched over nearly a millennium until the abolition of the Zaydi imamate in 1962, and the country witnessed various initiatives to affirm and renew the state's Zaydi identity during the thirteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries CE. During these periods, the production of books rose exponentially and new libraries were founded. Vicissitudes notwithstanding, the remarkable political continuity of the Zaydis is reflected in an almost uninterrupted library tradition in the country which remains unexplored.²

* Our thanks to Camilla Adang for her comments on an earlier draft of this report.

1 Ansari and Schmidtke 2017, chapters 5 and 6; Ansari and Schmidtke 2019.

2 Ansari and Schmidtke forthcoming a.

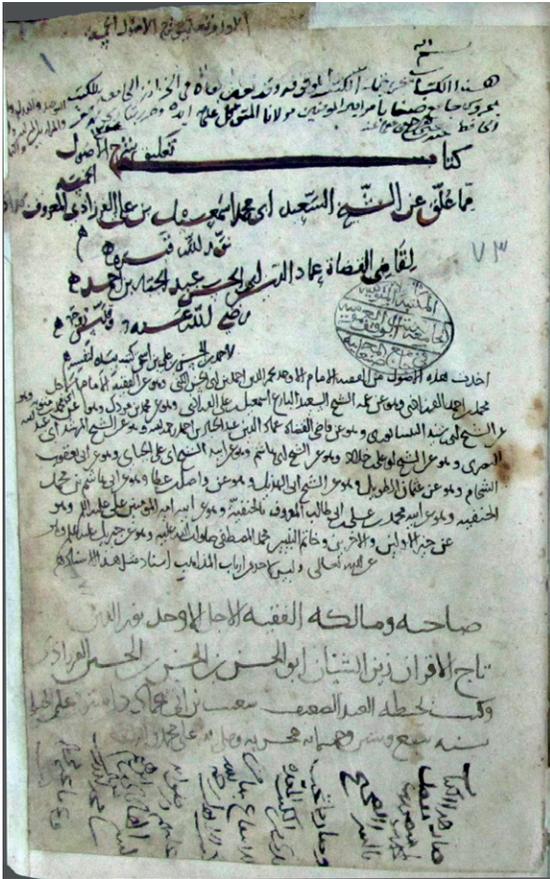


Fig. 1. MS Šan ‘ā’, Maktabat al-awqāf 599 (titlepage), containing a supercommentary (*ta‘līq*) of Ismā‘īl b. ‘Alī b. Ismā‘īl al-Farrazādī on the commentary (*ta‘līq*) by Abū l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. Abī Hāšim al-Ḥusaynī al-Qazwīnī (‘Mānkdm Šašdīw’, d. c.425/1034) on the *Šarḥ al-Uṣūl al-ḥamsa*, a doctrinal summa by *qāḍī l-quḍāt* ‘Abd al-Ġabbār al-Hamadānī (d. 415/1025), the head of the Baṣran school of the Mu‘tazila of his time (codex completed on 3 Muḥarram 543/May 1148, in Rayy, Iran)

The Zaydi literary tradition is among the richest and most variegated strands within Islamic civilization, and at the same time one of the least studied. Moreover, Zaydis were at all times intimately familiar with the relevant intellectual strands beyond the confines of their own community, and they actively engaged in them. The typical library of a Zaydi scholar would 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 (Fig. 1). The Yemeni manuscript collections thus constitute a unique treasure trove for large segments of the Islamic intellectual tradition—Sunnī as well as Shi‘i.³

At the same time, the written Zaydi manuscript heritage is widely dispersed. The most significant and by far largest collections of Zaydi manu-

3 Ansari and Schmidtke 2017, chapters 1–12; Schmidtke 2018a and 2018b.



Fig. 2. Inside the Maktabat al-awqāf, Şan‘ā’ (2010, photo: Sabine Schmidtke)



