An enormous cultural heritage beyond reckoning

Over the past decades, digital collections of texts produced by Muslim authors writing in Arabic during the premodern period have mushroomed. Major libraries include al-Maktaba al-Shāmila, currently containing some 7,000 books;¹ Noor Digital Library, with 35,169 books to date;² PDF Books Library, currently containing 4,355 books;³ Arabic Collections Online (ACO), providing access to 15,131 volumes;⁴ Shia Online Library, with 4,715 books; and⁵ al-Maktaba al-Waqfiyya, containing some 10 million pages of published books (in addition to a growing number of manuscript surrogates),⁶ to name only the most important ones. Moreover, since printing technologies were adopted in the Islamic world at a relatively late stage and slow rate, much of the written cultural production of the Islamic world is until today preserved in manuscript form. And although there has been a steady rise in the publication of manuscript catalogs all over the Islamic world over the past one hundred years, much material is still unaccounted for, and discoveries of titles that were believed to be lost or that were entirely unknown regularly occur. In parallel, numerous libraries have started to digitize their collections of Islamic manuscripts, and a fair number among them provide open access to their holdings through institutional digital repositories, in addition to a growing number of online gateways to Islamic manuscripts.⁷ At the same time, what is available online, whether published or in manuscript form, is only the tip of the iceberg.

We do not possess reliable data that would allow us to quantify the overall literary production by Muslim scholars over the past 1,500 years, nor do we have estimates of the total number of preserved manuscripts. However, the following figures, randomly chosen, may provide some idea about the overall scope of the corpus. The Süleymaniye Library in Istanbul, one of the

² http://www.noorlib.ir.
³ http://alfeker.net.
⁴ http://dlib.nyu.edu/aco/about/.
⁶ https://waqfeya.net.
most important libraries in Turkey, though just one among many, holds some 100,000 manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish, and the estimated number of Islamic manuscripts in all Turkish libraries is 300,000. The Union Catalogue of Manuscripts in Iranian Libraries, published in 2011 in thirty-five volumes, lists some 400,000 manuscripts in Arabic and Persian, not including the holdings of the many uncataloged private collections in the country. Estimates of the total number of manuscripts in the countless public and private libraries in Yemen, most of which are only partly cataloged if at all, range from 40,000 to 100,000 codices. Moreover, libraries with significant holdings of Islamic manuscripts are not confined to regions that are (or were) part of the Islamic world. Instead, they are spread all over the world. Important and substantial collections of Islamic manuscripts can be found across Europe, Russia, North America, and Australia, as well as East Asia.

Further, while Jan Just Witkam rightly remarks that “Arabic traditional literature is probably the largest body of literature in the world,” it should be kept in mind that Arabic is only one of many Islamic languages. The geographical expansion of the Islamic world over time to reach from West Africa and Islamic Spain to Central and South and East Asia, sub-Saharan Africa, the Indonesian archipelago, the Volga region, and Eastern Europe, and the linguistic variety that this spread implies, gave rise to a highly variegated literary production of enormous dimensions.

And although one might distinguish a core and a periphery in terms of geography (the historical heartlands of Islam versus regions that became part of the Islamic world in later periods) and of philology (Arabic as the language of the Qurʾān and of the Prophet Muḥammad against any other Islamic languages), the resulting conventional hierarchy is unjustified and illusory, as is any attempt to define orthodoxy versus heresy. Moreover, since the second half of the twentieth century, the Muslim diaspora in Western Europe and the United States as well as in Australia has been on the rise, bringing forward its own cultural production in languages that until now have not been not considered Islamic languages.

Modern attempts to account for the Arabic/Islamic written heritage

By the turn of the twentieth century, several bibliographical enterprises were under way, attempting to provide overviews of the literary production of the Muslim world, or at least parts of it. One of these was the renowned Geschichte der arabischen Litteratur (GAL) compiled by the German orientalist Carl Brockelmann (b. 1868, d. 1956). The first edition was published in 1898 (volume 1, covering the classical period up to 1258) and 1902 (volume 2, covering the

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thirteenth through nineteenth centuries). To render his enterprise feasible, Brockelmann restricted the scope of his project from the outset: while his understanding of “literature” was a broad one, encompassing “all verbal utterances of the human mind,” he considered only Arabic titles to the exclusion of writings by Muslims in any other language, and he limited himself to listing surviving works, ignoring titles that were known only from quotations and references. He further excluded titles by non-Muslim authors. Brockelmann’s GAL prompted others to compile counterparts to fill in some of these gaps: Moritz Steinschneider (b. 1816, d. 1907) surveyed Arabic literature by Jewish authors in his *Die arabische Literatur der Juden* (1902), and the British scholar Charles Ambrose Storey (b. 1888, d. 1968) devoted most of his academic career to his *Persian Literature: A Bio-bibliographical Survey* (published between 1927 and 1990). Georg Graf (b. 1875, d. 1955) covered Christian Arabic literature in his five-volume *Geschichte der christlichen arabischen Literatur* (GCAL, published between 1944 and 1953).

