Yemen's Manuscript Culture under Attack

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The Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya as a window into the history of manuscript production and book culture in Yemen

In the aftermath of the Ottoman empire’s collapse at the end of World War I, the Yemeni highlands came under the rule of the Zaydi Ḥamīd al-Dīn dynasty. Imām al-Mutawakkil ʿalā llāh Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn (r. 1904–1948) devised an idiosyncratic religio-pedagogical program to advance religion and culture in Yemen while at the same time attempting to shield its citizens from the advancements of modernity. His educational reforms included the foundation in 1926 of a “mosque university” (al-madrasa al-ʿilmīyya), where the country’s elite was educated over the next decades. Moreover, Imām Yaḥyā issued a decree in 1925 announcing the establishment of a public library, al-Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya (nowadays Maktabat al-Awqāf), which in many ways constituted a novelty in Yemen. The Imam assigned a consecrated location to the library on the premises of the Great Mosque, and he had a new storey added for the library along the southern side of the mosque’s courtyard. The principal purpose behind the library, as spelled out in the 1925 decree, was to gather what remained of the many historical libraries dispersed all over the country and thus prevent further losses. For this purpose, the Imam appointed as library officials qualified scholars, who started to build up the collections. The details of this process can be gleaned from the notes that were added to each codex. [fig. 1] These record the provenance of the individual codices and when each one of them was transferred to the Khizāna, as well as occasional specific regulations for the codex in question. Gradually, registers of the holdings of the newly founded Khizāna were produced, culminating in a catalog, which was published in 1942. [fig. 2]

The catalog, a large folio volume consisting of 344 pages and describing some 8,000 titles of both manuscripts and printed books, is a remarkable piece of work: although the information about each manuscript and printed volume is kept at a minimum, the catalog regularly records the provenance of each item. Taken together, these data allow for an inquiry into the history of the library’s manuscript holdings (some 4,000 items), dating from the tenth century up until the first decades of the twentieth century, thus opening a representative window into the history of manuscript production and book culture in Yemen over the course of a millennium.²

² In 1984, another catalog, describing only the manuscripts of the former al-Khizāna al-mutawakkilīyya, nowadays Maktabat al-Awqāf, was published: Aḥmad ʿAbd al-Razzāq al-Ruqayḥī [et al.], Fiḥrist makḥūṭāt maktabat al-Jāmiʿ al-kabīr, Ṣanʿāʾ, 4 vols., [Ṣanʿāʾ:] Wizārat al-awqāf wa-l-irshād, 1404/1984. As in the 1942 catalog, the provenance of the individual codices is again indicated, though the information provided seems
The oldest layer of manuscripts (constituting 5% of the Khizāna’s total holdings), some of which were produced during the tenth and eleventh centuries, came from the library of Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza (r. 1197–1217), which was situated in his town of residence, Zafr, and was one of the oldest extant libraries in Yemen. [fig. 3] Another corpus of particularly precious and old manuscripts originated in the library of the Āl Wazīr, a powerful Zaydi family in Yemen, whose members were engaged in scholarship and politics since the twelfth century. Of the family’s members, some successfully rose to power, while others failed. Time and again their opponents confiscated parts of the family’s property, including their books. The codices that are recorded in the 1942 catalog as originating from the library of the Āl Wazīr match an inventory of titles confiscated from the Āl al-Wazīr following the order of the Qāsimī Imām al-Mutawakkil ʿalā llāh Ismāʿīl (r. 1644–1676), which was written out in 1690 and lists 131 items. According to historical accounts, the library collection of the Āl Wazīr, which amounted to some 900 codices by the mid-seventeenth century, had been divided between several branches of the family and was at risk of being lost as a result of the dispersal. The inventory was scribbled down on some empty pages of a codex held in the Khizāna—testimony to the care that was taken of books even in times of conflict and at the same time one example of the documentary evidence available for the rich and multifaceted history of Yemen’s book and library culture, whose story still needs to be written.³ The fate of other parts of the library of the Āl Wazīr remains unknown; a significant portion of the family’s books is related to have ended up in Istanbul.⁴ Most of what had remained with the family was confiscated and transferred to the Great Mosque after the failed coup d’état in 1948 in which members of the Āl Wazīr played a leading role.⁵