Fig. 3. Scholars cataloguing manuscripts in the Dār al-maḥṭūṭāt, Şan‘ā’ (2009, photo: Sabine Schmidtke)

scripts are housed by the many public and private libraries of Yemen, first and foremost the Maktabat al-awqāf on the premises of the Great Mosque of Şan‘ā’ (founded by Imām Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn in the 1920s as al-Ḥizāna al-mutawakkiliyya; Fig. 2) and the Dār al-maḥṭūṭāt (formerly al-Maktaba al-ġarbiyya, which was founded in 1969) which is located in the immediate vicinity of the Great Mosque (Fig. 3). The catalogues of the two libraries cover only part of their respective holdings. Among the numerous private and mosque libraries throughout the country, only a few have been partially catalogued (Fig. 4).⁴

4 Schmidtke 2018c.



Fig. 4. Private Library in Şan'ā', with manuscripts stored in the lower shelf (2011; anonymous photographer)

The manuscript libraries in Yemen are under imminent threat. Throughout much of 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, with only limited success it would seem. In addition to this, many of the private libraries in Yemen have been severely damaged, looted, or even destroyed over the course of the twentieth century as a result of the political turmoil and wars that Yemen has witnessed.⁵ The continuing war in the country has accelerated this process (Figs 5 and 6).⁶



Fig. 5. The fortified Yemeni town of Kawkabān in 1978, home to several important manuscript libraries, including the library of the Madrasat Şaraf al-Dīn (photo courtesy Daniel Martin Varisco)



Fig. 6 Kawkabān, after an attack by an U.S. backed Saudi coalition aircraft in February 2016 (photo: Twitter)

5 Hollenberg and Regourd 2016.

6 Schmidtke 2018b; Sahner 2018; Ansari and Schmidtke forthcoming b. Cf. also Craig 2015; Khalidi 2015 and 2017; Raghavan 2016; Varisco 2016; Jarus 2019; Mashberg 2019.

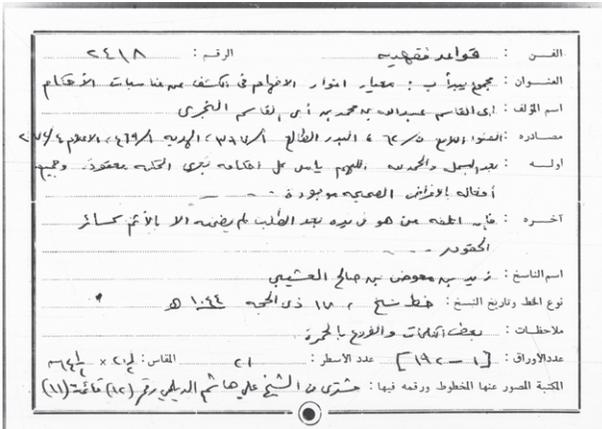


Fig. 7. MS Riyadh, Ġāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd 2418, containing a collective manuscript of Yemeni provenance that was sold to the library by al-Šayḥ ‘Alī Hāšim al-Daylamī (catalogue card)



Fig. 8. MS Riyadh, Ġāmi‘at al-Imām Muḥammad b. Sa‘ūd 2418, containing a collective manuscript of Yemeni provenance that was sold to the library by al-Šayḥ ‘Alī Hāšim al-Daylamī (first page of the codex)

Important collections of Yemeni manuscripts are also held in Europe (Italy, Germany, The Netherlands, and the UK), the US (especially Princeton, Yale), as well as in some Middle Eastern libraries, in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. These had been brought together by European, Ottoman-Turkish, and Saudi scholars, diplomats, merchants and travelers to Yemen since the second half of the nineteenth century (Figs 7 and 8).⁷

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century and during the early twenty-first century, various microfilming and digitization projects have been carried out by teams from Egypt, Kuwait, Iran, Germany, and the United States in an attempt to facilitate access to the manuscript holdings of the libraries in Yemen.⁸ Despite the significance of these efforts, there are also several downsides. The Egyptians, and later the Kuwaitis, had a selective