Brockelmann’s GAL was based on the few available sources at the time, namely *Kashf al-ṣunūn*, a bibliographical encyclopedia by the seventeenth-century Ottoman polymath Ḥājjī Khalīfa (or Kātib Çelebi, d. 1656), listing some 15,000 book titles, mostly in Arabic, as well as some thirty-five published manuscript catalogs of collections in Europe, Istanbul, Cairo, and Algiers. Brockelmann estimated in the preface to volume 1 of the GAL (1898) that “it would take at least a further century of hard philological work before even the most important landmarks of Arabic literature would be known and accessible”—a serious underestimation, in fact, of what lay ahead. The GAL turned out to be unsatisfactory from the beginning. Between 1937 and 1942, Brockelmann published three supplementary volumes, followed in 1943 and 1949 by the publication of an updated version of the original two volumes, containing about 25,000 titles by some 18,000 authors. To illustrate the quantitative discrepancy between the corpus of extant Arabic Islamic literature described by Brockelmann and what has become accessible since, it suffices to juxtapose Brockelmann’s list of thirty-five manuscript catalogs consulted for the first edition (GAL, 1898, pp. 4–5) and his expanded list of 136 catalogs consulted for the updated edition (GAL, 1943, pp. 4–13) with the *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts*, published in 1992–94 in four volumes with close to 2,500 pages in total, a “comprehensive bibliographical guide to collections of Islamic manuscripts in all Islamic languages in over ninety countries.”

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throughout the world.”14 Today, close to three decades after its publication, the World Survey is seriously outdated, and a revised enlarged edition would easily fill six or more volumes.15 Although Brockelmann’s GAL is still regularly consulted by scholars as a first point of departure (in fact, an English translation was published as late as 201716), it is widely agreed that any attempt to publish a revised and enlarged GAL is unrealistic.17 Today, scholars engaged in surveying the written production of Muslims restrict themselves to specific subjects, areas, and time periods. The Turkish-German scholar Fuat Sezgin (b. 1924, d. 2018), for example, who published between 1967 and 2015 a bio-bibliographical survey of Arabic literature, Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums (GAS), in seventeen volumes, limited his focus to the early Islamic centuries up to the mid-fifth/eleventh century. [fig. 8] Other examples in Western scholarship include Ulrich Rebstock’s three-volume survey of Arabic literature by Mauretanian authors, Maurische Literaturgeschichte (2001), describing some 10,000 titles by about 5,000 authors from the sixth through eighteenth centuries;18 international projects such as “Islam in the Horn of Africa: A Comparative Literary Approach” (IslHornAfR), funded by the European Research Council;19 and digitally born initiatives such as “Historia de los Autores y Transmisores Andalusíes” (HATA), providing information on “works written and transmitted in al-Andalus from the eighth to the fifteenth century with a total of 5,007 Andalusi authors and transmitters, 1391 non Andalusi authors and transmitters and 13,730 titles written and transmitted in al-Andalus,”20 and HUNAYNNET, an “attempt at compiling a digital trilingual and linguistically annotated parallel corpus of Greek classical scientific and philosophical literature and the Syriac and Arabic translations thereof,” funded by the European Research Council.21 Digital platforms and tools are being developed in a number of current projects, with the aim of continuing Brockelmann’s earlier bibliographical endeavors and developing innovative ways to survey and study the Arabic written heritage. Among the most important such projects are “Bibliotheca Arabica,” funded by the Saxon Academy of Sciences and

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14 https://brill.com/view/serial/9ROP.
15 The contents of the World Survey are also accessible through https://digitallibrary.al-furqan.com/world_library, a digital resource, which is based on the World Survey but has some added value, including an interactive map to access information about the various manuscript libraries.
17 See also, for example, Max Krause’s review (published in Der Islam 24 (1937), pp. 307–311) of Brockelmann’s first supplementary volume of 1937, with a list of corrections and additions to 539 entries in Brockelmann’s work.
18 http://omar.ub.uni-freiburg.de/.
21 https://hunaynnet.oeaw.ac.at.
Middle Eastern scholars also began to embark on large-scale bibliographical enterprises around the turn of the twentieth century. Like Brockelmann, who took Ḥājjī Khalīfa’s *Kashf al-ẓunūn* as his point of departure, the Ottoman Iraqi scholar Ismāʿīl Bāshā al-Baghdādī (d. 1919) expanded on Ḥājjī Khalīfa’s work in his *Īḍāḥ al-maknūn fi ḏhayl ‘alā Kashf al-ẓunūn*, with entries for more than 40,000 titles by some 9,000 authors ranging from the seventh to the early twentieth century. But this is, again, only the tip of the iceberg—Ismāʿīl Bāshā al-Baghdādī not only focused on Arabic material but also disregarded works composed by non-Sunni scholars and by authors who flourished beyond the main centers of learning. Challenged by the Christian Lebanese Jurjī Zaydān’s (b. 1861, d. 1914) statements in his *Tārīkh ādāb al-lugha al-ʿarabiyya* (published in four volumes between 1910 and 1913) belittling the contributions of Twelver Shīʿīs to Arabic literature, a number of Shīʿī scholars strove to counter this claim by collecting, transcribing, and publishing as many earlier Shīʿī texts as possible. Their endeavors resulted in two biobibliographical encyclopedias, namely, the four-volume *Kashf al-astār ‘an wajh al-kutub wa-l-asfār* by al-Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī al-Ṣafāʾī al-Khū’ānsārī (b. 1863–64, d. 1940–41), and, more importantly, Āghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī’s (b. 1876, d. 1970) monumental *Dharīʿa ilā taṣānīf al-Shīʿa*, a comprehensive bibliographical encyclopedia of Twelver Shīʿī literature, consisting of twenty-eight volumes and describing a total of 53,510 books. Āghā Buzurg not only consulted available manuscript catalogs and publications but also traveled widely to visit the relevant public and private libraries in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Palestine, Egypt, and the Ḥijāz, where he had unprecedented access to a large number of manuscripts. The result is an unsurpassed work of meticulous scholarship, and the *Dharīʿa* constitutes until today the most important reference work for scholars engaged in the study of Twelver Shīʿism.