Among the largest collections that were incorporated into the Khizāna are the libraries of members of the Qāsimī family, which ruled the country for most of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. These members include three grandsons of al-Imām al-Manṣūr al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad (b. 1559, d. 1620): the eponymous founder of the dynasty, namely Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn b. al-Qāsim al-Yamanī al-Ṣanʿānī (b. 1625, d. after 1688) (whose books account for 3% of the Khizāna’s collection), al-Mahdī li-Dīn Allāh Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Qāsim (b. 1620, d. 1681) (10%), and Aḥmad’s older brother, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan b. al-Qāsim (b. 1601, d. 1668 in Rawḍa), whose private library stands out for its size (31%). Some of the leading bureaucrats during the Qāsimī period also had substantial personal libraries, the

³ The document is analyzed in depth in Ansari and Schmidtke, Towards a History of Libraries in Yemen, chapter 2.
remains of which were likewise transferred to the Khizāna (21%). Imām Yahyā also contributed a significant portion of manuscripts from his personal library to the newly founded al-Khizāna (17%). The Imām’s concern to salvage what remained of the historical libraries to prevent further losses was certainly justified. Prior to the 1925 decree, numerous codices, which originally belonged to the library of Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza as well as those founded by members of the Qāsimī dynasty, had been sold and are nowadays preserved in the libraries of Riyadh, Istanbul, Berlin, Leiden, Milan, Vienna, Munich, London, and even Benghazi.⁶ [figs 4a&4b] Others are today in the possession of private owners in Yemen.

The entries in the catalog are classified according to twenty-six disciplinary headings,⁷ and within each section, the titles are arranged in alphabetical order, with printed books and manuscripts listed side by side. [fig. 5] While the classification system, as well as other organizational principles applied in the Khizāna, emulated contemporary notions of rudimentary library science at the time of the library's founding, it also reflects the traditional canon of mainstream Zaydism. What is remarkable is the disciplines that remain uncovered in the catalog. There are no headings covering philosophy or Sufism, two strands of thought that were not cherished among the Zaydis over the course of the centuries. That the exclusion was the result of a conscious decision is corroborated by oral reports according to which the Imam gave special orders to exclude from the catalog all categories of holdings that he considered inappropriate or harmful.⁸ That works of philosophy did circulate among the Zaydis of Yemen is, however, attested since the twelfth century. The two prominent twelfth-century scholars Qāḍī Ja’far b. Aḥmad b. ʿAbd al-Salām al-Buhlūlī (d. 1177–78) and al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad al-Raṣṣāṣ (d. 1188), for example, wrote refutations of selected notions of the philosophers, and their respective works testify to their familiarity with some of the relevant primary sources, including perhaps al-Ghazālī’s Doctrines of the Philosophers (Maqāṣid al-falāsifa).⁹ Moreover, a handwritten inventory of the library of Imām al-Mutawakkil Sharaf al-Dīn Yahyā (d. 1558), a grandson of the renowned Imām al-Mahdī Aḥmad b. Yahyā b. al-Murtaḍā (d. 1437) and a prominent scholar in his own right, includes a number of philosophical titles, viz. two copies of al-Ghazālī’s Doctrines of the Philosophers (nos. 72, 145), a book on logic by al-Fārābī (no. 118b), and a partial copy of Avicenna’s

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⁷ These include Qur’ānic sciences, exegesis, prophetic traditions, dogmatics, inward sciences and ethics, logic and disputation, legal theory, Hādawī law, Sunni law, law of inheritance, grammar, morphology, eloquence, linguistics, poetry and literature, history, medicine, dream interpretation, astronomy, and agriculture.
⁸ At present, efforts are under way in Yemen to produce a new catalog of the holdings of the Maktabat al-Awqāf to include also the so far uncataloged manuscripts.
Deliverance (K. al-Najāt) (no. 130)." Imām Yahyā is also reported to have captured significant quantities of Bāṭinī works during his battles against the Ismāʿīlīs in Yemen, including an entire library of 400 codices that he received as booty in May–June 1905. None of these works are listed in the catalog, as they were kept during Imām Yahyā’s lifetime in his personal library. Their later fate and current whereabouts are unknown. The Ismāʿīlī daʿwa (“missionary propagation”) had been associated with Yemen since the end of the ninth century, that is, since about the time when Imām al-Hādī ilā l-Ḥaqq Yahyā b. al-Ḥusayn (d. 298/911) and his followers arrived in Ṣaʿda and established a Zaydi state in the northern highlands of Yemen, and the Ismāʿīlīs posed a serious threat to the Zaydis during the Ṣulayḥīd rule over Yemen, which lasted for about a century from the mid-eleventh to the mid-twelfth century. Thereafter, the Ismāʿīlī daʿwa moved eastward toward India, although the community continued to be present in small numbers in Yemen. Sufism was also largely detested by the Zaydis, and historical accounts from the Qāsimī era regularly mention repeated attempts to purge the book markets of books on Sufism, an indication that such titles did circulate also among the Zaydis.