7 Schmidtke 2011 and 2017.

8 Schmidtke and Thiele 2011; Schmidtke 2017; Ahmed 2016.



Fig. 9. Yemeni operators in Ṣan‘ā’ digitizing a manuscript from a private collection (2009, photo: Sabine Schmidtke)

approach in their choice of manuscripts to be microfilmed. Scholars of Egypt published a fair amount of works they had brought from Yemen during the late 1960s and 1970s, and with this rendered a great service to scholarship. The publication of these works evoked a reappraisal of rationalism as evidenced in the theological writings of the Mu‘tazila, resulting in a movement that was summarized under the label Neo-Mu‘tazila. The Iranians, who microfilmed and later digitized significant amounts of Yemeni manuscripts during the early 2000s, had a far more comprehensive approach—in many cases they filmed entire collections. The various digitization efforts supported by the German Foreign Office (2010) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities (2010–2013)—both carried out in cooperation with the local Imam Zayd bin Ali Cultural Foundation (Mu‘assasat Zayd b. ‘Alī al-ṭaqāfiyya)—aimed at digitizing a select number of private collections in their entirety (Fig. 9).⁹

While the various efforts to capture manuscripts in Yemen aimed at providing scholars outside of Yemen access to the material, little thought has been given to the question of how Yemeni scholars might gain access to holdings of libraries outside their country and only a fraction of the Zaydi/Yemeni manuscripts held outside of Yemen is available through open access. On the other hand, Yemenis have made attempts over the past decades to ‘repatriate’ some of the important collections of Yemeni manuscripts in the West, but none of them came to fruition. In 2008, the Yemeni Ministry of Culture apparently planned ‘to get back the Yemeni manuscripts at European libraries, particularly those that are available at the Italian ones’, and at one stage a senior Yemeni diplomat negotiated with the Ambrosiana to purchase surrogates of portions

9 Hollenberg 2012; Schmidtke 2016. See also <<http://pudl.princeton.edu/collections/pudl0079>> (consulted July 2, 2019).



Fig. 10. Eduard Glaser collection of Yemeni mss in Vienna with Dr. Andreas Fingernagel, Head of the Department of Manuscripts and Rare Books at the Austrian National Library in Vienna (2012, photo: Sabine Schmidtke)

of the Caprotti collection, but the costs were beyond the means available to the embassy. Moreover, during 2014 the then newly appointed Minister of Cultural Affairs approached the US ambassador to Yemen, Matthew H. Tuel-ler, in order to bring about the return of ‘any Yemeni historical manuscript in the US’ to Yemen, an initiative that was never pursued any further.¹⁰

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) project

To remedy the calamitous impact of the war situation in present-day Yemen on the country’s cultural heritage, the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) project was initiated in 2016 to build up a virtual library of the Zaydi / Yemeni literary heritage which is being made freely available to scholars and intellectuals worldwide. As such it also allows for digital repatriation of the extensive holdings of manuscripts of Yemeni provenance in libraries outside the country. The ZMT is a joint project initiated by the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), Princeton, in partnership with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) at Saint John’s University, Colledgeville, Minnesota.¹¹

¹⁰ Schmidtke 2018c.

¹¹ <https://www.ias.edu/digital-scholarship/zaydi_manuscript_tradition> (consulted July 2, 2019).

Through generous funding provided by the National Endowment of the Humanities,¹² the Carnegie Corporation of New York, the Charles & Lisa Simonyi Fund for the Arts and Sciences, the Gerard B. Lambert Foundation, the Ruth Stanton Foundation, Sherwin Seligsohn, and the Middle Easter Center at the University of Pennsylvania, some 2,000 codices have already been uploaded onto vHMML, and until the end of 2019, the entire collections of Yemeni manuscripts held by the libraries of Leiden University Library,¹³ Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin,¹⁴ Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (Fig. 10), as well as the holdings of some fifteen private libraries in Yemen will be available online, some 3,000 codices in total.