**Book inventories in the premodern Islamic world**

Whereas the biobibliographical works of Muslim scholars such as Ismāʿīl Bāshā al-Baghdādī or Āghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī are *de facto* modern publications, they continue a centuries-long tradition that can be traced back to the early Islamic era. In 988, some three hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muḥammad, the Baghdadian bookseller Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 990) compiled a comprehensive *Catalog* of the entire Arabic textual corpus he was able to get his

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23 http://kitab-project.org/.
hands on, and his bibliographical work in its current, incomplete state lists the works of some 3,500 or 3,700 authors—an impressive monument to the book revolution that had been brought about by the nascent Islamic civilization by the early ninth century. Many of the titles Ibn al-Nadim includes have not come down to us, and the information he provides in the Catalog is thus of primary significance. Comparable enterprises from later centuries include Miṣṭāḥ al-saʿāda wa-miṣbāḥ al-siyāda, a comprehensive inventory of books arranged according to disciplines of learning by the sixteenth-century Ottoman scholar Aḥmad b. Muṣṭafā Taṣḳöprüzade (d. 1560), and Fāhrasat al-kutub wa-l-rasāʾil, an overview of Ismāʿīlī literature by the eighteenth-century Dāʿūdī Bohra scholar Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Rasūl al-Majdūʿ (d. 1769 or 1770).

Moreover, the historical sources report about large-scale libraries in the intellectual hubs of the Muslim world from early on. The Fatimid royal libraries, for example, are said to have amassed some 1.5 million volumes towards the end of the dynasty in the early twelfth century—whether the figure is exaggerated or not, there is no doubt that their holdings were enormous and comprised the full range of what existed at the time in Arabic. One of the most important libraries during the Abbasid period was founded in Karkh (Baghdad), attached to the academy of learning (dār al-ʿilm), by the Shīʿī Shāpūr b. Ardashīr (d. 1035–36), the erstwhile vizier of the Būyid ruler Bahāʾ al-Dawla. The library existed for six decades, and its holdings amounted to some 10,000 volumes, until it was destroyed in 1059, during the Seljuq Tughril Beg’s march on Baghdad.

Although we know very little about the history, holdings, and organization of most early rulers’ libraries, as the narrative sources provide primarily anecdotal evidence, an increasing number of documentary sources have come to light over the past decades—inventory of property and records of sold objects, endowment deeds, inheritance inventories, confiscation registers, gift registers, court records, account books, and library catalogs, as well as paratextual material in manuscript codices—informing us about the history, organization and management, arrangement, and holdings of a growing number of libraries from the tenth century onwards, and more discoveries can be expected within this vibrant field of scholarship. Fairly detailed descriptions are available, for example, of the private library of the

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tenth-century Baghdadian scholar Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 947). Among the earliest extant library catalogs are a register of the holdings of the library of the Great Mosque of Qayrawān in Tunisia (dated 1294) and a catalog of the library of the mausoleum of al-Malik al-Ashraf (r. 1229–37) in Damascus, which lists some 2,000 books. The thirteenth-century Twelver Shi’ī scholar Raḍī al-Dīn Ibn Ṭāwūs compiled a catalog of the holdings of his personal library, *al-ibāna fī maʿrifat (asmā’) kutub al-khizāna* (lost), to which he later added as a supplement his *Sa’d al-su’ūd*, which is partly preserved (and was perhaps never completed). The latter work contains detailed information on some of the books Ibn Ṭāwūs had in his possession, together with extensive quotations from those books. The Ottoman Mu’ayyadzâde ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Efendi (d. 1516), a close friend and confidant of the future Ottoman sultan Bāyazīd II (r. 1481–1516), assembled an impressive personal library with an estimated 7,000 volumes. A six-folio partial inventory of his library, listing some 2,100 titles, is extant in manuscript. Bāyazīd II also commissioned an inventory of books held in the library of the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul. The inventory, dated 1503–4, records over 7,000 titles. The Hanbalī Damascene scholar Ibn ʿAbd al-Hādī (b. 1437, d. 1503) compiled a catalog of his library, comprising close to 3,000 titles. An endowment deed dated 1751 records the donation of a private book collection of more than one hundred volumes by the otherwise unknown al-Ḥājj al-Sayyid Muṣṭafā b. al-Ḥājj Efendi. From the early nineteenth century, the inventory of the private collection (amounting to almost 1,200 volumes) of the founder of the Khālidiyya branch of the

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Naqshbandiyya order in Damascus, Shaykh Khālid al-Shahrazūrī al-Naqshabandi (d. 1827), which was compiled on the occasion of a lawsuit involving the collection, has come down to us—and those are only some examples.