That works pertaining to philosophy, Sufism, and Ismāʿīlism are largely missing from the catalog suggests that Imām Yahyā asked them to be left uncataloged. The 1942 catalog thus testifies both to the long library tradition of Zaydi Yemen and to the continuous efforts to cleanse the curriculum through censorship and destruction and to control the literary canon. [fig. 6]

A millenium of Zaydi presence in Yemen

Since the third/ninth century, the Zaydi community has flourished mainly in two regions, the mountainous northern highlands of Yemen and the Caspian region of northern Iran. Over the following centuries, the Zaydis of Yemen remained largely isolated from their coreligionists in Iran as a result of their geographical remoteness and political seclusion. Unlike Yemen, northern Iran was in close vicinity to some of the vibrant intellectual centers of the Islamic world at the time, and Iranian Zaydis were actively involved in the ongoing discussions. The most important among the period’s intellectual strands was the Muʿtazila, a school of thought that attributed primary importance to reason in matters of doctrine and that thrived under the Buyids, who ruled over Iran and Iraq. During the tenth century, Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Baṣrī (d. 980), who was based in Baghdad, was at the helm of the Bahshamite branch of the movement, and his students included the two Buṭḥānī brothers and later Zaydi imams Abū l-Ḥusayn Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn (Imām al-Muʾayyad bi-llāh, d. 1020) and Abū Ṭālib

10 See Ansari and Schmidtke, Towards a History of Libraries in Yemen, chapter 3.
Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn (Imām al-Nāṭiq bi-l-Ḥaqq, d. ca. 1033), who were both prolific scholars. Abū ‘Abd Allāh al-Baṣrī’s successor as the head of the school was ‘Abd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī (d. 1025). The latter enjoyed the patronage of the Buyid vizier al-Ṣāḥib b. ‘Abbād, who appointed him chief judge in Rayy (nowadays part of Tehran). ‘Abd al-Jabbār also had a fair number of Zaydis among his students, and some of these wrote commentaries on his theological works and composed their own books. Rayy continued to be a center of Zaydi Mu’tazili scholarship even after the demise of ‘Abd al-Jabbār, and we know of a number of prominent Zaydi scholarly families in the city that flourished over the next century.14

A rapprochement between the two Zaydi communities in Iran and Yemen began in the early twelfth century and 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. The sources—chains of transmission and colophons in manuscript codices, correspondence, and biographical literature, as well as biobibliographies and other historical works—provide detailed information 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 Iranian authors and acted as teachers to the Yemeni Zaydi community’s spiritual and political leaders, the imams, and to other scholars in Yemen. At the same time, Zaydi scholars traveled from Yemen to Iran and Iraq for the purpose of study. The knowledge transfer reached its peak during the reign of the aforementioned Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza. The Imam founded a library in Zafr, his town of residence, for which he had a wealth of textual sources copied by a team of scholars and scribes. Moreover, the recent discovery of some texts from Yemen in Iranian libraries suggests that the intellectual dependence of Yemeni Zaydism on the northern Zaydi state was reversed.15

The imported Basran Mu’tazili literature from Iran served as an ideological backbone in the intra-Zaydi conflict with the local movement of the Muṭarrifiyya, a school of thought within Yemeni Zaydism that had evolved over the tenth and eleventh centuries and is named after Muṭarrif b. Shihāb b. ‘Āmir b. ‘Abbād al-Shihābī (d. after 459/1067), who played a major role in formulating and systematizing its doctrines. Although the followers of the Muṭarrifiyya claimed to cling fervently to the theological teachings of al-Hādī ilā l-Ḥaqq and his sons, they developed a cosmology and natural philosophy of their own. They maintained, for example, that God had created the world out of three or four elements, viz. water, air, winds, and fire, and it is through the interaction of these constituents of the physical world that change occurs; in other words, they endorsed natural causality rather than God’s directly acting upon His creation. The precise contours of their doctrines cannot be restored at


this stage. The conflict between the local Zaydi-Muṭarrifi faction and those Zaydis who adhered to the Bahshamite Muʿtazilite doctrine of northern Iran reached its peak during the reign of Imām al-Maḥṣūr bi-llāh ʿAbd Allāh b. Hamzā, an ardent adherent of the Bahshamite doctrines. He led a relentless, all-out war against the adherents of the Muṭarrifiyya, demolished their abodes (hijar),16 schools, and libraries, and had their entire literary heritage destroyed. Today, we possess only some few original works by Muṭarrifi authors that could inform us about the movement’s doctrine and its development over time. On the other hand, there is a plethora of anti-Muṭarrifi polemics written by mainstream Zaydi authors, a genre that continued to thrive for several centuries after the movement was extinct. These polemics can be used only with great caution as a source for the reconstruction of the thought of the Muṭarrifiyya.17