The ZMT project and Italian library collections

In cooperation with the Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei in Rome (BANLC), the Project is currently also engaged in including all the Italian collections of Yemeni manuscripts into vHMML, some of them still ignored, uncatalogued and yet to be investigated. Joining the ZMT has been a great opportunity to track all the Arabic collections that might include Yemeni manuscripts as well as individual manuscripts scattered in the different Italian institutions and libraries during the first half of the last century.¹⁵

In 2017, sixty-eight Yemeni Arabic manuscripts of the Lincei holdings have been digitized and uploaded and they are now available at the vHMML (including basic metadata, see Fig. 11).¹⁶ The collection was purchased and mainly built up by two Italians, namely the Orientalist scholar Ettore Rossi, who was in Yemen in 1937–1938, and the physician Cesare Ansaldi who was a member of the Italian health mission to Yemen from 1929 to 1932.¹⁷ One manuscript produced in Yemen was donated to the Accademia by the Islamicist Leone Caetani in 1911.¹⁸ The oldest one among the manuscripts held by the Accademia dei Lincei dates back to the end of the seventh/thirteenth century (Fig. 12).

12 Grant number: PW-258989-18.

13 Vrolijk 2018.

14 Pehlivanian and Rauch 2018.

15 For the political background of the Italian presence in Yemen during the first decades of the twentieth century, see Baldry 1976–77. For the Italian scholarship on Yemen during the pre-Islamic and the Islamic period, see Traini 2006; Antonini de Maigret, D'Amore and Jung 2012.

16 <<http://hmml.org/digital-copies-rossi-ansaldi-caetani-yemeni-manuscript-collections-now-available-vhmml-reading-room/>> (consulted July 2, 2019). See also the ZMT digital portal at <<http://projects.ias.edu/zmt/>> (consulted July 2, 2019).

17 Nallino 1933; Traini 1967.

18 Colini 2016.

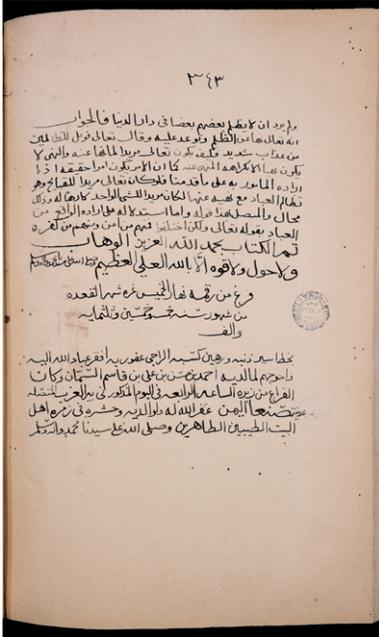


Fig. 13. MS Rome, Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino (IPO-CAN), CAN_Ar.I-46bis_3-1 (final page), containing the *K. al-ṣāfi* by Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh 'Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza (d. 614/1217), a refutation directed against the Aṣ'arites of Yemen, focusing specifically on the notion of the imamate. The copy was completed in Ḍu l-Qa'da 1355[/January-February 1937] in Ṣan'ā'

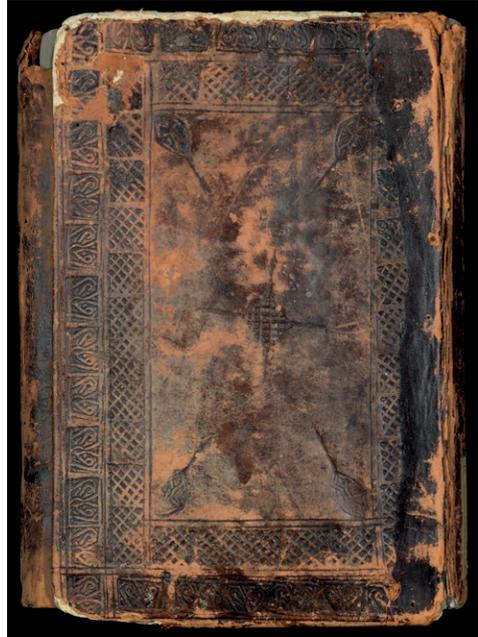


Fig. 14. MS Rome, Istituto Centrale per il Restauro e la Conservazione del Patrimonio Archivistico e Librario (ICRCPAL), Bib 1058 (binding from the seventh/thirteenth century)

eighth/fourteenth century), while the Biblioteca di Storia della Medicina of the University 'La Sapienza' (BSM, Rome), has two additional manuscripts donated by Sarnelli.