Closely related to catalogs and inventories of library collections are notebooks containing detailed descriptions of works and excerpts from these works, many of which are otherwise lost. A prominent example is the Kitāb al-Funūn by the Ḥanbalī author Ibn ʿAqīl (b. 1040, d. 1119), a personal notebook consisting of quotations from works by others together with the author’s own comments and thoughts on the material. The book is only partly extant in a single manuscript and is related to have consisted of two hundred or more volumes in its original form. Another example of an entirely different character is the Tadhkira, a literary notebook by the Hanafi littérature and historian Kamāl al-Dīn ʿUmar b. ʿAbd al-Adīm (b. 1192 in Aleppo, d. 1262 in Cairo). Following the aforementioned Ibn Ṭāwūs, the tradition of compiling catalogs with extensive excerpts from the books being described was continued among Shiʿī scholars, particularly among the scholars of al-Ḥilla, Ibn Ṭāwūs’s hometown. Ibārīm b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥasan al-Kafʿamī (d. 1499–1500), who resided both in al-Ḥilla and in Najaf, compiled a Majmūʿ al-gharāʾib wa-mawḏūʿ al-raghāʾib, listing the books he had access to and quoting extensively from them. Collections of selections gleaned from (now often lost) books and manuscripts also circulated under the title fawāʾid, as in the case of a notebook by the Twelver Shiʿī Iranian scholar ʿAbd Allāh al-Afandī al-ʿIṣfahānī (d. 1718), the author of biographical dictionary titled Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ, who provides information in the notebook that often complements the data provided in the Riyāḍ. Mention should also be made of the various excerpts (fawāʾid) from earlier philosophical works by the Jewish philosopher ʿIzz al-Dawla Ibn Kammūna (d. in or after 1284), compiled for his own study purposes. The Iraqi Shiʿī scholar and politician Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī (b. 1889 in Najaf, d. 1965) also produced copies and excerpts of many of the manuscripts he inspected during his study sojourns in the various libraries he visited, as is the case with the notes he took during his visit to the Rawḍa al-Ḥaydariyya in Najaf in 1911, which are extant in manuscript.

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37 Reza Pourjavady and Sabine Schmidtke, A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad: ʿIzz Al-Dawla Ibn Kammāna (d. 683/1284) and His Writings, Leiden: Brill, 2006, passim.
The interplay of oral and written culture and the predominance of a writerly culture in Islamic societies

The reasons for the eminent status of the written word and the development of the codex include the early codification of the Qurʾān and its central place in Islamic practice, its continuous transmission through carefully produced copies, and the ubiquity of Qurʾānic passages in the visual cultures of the Islamic world, in addition to its oral recitation and aural consumption. At the same time, the reports and utterances of the Prophet Muḥammad—the sunna—also held a prominent position among Muslims from early on. The codification of the prophetic traditions was concluded only centuries later, privileging orality/aurality over written transmission during the first centuries of Islam. The shift from a nonliterate mode to a literate one, from oral to written transmission, or rather to a combination of oral/aural and literary practices, is commonly dated to the ninth century, and the ways in which oral/aural and written practices interacted and complemented each other is another vibrant field of scholarship.39 The interplay between oral/aural and writerly culture gave rise to a variety of literary genres and documentary sources, which provide important information about literary cultural production among Muslims. [fig. 16]

The backbone of oral transmission was a solid chain of transmitters to guarantee the authenticity of the transmitted content, especially in view of the canonical status of the sunna of the Prophet Muḥammad. Within the larger context of Sunnism, a number of literary genres emerged, reflecting the changing landscape of traditional ḥadīth scholarship during the canonical and postcanonical periods and the related social practices. Among other purposes, they evolved into an efficient means for documenting the internal scholarly tradition, often including extensive booklists.40 The starting point in the organizational structure of such works was the list of transmitters with whom a scholar or collector of ḥadīth had studied over the course of his or her life. From the ninth century onwards, Sunni ḥadīth scholars compiled catalogs of their shaykhs, and the two genres that were most popular among scholars of the eastern and central lands of Islam were the mashyakha and the muʿjam al-shuyūkh. The entries in this type of book characteristically consist of two core elements—the names of the