The next important phase of religio-cultural renewal among the Zaydis in Yemen occurred during the Qāsimī era in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. Under the rule of the Qāsimīs, the Ottomans, who had conquered Yemen in 1517, were pushed from the country’s inland regions, and they eventually withdrew from their last foothold, the coastal town of Mocha (al-Mukhāʾ) in 1636. Moreover, the Qāsimī imams expanded their territory beyond the traditional Zaydi areas, and during the reign of the third Qāsimī imam, al-Mutawakkil Ismāʿīl (r. 1644–1676), most of the country, including lower Yemen and the eastern stretch of Hadramawt, came under Zaydi rule. [fig. 8]

Economically, the first century of Qāsimī rule was also particularly prosperous, as Yemen maintained, from 1636 through 1726, a monopoly on the cultivation and export of coffee. The Qāsimī imams, as well as other members of their family, were engaged in fostering a religious and cultural renewal of Zaydism and sought to spread Zaydism beyond its traditional boundaries into the newly conquered regions of Yemen, and the prosperity of the period provided them with the material means to do so. There was a significant rise in the production of manuscripts, and many members of the royal family as well as other leading dignitaries and scholars founded new libraries and accumulated significant collections of books, many of which were also imported from other parts of the Islamic world through the Sunni Shafiʿī regions of Yemen as well as through Mecca, which had been since the beginning of Islam an important center for the exchange of books and scholarship during the annual ḥajj period. At the same time, the Qāsimīs not only promoted scholarship but also carried out censorship by excluding from the canon works that they considered to contravene core Zaydi beliefs and doctrine—most importantly Sufi literature, as well as philosophy and Ismaʿīlī works. In this time, the

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confiscation of property and libraries was a common means to combat political enemies within the Zaydi community.¹eight

**Beyond the Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya**

The preservation of books, alongside confiscation, censorship, and occasional destruction of books and entire libraries, continued in Yemen throughout the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first century. In the aftermath of the revolution and the civil war, thousands of manuscripts from the members of the former royal family, from some members of the family of the Prophet (sādāt), and from collections that were found in combat areas were confiscated and stored in the Maktaba al-Gharbiyya and later in the Dār al-makhṭūṭāt in Ṣanʿāʾ. The latter’s holdings were repeatedly cataloged, though it remains uncertain what percentage of the entire collection (which grows continuously through confiscations and chance finds) has so far been described.¹⁹ Additionally, only some of the former rulers’ libraries were integrated into the Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya under Imām Yahyā’s rule. Since the Zaydi imams typically made an individual choice regarding where to set up their residences, the holdings of the various rulers’ libraries are dispersed all over the country. For example, none of the numerous extant holographs of the writings of Imām al-Mu’ayyad bi-llāh Yahyā b. Ḥamza (b. 1270, d. 1348–49) can be found today in the Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya. Of his major theological summa, the *K. al-Shāmil li-ḥaqāʾiq al-adilla al-ʿaqliyya wa-uṣūl al-masāʾil al-dīniyya*, a work in four volumes, holographs of volumes 2 and 4 are preserved in Taʾizz and in Leiden, respectively. [fig. 9] Further, many of the former holdings of the personal library of the aforementioned Imām al-Mutawakkil ʿalā llāh Sharaf al-Dīn Yahyā are today kept in the library of the grand mosque of Dhamār.²⁰ Only a fraction of such smaller libraries across the country, including the countless family libraries, have been cataloged.²¹ [fig. 10]

The socio-religious and cultural value of the Zaydi literary heritage as preserved in books and libraries for northern Yemen and its people can hardly be overestimated. The principal reason for its importance is the Zaydi notion of imamate. Although the Zaydis restricted the privilege to claim the imamate to members of the family of the Prophet, the *ahl al-bayt* (preferably descendants of al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn), they disagreed with the Twelver Shīʿīs’ insistence on a hereditary line of imams. Among the qualifications required of a Zaydi imam, excellent knowledge in religious matters and the capacity to perform *ijtihād* ("independent reasoning in legal matters") held top priority. As a result, the Zaydi imams were not only patrons of culture but prolific scholars themselves. A significant