The Biblioteca of the Sistema di Ateneo, Asiatic Section, of the University 'L'Orientale' in Naples (UNIOR) has joined the Project in 2019. Among their 256 Arabic manuscripts—currently being digitized—forty-two are Zaydi,²¹ whose Yemeni origin had never been recognized so far (Fig. 15). They were collected by Sarnelli, who was in Yemen in the years 1930–1932 (Fig. 16).

21 Celentano and Sarnelli Cerqua 1984.



Fig. 15. MS Naples, Biblioteca of the Sistema di Ateneo, Asiatic Section, 'L'Orientale', ARA 2 (titlepage), containing *K. Mağma 'al-hulāsa fī l-tıbb*, by one Faṭhī al-Muḥarrir



Fig. 16. MS Naples, Biblioteca of the Sistema di Ateneo, Asiatic Section, 'L'Orientale', ARA 5 (ex libris Tommaso Sarnelli)



Fig. 17. Emilio Dubbiosi collection, Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO, Rome), now deposited in the National Library in Rome



Fig. 18. MS Rome, Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO), Dubbiosi 31

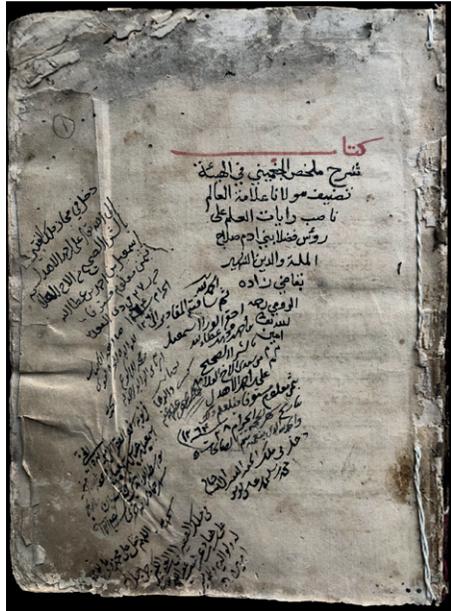
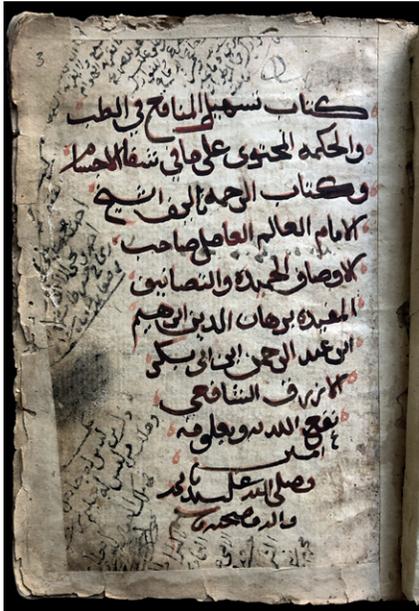


Fig. 19. MS Rome, Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO), Dubbiosi 37, containing *K. Tashīl al-manāfi’ fī l-tibb wa-l-ḥikma al-muhtawī ‘alā mā fī šifā’ al-aḡsām* by Burhān al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. ‘Abd al-Raḥmān b. Abī Bakr al-Azraq al-Šāfi‘ī (active ninth/fifteenth century)