transmitters with whom the shaykh in question studied and some sample hadith from the shaykh. From about the eleventh century onwards, compilers of mashyakhas and muʿjams increasingly focused on their transmitters and/or chains of transmission for the books they had studied, often going beyond the narrow confines of hadith literature and applying the practice to the whole array of disciplines of learning. Such books were arranged sometimes according to book titles, sometimes according to the names of transmitters. The Egyptian Shāfiʿī scholar Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (b. 1372, d. 1449), for example, provides an inventory of his teachers and the books he studied in a series of works, viz. his al-Muʿjam al-mufahris (arranged according to book titles) and his al-Majmaʿ al-muʿassīs li-l-Muʾjam al-mufahris (arranged by transmitters). With respect to the early modern period, mention should be made of al-Nafas al-Yamanī wa-l-rawḥ al-rayḥānī fī ijāzāt Bani l-Shawkānī by the Shāfiʿī scholar of Zabīd, Yemen, Wajīh al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Sulaymān al-Ahdal (d. 1835), detailing his teachers and the chains of transmission for the books he studied with them. The overall structural framework of al-Nafas al-yamanī is an ijāza, or “license to transmit,” issued by ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Ahdal to members of the family of the Yemeni scholar Muḥammad b. ʿAlī al-Shawkānī (d. 1834). Al-Shawkānī, in turn, provides in his Ḥithāf al-akābir bi-Isnād al-dafātir his chains of authority for each book title he mentions.

Presenting chains of transmission for books became particularly popular among scholars in the Islamic West, with compilations that were typically referred to as fihrīst, fahrasa, barnāma, or thabat, a genre whose beginnings can be dated to the late tenth century. Among the earliest extant examples is Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq Ibn ʿAṭiyya’s (d. 1147) Fahrasa, while the Fahrasa of the Andalusi scholar Abū Bakr Muḥammad Ibn Khayr al-Ishbili (d. 1179) is the first work in which the material is arranged according to disciplines. The Fihrīst by Abū l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad b. Yūsuf al-Fihrī al-Lablī (d. 1291), known as Fihrīst al-Lablī, is an example of a work within this genre containing extensive material on the Ashʿarite tradition.

The “license to transmit” (ijāza) played a central role also among the Shīʿīs, and in many ways it resembles in structural organization and social functions the various genres for documenting transmission that prevailed among the Sunnis. Although the earliest extant ijāzas date from the tenth century, an increasing number of more detailed ijāzas were issued over the centuries up until the modern period. Arranged as a rule according to transmitters, such documents include detailed bibliographical information on the books the recipient of an ijāza (the mujāz) has studied in one or often several disciplines of learning, thus providing a comprehensive picture of the literary canon that was available to the scholar in question. Moreover, an essential function of comprehensive, text-independent ijāzas is the documentation of the scholarly tradition, first and foremost the scholars making up the chains of transmission of the scholar granting the ijāza (the mujīz). This type of ijāza often fulfills functions similar to those of biographical dictionaries, and in many cases the boundary
between the two genres is blurred. A prominent example is the *K. al-Wajīz* by the prominent Shāfiʿī transmitter Abū Ṭāhir Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Silafī (d. 1180), an inventory of scholars from whom he received an *ijāza* (and whom he knew only through correspondence) with detailed, and often unique, biobibliographical information about each scholar.

Imamis and Zaydis also compiled collections of *ijāzas*, many of which contain dozens and even hundreds of such documents. Taken together, these provide detailed insights into the scholarly tradition and its literary output over the course of several centuries. Mention should be made, by way of example, of the collection of *ijāzas* that were granted to Āyat Allāh al-ʿUzmā Shihāb al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī al-Marʿashī al-Najafī (d. 1990) over his lifetime, compiled by his son al-Sayyid Maḥmūd al-Marʿashī. Among the Zaydis, *Majmūʿ al-ijāzāt*, a collection of dozens of *ijāzas* that Aḥmad b. Saʿd al-Dīn al-Miswarī (d. 1668) culled from the manuscripts available to him, is transmitted in several manuscripts.

**Muslim scholarly practices throughout the centuries**

The eminent status of the written tradition also gave rise from early on to scholarly methods among Muslims that in many ways predate some of the text-critical approaches of modern scholarship. A first attempt to analyze them was Franz Rosenthal’s 1947 publication *The Technique and Approach of Muslim Scholarship*. Towards the end of the twentieth century, systematic analysis in this area of scholarship boomed. The principal directions, which are closely related to each other, include, first of all, codicology and manuscript studies, a field that has blossomed over the past decades, as is evident in a growing number of handbooks,41 specialized journals,42 book series,43 research initiatives,44 and so on. This has led to a deeper appreciation of paratextual materials found in manuscripts, which in turn has prompted scholars to combine aspects of intellectual and social history to study, for example, not only the intellectual contents of the codices and the social practices of the producers of knowledge—the scholars and the authors—but also the habits, interests, and practices of the consumers of knowledge, the readers. [fig. 18] The increased consultation of documentary sources, such as endowment deeds and library registers, has made possible a growing number

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42 E.g., *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* (Leiden); *Manuscripta Orientalia* (St. Petersburg).