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²¹ For details, see Schmidtke, “Preserving, Studying, and Democratizing Access.”
portion of the Zaydi literary legacy consists of the writings of the imams. Books and libraries therefore qualify as the principal identity marker for Zaydis of Yemen, and this also accounts for the millennium of nearly uninterrupted library history in the highlands of Yemen. The significance of books and libraries in Yemen is also the motivation behind the efforts of private Yemeni NGOs and organizations such as the Imam Zayd ibn Ali Cultural Foundation and Markaz al-Badr al-ʿilmī wa-l-thaqāfī, which work both to make works by Zaydi imams and scholars available through publication and to digitize private book collections. [fig. 11]

At the same time, there are several factors that put the library tradition of Yemen into immediate risk. Books are a commodity in Yemen, and the buying and selling of books and the dispersal of entire libraries following the demise of their owners are common occurrences. Moreover, manuscript culture has persisted in Yemen beyond the turn of the twenty-first century, as is evident from the fact that manuscripts were still being produced in large numbers throughout the twentieth century and up until today. As a result, we can observe interesting encounters between manuscript tradition and technology. Once photocopy machines became available in Yemen, owners of manuscript libraries began to produce copies of individual codices from their collections and often had them bound in the traditional manner. These mechanically produced “new” codices became a novel commodity alongside codices produced by hand, and the same applies to CDs and other digital media containing scans of large numbers of manuscripts, and often entire libraries, with poor or no documentation as to the provenance of the material and the whereabouts of the physical codices.22 [fig. 12]

All this, together with the lack of catalogs for the majority of the numerous public and private libraries in Yemen, makes it impossible to prevent illicit traffic in manuscripts.23 Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, Yemeni authorities have been constantly fighting manuscript dealers, trying to prevent them from smuggling manuscripts out of the country, apparently with only limited success.24 That such trade continues to on a regular basis is attested by the numerous collections of Yemeni manuscripts that have been offered to libraries in the West during the second half of the twentieth century and occasional reports on social media of manuscripts of Yemeni provenance showing up in museums and private collections in the Gulf

22 This is also the case with the online digital Maktabat Mu’assasat al-Imām Zayd. B. ʿAlī al-Thaqāfīyya containing most of the material previously distributed by the IZbACF on CDs and now kept on a website run by the Ministry of Endowment & Religious Affairs of Oman and accessible via https://elibrary.mara.gov.om/mktbtt-muosstt-aliemam-zed-bn-ale-althqafett/mktbtt-muosstt-aliemam-zed-bn-ale-althqafett/ [accessed January 8, 2021].


region. Another development that has put significant portions of the Zaydi literary tradition at risk is the growing “sunnification” of Zaydism, a trend whose beginnings can be traced back to the fourteenth century. The towering figure in this endeavor was the eighteenth-century Yemeni scholar Muḥammad b. ‘Alī al-Shawkānī (b. 1760, d. 1834), who sought to eliminate the Zaydi-Hādawī tradition—“Hādawī” referring to the founder of the Zaydi state in Yemen, al-Hādī ilā l-Ḥaqq—and accordingly revised the traditional works to be included in the curriculum. His program had little impact on the curriculum of the Zaydi elite of Yemen before the revolution, but the situation has changed dramatically since the official abolishment of the imamate in 1963. This, plus the increasing presence of the so-called maʿāhid al-ʿilmiyya, Sunni teaching institutions with a distinct anti-Hādawī bias that have spread in Yemen since 1972 with Saudi backing, constitute a major threat to the countless smaller public and private libraries in the country. Many of the private libraries in the north of 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, and the continuing war today constitutes another imminent threat not only to the local population but also to the cultural heritage of the country, including its many libraries. [fig. 13]