Fig. 20. MS Rome, Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente (IsIAO), Dubbiosi 32, containing *Šarḥ Mulaḥḥaṣ al-Ġaġmīnī, a commentary on al-Mulaḥḥaṣ fī l-hay’a* of Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Ġaġmīnī al-Ḥwārazmī (d. 745/1344-45) by Ġalāl al-Dīn Mūsā b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd al-Rūmī al-Bursawī al-Ḥanafī al-ma’rūf bi-Qāḍī Zāda (d. after 835/1432), a popular work on astronomy

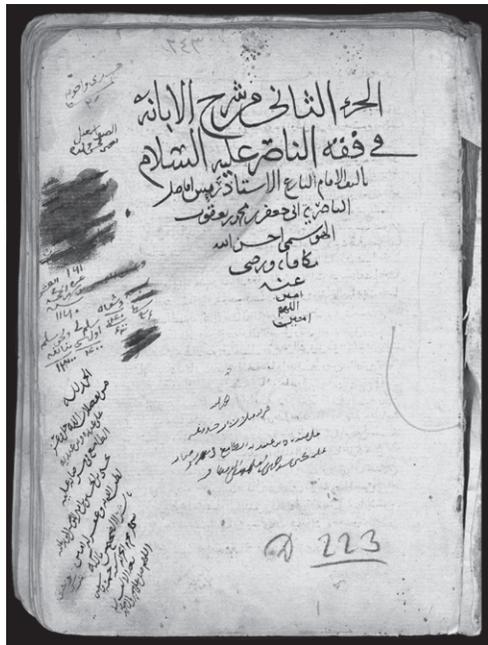


Fig. 21. MS Milan, Biblioteca Ambrosiana, D 223 ar, a multiple-text volume containing part two of the legal work *Šarḥ al-Ibāna fī fiqh al-Nāṣir al-Uṭrūs*, by Abū Ġa'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Hawsamī (fl. mid-fifth/eleventh century), copied in 969[1561]

One of the most original and lesser-known collections, comprising 223 Yemeni codices, is represented by the Fondo Dubbiosi, donated to the former Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente (IsIAO, Rome) in 1990 by the family of doctor Emilio Dubbiosi, medical officer in Yemen from 1926 to 1938 (Fig. 17). History, medicine, zoology, geography and theology are the prevailing topics covered by the manuscripts, dated mostly from the sixteenth through the twentieth century CE (Figs 18, 19, 20).²²

The Nuovo Fondo at the Veneranda Biblioteca Ambrosiana, and several dozens of manuscripts of the Antico Fondo, represent the most outstanding collection of Arabic manuscripts of Yemeni provenance in the Western world, with its around 1,900 codices,²³ fully digitized by the Ambrosiana in recent years and waiting to join our Project. The collection was brought together by the Lombardic merchant Giuseppe Caprotti in Yemen in the years 1882–1919, and sold to the Ambrosiana in 1909, thanks to the Arabist Eugenio Griffini, the first scholar who studied and investigated the manuscripts.²⁴ Some tens of them date back to the ninth/eleventh through seventh/thirteenth centuries, the

22 <<https://www.raicultura.it/storia/eventi/Lapertura-della-Biblioteca-IsIAO-e-le-a51d0-b97b-4f1d-913f-85bdc188d07a.html>> (consulted July 2, 2019) On the current status of the IsIAO, see Barrera 2016.

23 Löfgren and Traini 1981–2011.

24 Griffini 1909–1920.

majority is dated to the tenth/sixteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries, corresponding to the period of greater flowering of manuscript production in Zaydi Yemen during the Qāsimī era (Fig. 21).

Finally, the Yemeni Arabic manuscripts held by the Apostolica Biblioteca Vaticana,²⁵ about 150 codices, also originated with Giuseppe Caprotti. This corpus still needs a thorough study specifically focused on them. As for the holdings of Arabic manuscripts in other Italian libraries, these still need to be searched exhaustively to verify whether they also hold Yemeni materials.

It is expected that the ZMT Project will ultimately include approximately 2,500 manuscripts from the libraries of Italy, which means about 8,600 works because of the miscellaneous nature of many Yemeni manuscripts.

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25 Levi della Vida 1935.

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