43 E.g., “Islamic Books and Manuscripts” (Leiden).

44 E.g., the Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (COMSt) network, hosted by Universität Hamburg.
of studies devoted to individual libraries, a new focus that is complemented by studies on the collections brought together by Western collectors and preserved today in European and North American libraries.45

The following examples, randomly chosen, provide a taste of Muslim scholarly practices throughout the centuries.

**Critical editions:** The twelfth-century Shīʿī scholar Faḍl Allāh b. ‘Alī al-Rāwandī al-Kāshānī (alive 1176–77) was the most important transmitter of the writings of two prominent Twelver Shīʿī scholars and officials in twelfth-century Baghdad, the brothers al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā ‘Alī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawi (b. 967, d. 1044) and al-Sharīf al-Raḍī Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Mūsawi (b. 970, d. 1015).46 Of their writings, the most important were al-Murtaḍā’s *K. al-Ghurar*, a book containing a variety of exegetical and literary materials divided into sessions (*majālis*), which was popular among both Shīʿīs and Sunnis, and the *K. Nahj al-balāgha*, a collection of utterances of semicanonical status attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib, compiled by al-Sharīf al-Raḍī. The majority of extant copies of these two works were transmitted through Faḍl Allāh, and his name shows up in nearly all chains of transmission for them. The rigorous editorial principles Faḍl Allāh applied are documented, for example, in Ms. Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Reisülküttab 53, transcribed by Muḥammad b. Aws b. Aḥmad b. ‘Alī b. Ḥamdān al-Rāwandī (dated 1170). The scribe explains that he had a copy produced by Faḍl Allāh al-Rāwandī as antigraph, and he quotes the latter’s colophon (dated 1143) in full. [fig. 19] In it, Faḍl Allāh al-Rāwandī explains the editorial principles he followed when producing his copy: he collated his own copy of the text with two other witnesses, one of them transcribed by a direct student of al-Murtaḍā. In addition, Faḍl Allāh reports that he consulted the relevant collections of poetry (diwān) to render properly the poetry included in the *Ghurar*. The manuscript also contains copious marginal glosses and corrections, indicating a similarly careful transcription process, and many of these originated with Faḍl Allāh. They include, for example, comments in which Faḍl Allāh al-Rāwandī records different copies of source texts that he has consulted; mentions of alternative interpretations or additional perspectives derived from his own studies, with precise details; and references to other works containing elaborations relevant to the discussion at hand. [fig. 20] Faḍl Allāh excelled as a critical editor of and commentator on other works, as well, notably the *K. al-Ḥamāsa*, an anthology of poetry by Abū Tammām Ḥabīb b. Aws

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al-Ṭāʾī (d. 842 or 845). Faḍl Allāh’s recension of the Ḥamāsa, together with his glosses, is preserved in a single manuscript held by the British Library. [fig. 21]

Referencing: The authorial practice of indicating the sources that one has consulted when composing a book, either in a separate bibliographical section or throughout the book and typically including the chains of transmission, can be encountered from very early on. The Sunni scholar Ibn Abī l-Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 938) lists his sources at the beginning of his Qurʾān exegesis, while the Twelver Shīʿī scholar Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Ibn Babawayh (d. 991) concludes his ḥadīth work Man lā yaḥḍuruhu l-faqīh with a chapter discussing his sources. The Andalusi scholar Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad al-Qurtubī (d. 1104) appended to his Kitāb Aqḍiyat rasūl Allāh a list of the books he had consulted; Abū Isḥāq Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Thaʿālabī (d. 1305–36) mentions in the introduction to his Qurʾān exegesis, al-Kashf wa-l-bayān fi tafsīr al-Qurʾān, all the works he used while composing the work; and a list of sources is also provided by Muḥammad b. Aḥmad al-Dhahabī (d. 1348) in his renowned Ṭārīkh al-Islam. Another example is the Ḥanafī scholar of Būkhārī, ʿImād al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Fāryābī (d. 1210–11), who completed in 1200 his Kitāb Khālīṣat al-haqāʾiq wa-niṣāb ghāʾīsat al-daqaʾāʾiq, a book on piety, ethics, and moral conduct, which he concluded with a bibliography of his sources—one of the earliest works, by the way, in which the author does not indicate his chains of transmission for the named sources. The K. al-Bahr al-muḥīṭ fi uṣūl al-fiqh, an important work on legal theory by the Shāfiʿite scholar Badr al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Bahādur al-Shāfīʿī al-Zarkashī (d. 1392), also opens with a section in the course of which he lists his sources. Since many of the books al-Zarkashī used are lost today, his often elaborate quotations allow at least a partial reconstruction of what has been lost. An exceptional example is the aforementioned Ibn Ṭāwūs who, throughout his writings, documents his sources with great accuracy, often indicating the volume, quire, or even folio or page of the codex he is quoting.47 [fig. 22]

The continuation of the manuscript culture into the twentieth century: In many parts of the Islamic world, we can observe an extraordinary continuity of manuscript culture, which has even persisted into the twenty-first century. While the reason is evident for countries with poor technological infrastructure, such as Yemen, there were and are many other reasons for this phenomenon, such as the desire to evade censorship, which can easily be applied to printed works but is impossible to enforce on the transcription of manuscripts.48 Most importantly,