For Yemen’s book culture, it is a curse and a blessing that some of the most precious collections were purchased by European, Ottoman Turkish, and Saudi scholars, diplomats, merchants, and travelers during the second half of the nineteenth and the early decades of the twentieth century (and beyond); these manuscripts, numbering between ten and twenty thousand, are nowadays housed in libraries outside of the country. Within Europe, the Glaser collections (today in Berlin, Vienna, and London) and the Caprotti collections (in Munich and Milan) as well as other, smaller collections have served as the basis for Western scholarship on Zaydism since the early twentieth century. Whereas the collections of manuscripts of Yemeni provenance in Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and other countries of the Middle East remain largely unexplored and often even uncataloged, the majority of European libraries with substantial holdings of Yemeni provenance subscribe to the concept of digital repatriation of those treasures by making their material available through open access, in most cases both through their own digital repositories and under the auspices of collaborative projects such as the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition project.25 [fig. 14] Moreover, the history of libraries in Yemen is largely terra incognita, and no attempt has ever been made to write a critical account of the historical and/or present-day libraries of Yemen.26 In view of the lack of a critical mass of reliable catalogs, it is the codices themselves that constitute the most important sources on the historical libraries of Yemen: many contain ample peri- and paratextual materials, such as ownership statements, purchase notes, colophons, collation and study notes, and often entire inventories of historical libraries. An analysis of


26 The forthcoming study by Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke, *Towards a History of Libraries in Yemen*, covers only some aspects of this large field of inquiry.
a critical mass of codices could contribute to reconstructing the holdings of individual libraries and their fate over time, which in turn would help curb illicit trafficking and allow for collaborative scholarly efforts among scholars in Yemen, the Middle East, and beyond to salvage and study the Zaydi Yemeni manuscript tradition. None of this is possible under the current circumstances.

Captions

[fig. 1] Ms. Ṣanʿāʾ, Maktabat al-Awqāf 2318, page 2, transfer note (upper two lines and margin) for the codex from Ẓafār to Ṣanʿāʾ in Rabīʿ I 1348 [August–September 1929] (photo by Sabine Schmidtke)

[fig. 2] Inside the Maktabat al-Awqāf, 2009 (photo by Sabine Schmidtke)

[fig. 3] Ms. Ṣanʿāʾ, Maktabat al-Awqāf 543, volume 5 of ʿAbd al-Jabbār al-Hamadhānī’s theological summa, K. al-Mughnī fī abwāb al-ʿadl wa-l-tawḥīd, copied for the library of Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza (noted on the four lines of the bottom of the page). The note in the middle of the page was added later by the library personnel of the Khizāna al-Mutawakkiliyya.

[fig. 4a/b] Ms. Leiden, University Library, Or 8409, title and final pages (with kind permission). The title page had been glued over, hiding both the title of the book and a note recording that it had been transcribed for the library of Imām al-Manṣūr bi-llāh ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza. The final page has the scribe’s colophon, dated Shaʿbān 605 [February–March 1209], followed by a note signed by Muḥyī al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. ʿAlī b. al-Walīd al-Qurashī al-Anf (d. 1226) relating that he collated the transcription with a witness of the work from “Irāq” (meaning Irāq al-ʿajam, i.e., Iran) and that he finished doing so at the beginning of Shawwāl 605 [April–May 1209]. Ibn al-Walīd, a scholar in his own right, had studied together with ‘Abd Allāh b. Ḥamza and led a project of transcription of manuscripts brought from Iran to Yemen at the request of the Imam.


[fig. 7] An inventory, dated 620/1223, of seventeen books that were in the possession of one thirteenth-century scholar Yaḥyā b. Jābir (Ms Milan, Ambrosiana, ar. E 208, fol. 61r)


[fig. 9] Ms. Leiden, University Library, Or 2587, fol. 294r, end of volume 4 of Imām al-Muʿayyad bi-llāh Yaḥyā b. Ḥamza’s (d. 1348–49) K. al-Shāmil li-ḥaqāʾiq al-adilla al-ʿaqliyya wa-uṣūl al-masāʾil al-dīniyya
(with kind permission). In the final authorial colophon the author relates that he began writing the book in Muḥarram 711 [May–June 1311] and that he completed it on 10 Sha‘bān 712 [December 11, 1312].

[fig. 10] Inside the Dār al-Makhṭūṭāt, 2009 (photo by Sabine Schmidtke)

[fig. 11] Personnel of the Imam Zayd bin Ali Cultural Foundation, Ṣanʿā’, digitizing manuscripts, 2009 (photo by Sabine Schmidtke)

[fig. 12] Stack of manuscripts in a private library in Yemen, 2019 (photo by the Imam Zayd bin Ali Cultural Foundation, Ṣanʿā’; with kind permission)


[fig. 14] Eduard Glaser’s diary listing some of the manuscripts he had purchased in Ṣanʿā’, which he later sold to Berlin State Library (source: Austrian Academy of Sciences; with kind permission)