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47 It is on the basis of the detailed information Ibn Ṭāwūs provides throughout his oeuvre that the contents of his library have been reconstructed; see Etan Kohlberg, A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭawus and His Library, Leiden: Brill, 1992.

however, the production of manuscripts was perceived as a kind of pious exercise. Conversely, many modern scholars and scribes also pursued scholarly purposes when transcribing books of earlier times by hand. Mention should be made, by way of example, of the Iraqi scholar Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir b. Ḥabīb al-Samāwī (b. 1876, d. 1950). Al-Samāwī hailed from Samāwa in southern Iraq, and he spent several decades in Najaf, one of the most important intellectual centers of Twelver Shi‘ism, in pursuit of scholarship. Al-Samāwī was an avid collector of manuscripts, and he transcribed hundreds of Shi‘i and non-Shi‘i texts for his personal library. Many of his transcriptions are apographs of copies held by the Rawda al-Ḥaydariyya, one of the oldest libraries of Iraq. In his colophons he typically identifies his antigraph(s), fully quoting their colophons and commenting on their quality and, accordingly, on his own contribution during the transcription and editing of the text.49 [fig. 23]

The Islamic manuscript culture under threat

There are many reasons why a certain book has come down to us while others fall into oblivion and eventually get lost. What becomes part of the canon at any given time and what is discarded is continuously renegotiated, and many of the registers discussed above in fact not only record what was there but also silently exclude what is meant to be left out.50 At the same time, it needs to be pointed out that the Islamic manuscript heritage continues to be threatened in many ways even today—it is exposed to improper handling, exposure, theft, inclement climatic conditions, and willful destruction, to name only a few dangers. Over the past decades, there have been repeated cases of deliberate destruction of Islamic manuscripts. They include the bombing of libraries, archives, and museums in Kosovo and Bosnia by Serbian nationalists, most importantly the tragic burning of the National Library of Bosnia-Herzegovina in August 1992, when some two million books were destroyed by fire.51 Moreover, a large portion of the manuscript holdings of the libraries of Iraq was either destroyed or looted in the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War and again in March 2003, following the invasion of Iraq by American and British troops.52 [figs 24, 25] It is also worrying that Islamic manuscripts

49 For other examples of scholars engaged in the transcription of manuscripts during the twentieth century, see Ansari and Schmidtke, Imāmī Thought in Transition, vol. 1, ch. 2.4.
of uncertain provenance continue to be auctioned off into private hands. Sectarianism and multiple forms of censorship pose another threat to part of the Islamic cultural heritage. Reducing the intellectually rich and diverse Islamic literary heritage to the bare minimum of what is seen as allegedly authentic is a strategy that is characteristic of Wahhabism, Salafism, and jihadism and their respective proponents. Whatever goes against their interpretation of Islam is classified as “heretical” and banned from distribution. [fig. 26] Moreover, libraries holding books and manuscripts that are seen as containing deviant views are targeted for destruction, and the same holds for historic monuments, shrines, and religious sites, which have been destroyed over the past decades by Muslim extremists in an attempt to “purify” Islam. [fig. 27] Particular mention should be made of the attempts by Islamic militants to destroy important manuscript holdings in Timbuktu in 2013; the destruction of cultural heritage in Sukur, Nigeria, in 2015; the destruction of books and manuscripts in the libraries of Mosul at the hands of ISIS in 2015; and the attacks on Zaydi libraries in Yemen. [fig. 28]

Captions

Fig. 1 Page from a lithograph print, Tabrīz 1877, of Jaʿfar b. al-Ḥasan al-Muḥaqiq al-Ḥillī’s (d. 1205–6) Sharāʾiʿ al-Islām, with several layers of commentaries in the margin

Fig. 2 Entrance to the Süleymaniye Library, Istanbul (source: http://emedrese.tv/suleymaniye-kutuphanesi-1/)

Fig. 3 Display of Muṣṭafā Dirāyatī, Fihrīṣṭān: Nuskha-i khaṭṭī-yi Īrān = Union Catalog of Iranian Manuscripts, 35 vols. (Tehran: Sāzmān-i Asnād wa Kitābkhāna-yi Millī-i Jumhūrī-yi Islāmī-yi Īrān, 1390/2011)


Fig. 4 Worldwide distribution of Islamic manuscripts (source: María Mercedes Tuya; with kind permission)

Fig. 5 A specimen of a Chinese Qurʾān commentary (source: http://answering-islam.org/Books/Zwemer/Translations/pic1.jpg)

Fig. 6 Primary languages of the Islamic world (source: https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/2ecu7a/primary_languages_of_islamic_world_84186346/)

Fig. 7 Pile of Arabic books, with titles marked on the lower edge (source: http://expositions.bnf.fr/livrarah/grands/007.htm)

Fig. 8 Fuat Sezgin’s copy of Brockelmann’s GAL with notes (photograph: Hilal Sezgin, de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Datei:FsezginLitKomm.jpg)

Fig. 9 Āghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī and his sons (source: https://commons.wikishia.net/common/File:Agha_Buzurg_Tehrani-Sons.jpeg)

Fig. 10 Title page of Ms. Dublin, Chester Beatty Library, Ar. 3315, one of the oldest extant copies of Ibn al-Nadīm’s Catalog, which was purchased in 1421 by the prominent Egyptian scholar Taqī l-Dīn Aḥmad b. ‘Alī al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442)

Fig. 11 Ms. Paris, BnF, arabe 5847, fol. 5v, illustration of a library in al-Ḥāʾirī’s Maqāmat, copy dated 1237 (source: Alamy Stock Photo, History Collection, image ID: J41HW9)

Fig. 12 From the table of contents of the catalog of the library of Sultan Bayezid II, Ms. Budapest, Hungarian Academy of Sciences, Török F 59 (source: http://real-ms.mtak.hu/id/eprint/50)

Fig. 13 Endowment deed (dated 1751), which records the donation of a private book collection of more than one hundred volumes by al-Ḥājj al-Sayyid Muṣṭafā b. al-Ḥājj Efendi (Ms. Berlin, Staatsbibliothek zu Berlin, Hs. or. 13525; with kind permission)


Fig. 15 Pages from Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī’s 1911 notes on a work by Ibn Kammūna in the Rawḍa al-Ḥaydariyya in Najaf; the notebook is nowadays in the possession of the Maktabat Āl Kāshīf al-Ghiṭāʾ in Najaf (with kind permission)

Fig. 16 Page from a Mamluk Qurʾān (source: Marcus Fraser, Geometry in Gold: an Illuminated Mamlūk Qurʾān Section, London: Sam Fogg, 2005)
Fig. 17 Beginning of a license to transmit (iḫāza), issued on 3 Rabiʿ II 606 [October 5, 1209], placed at the end of a codex (Ms. Ṣanʿāʾ, Maktabat al-awqāf, no. 696, fol. 297r; photo: Sabine Schmidtke)

Fig. 18 Shaykh Baye looking at an illuminated Qurʾān dating back to the fourteenth century, in his library, Bouj Beha, Mali in April, 2003. (Photo by XavierROSSI/Gamma-Rapho via Getty Images; gettyimages-115130675)

Fig. 19 Scribal colophon at the conclusion of Ms. Istanbul, Süleymaniye, Reisülküttab 53, fol. 281v, containing a copy of al-Murtaḍā’s K. al-Ghurar, transmitted through Faḍl Allāh al-Rāwandī

Fig. 20 Title page of Ms. San Lorenzo, El Escorial, arabe 1485, fol. 7r, containing another copy of al-Murtaḍā’s K. al-Ghurar, transmitted through Faḍl Allāh al-Rāwandī

Fig. 21 Page from al-Murtaḍā’s K. al-Ghurar, transmitted through Faḍl Allāh al-Rāwandī, with numerous marginal notes (Ms. San Lorenzo, El Escorial, arabe 1485, fol. 8r)

Fig. 22 Bookshop in Najaf, Augst 2018 (source: https://thearabweekly.com/najaf-iraqs-city-bookshops)

Fig. 23 A copy of the final colophon of part 2 (on physics) of a tripartite philosophical work by the Twelver Shīʿī scholar al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī (d. 1325), al-Asrār al-khafiyya, preserved as Ms. Tehran, Majlis 10143. The copy was produced by ʿAbd Allāh b. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-Hashtrūdī al-Tabrīzī (d. 1950–51) on the basis of a copy transcribed by Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Samawī. The scribe quotes al-Ḥillī’s authorial colophon, dated 29 Rabiʿ I 676 [August 30, 1277] (in fact, al-Hashtrūdī gives the year as “776,” which is evidently an error), followed by his own colophon, after which he cites the colophon of al-Samawī, who had completed the copy at the end of Ramaḍān 1335 [July 1917]. In it, the latter states that the antigraph (“marred with errors,” nuskha maghlūṭa) was a copy of a copy of the holograph.

Fig. 24 Bayt al-ḥikma, Baghdad, burned second floor view (photo: Nabil al-Tikriti, copyright © 2003 Oriental Institute, University of Chicago; MELA Committee on Iraqi Libraries, http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/LibraryPix/014.html)

Fig. 25 Central Awqāf Library, burned-out interior, May 2003 (photo: Nabil al-Tikriti, copyright © 2003 Oriental Institute, University of Chicago; MELA Committee on Iraqi Libraries, http://oi-archive.uchicago.edu/OI/IRAQ/mela/LibraryPix/036.html)

Fig. 26 A man tries to salvage burned manuscripts at the Ahmed Baba Institute in Timbuktu, Mali (source: Eric Feferberg/AFP/Getty Images)

Fig. 27 Burned Books in the National Library, Baghdad, April 2003 (source: Photo by Roger Lemoyne/Getty Images, Getty Images 2059109)
Fig. 28 Evidence of ongoing illicit trafficking of manuscripts from Yemen (source: Ahmed Shaker, with kind permission)