

## Lost Treasures: Medieval Arabic Manuscripts of Iraqi Provenance in Private Hands

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Over the past few decades, there have been repeated cases of deliberate destruction of Islamic manuscripts. For example, 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. It is also worrying that Islamic manuscripts of uncertain provenance continue to be auctioned off into private hands, many among them apparently of Iraqi provenance.

I want to showcase a recent example of a particularly precious Arabic manuscript from the thirteenth century in the realm of Islamic philosophy and logic that belonged since the fourteenth century to the Maktaba al-Gharawiyya in Najaf and repeatedly surfaced on the European market in recent years.

In outlining the story of my observations, I want to ask in particular what we, as scholars, can do to detect trafficked written artefacts and to bring about their restitution if that is at all possible.

First a few words about the Najaf Library.

Founded in the tenth century CE on the premises of the mausoleum of Imām ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib in Najaf, the al-Khizāna al-Gharawiyya (alternatively known as Maktabat al-Rawḍa al-Ḥaydariyya) is one of the oldest libraries in Iraq to have survived until today. Over more than a thousand years, the library and its collection have gone through periods of neglect and destruction, alternating with times of growth and flourishing.

Whereas the prominent Imāmī Shi‘i Raḍī al-Dīn ‘Alī b. Mūsā Ibn Ṭāwūs (d. 1266), for example, regularly consulted the Rawḍa and occasionally described codices he had seen there, the library is reported to have been largely destroyed by fire in 1354. In 1358 Ṣadr al-Dīn b. Sharaf al-Dīn b. Maḥmūd b. al-Ḥasan b. Khalīfa al-Kafī al-Āwī assumed responsibility for the library and began to rebuild its collections through the acquisition of books and entire private libraries. Others bequeathed their personal collections to the Rawḍa; such donors included the fourteenth-century Imāmī scholar Ibn al-‘Atā’iqī al-Ḥillī, whose personal library included many holographs of his own writings. Over the following centuries, there is ample evidence that the Rawḍa was

regularly visited by leading Imāmī scholars, who often referred in their own writings to the codices they had seen in the library. The Rawḍa experienced another period of decline during the twentieth century. Eventually, it was revived at the beginning of the twenty-first century under the auspices of al-Sayyid ‘Alī al-Ḥusaynī al-Sīstānī (b. 1930) and reopened in July 2005.

Among the former precious holdings of the library is a collective manuscript containing writings by al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 1044), which was transcribed in Dhū l-Qa‘da 574 (April–May 1179). Although the codex is no longer found in the library and may have been lost, it is regularly referred to in later copies that were produced during the seventeenth century. What happened to the 574 codex in or after the seventeenth century is unknown. Another example is a precious copy of volume two of the commentary on the *K. al-Talwīhāt* of Shihāb al-Dīn al-Suhrawardī by the Jewish philosopher ‘Izz al-Dawla Sa‘d b. Maṣṣūr Ibn Kammūna, copied about three years after the latter’s death in 1284. During al-Āwī’s term as head of the Rawḍa, the copy was presented as a *waqf* to the library (*waqfiyya* on the title page dated 766 [1364]). Today, however, the copy is part of the Yeni Cami collection in Istanbul. In fact, many of the manuscripts that formerly belonged to the Rawḍa al-Ḥaydariyya are nowadays kept in the libraries of Istanbul, and we know nothing about when and how this happened, nor do we have a complete list of relevant codices.

Other noteworthy items from the thirteenth century that still existed in the library at the beginning of the twentieth century are several codices containing holographs of writings by Ibn Kammūna. In addition, the library also owned copies in his hand of some of the philosophical works of the little-known thirteenth-century scholar Najm al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr b. Muḥammad al-Nakhjiwānī (or al-Nakhjuwānī), whose oeuvre has only partly come down to us. Al-Nakhjiwānī had written several critiques of Ibn Sīnā as well as a concise commentary on Ibn Sīnā’s *Ishārāt*. An attempt to trace the fate of the Rawḍa’s Ibn Kammūna corpus over the last one hundred years illustrates the vicissitudes suffered by the library during the twentieth century.

The first modern scholar to encounter Ibn Kammūna’s writings and transcriptions in the Rawḍa was the Iraqi Shi‘i scholar and politician Muḥammad Riḍā al-Shabībī (b. 1889 in Najaf, d. 1965), who visited the library in 1911. During his visit to Najaf, al-Shabībī encountered several codices in the Rawḍa containing some of Ibn Kammūna’s philosophical writings. In addition, al-Shabībī, who had an interest in the history of

Islamic philosophy, was intrigued by the writings of al-Nakhjiwānī, some of which he also encountered in the Rawḍa among the Ibn Kammūna material. Al-Shabībī included detailed descriptions of the codices he had inspected in the Rawḍa back in 1911 in his two-volume monograph on Ibn al-Fuwaṭī, published in 1958, as well as in his 1965 monograph, *Turāthunā al-falsafī*. Some of the notes he took during his visit to the Rawḍa may also have been included in his *Falāsifat al-Yahūd fī l-Islām*, which was never published and may or may not have survived in manuscript form.

Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir b. Ḥabīb al-Samāwī (1876-1950), who hailed from Samāwa in southern Iraq, spent several decades in Najaf in pursuit of learning. Al-Samāwī was an avid collector of manuscripts, and he transcribed numerous Shi‘i and non-Shi‘i texts for his personal library. Many of his transcriptions are apographs of copies held by the Rawḍa, which suggests that he had unrestricted access to its holdings and was granted permission to borrow individual codices from the Rawḍa for the purpose of copying them, in accordance with the centuries-old practice in the library. This may explain why some manuscripts that originally belonged to the Rawḍa were later part of al-Samāwī’s personal collection—he may just have forgotten to return them or he may have died before he was able to do so. Al-Samāwī’s library was dispersed after his death in 1950, when its holdings were sold by his heirs. Most of his books ended up in the Imām al-Ḥakīm library, al-Ya‘qūbī library, the library of Muḥammad Ṣādiq Baḥr al-‘Ulūm, and the Maktabat Kāshif al-Ghiṭā’, all of which are located in Najaf, and some also found their way to the library of the National Museum of Iraq in Baghdad. The latter were transferred in 1988 to the Dār Ṣaddām li-l-Makhtūṭāt (nowadays Dār al-Makhtūṭāt al-‘Irāqiyya). A large portion of the manuscript holdings of the libraries of Iraq, including the Dār Ṣaddām li-l-Makhtūṭāt, was either destroyed or looted in 1991 and in 2003.

The Iranian scholar and bibliographer Āghā Buzurg al-Tihrānī (1876-1970) also inspected the holdings of the Rawḍa during his sojourn in Najaf around 1931–32. The data that Āghā Buzurg recorded in his personal handlist were for the most part later incorporated into his various bio-bibliographical works, such as *al-Dharī‘a ilā taṣānīf al-Shī‘a*. During his visit to Najaf Āghā Buzurg also consulted the library of al-Samāwī, occasionally mentioning books that belonged to the Rawḍa but that he had seen in al-Samāwī’s library.

A few decades later, in 1957, the Iraqi Shi‘i scholar Ḥusayn ‘Alī Maḥfūz also spent some time in the library. Using the information provided by Āghā Buzurg as his point of departure, Maḥfūz prepared a partial handlist of eighty-two particularly valuable individual works held by the Rawḍa, which was published a year later.

In 1970 the Iranian scholar Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī al-Ishkawārī visited the Rawḍa and prepared a catalog containing brief descriptions of a total of 153 codices. His handlist records shelfmarks, and multitext manuscripts are identified and briefly described. Al-Ḥusaynī relates that he was working under immense time pressure and that the library holds significant additional material that he was unable to inspect, including bound and unbound codices as well as several boxes of unbound leaves.

It was only in 2021 that a full, detailed catalogue of the current library’s holdings was published:

Ḥasan al-Mūsawī al-Burūjirdī, *Fihris makhṭūṭāt al-Khizāna al-Gharawiyya fī l-Rawḍa al-Ḥaydariyya al-Muqaddasa, al-‘Irāq al-Najaf al-Ashraf*, Najaf: al-‘Ataba al-‘Alawiyya al-Muqaddasa, 1442/2021.

It contains 119 codices—35 codices less than what al-Ḥusaynī included in his partial handlist, and certainly just a fraction of what the library had consisted of during its heydays.

Let me know briefly relate my encounter with one of the Ibn Kammūna codices that is not listed in al-Mūsawī al-Burūjirdī’s catalogue. According to the descriptions of al-Shabībī and Āghā Buzurg it consisted of *Talkhīṣ Lubāb al-manṭiq li-l-Nakhjiwānī* or *Khulāṣat mā taḍammanathu Khulāṣat al-ḥikma*, Ibn Kammūna’s summary of Nakhjiwānī’s *Lubāb al-manṭiq wa-khulāṣat al-ḥikma*, completed in Dhū l-Qa‘da 675 [April–May 1277], followed by his *Iltiqāt al-i‘tirādāt min Kitāb Zubdat al-naqḍ wa-lubāb al-kashf*, also by al-Nakhjawānī. Al-Shabībī also quotes Ibn Kammūna’s colophon in full and cites numerous excerpts from both texts.

In the aftermath of the 1991 Gulf War, Dr. Mu‘ayyad Sa‘īd al-Dāmarjī (b. 1942), Director General of the Iraqi Directorate General of Antiquities and Heritage prepared a preliminary list of some 2,000 items stolen from various regional museums in Iraq during the insurrection following the war. His list was published in the series *Lost Heritage: Antiquities from Iraq’s Regional Museums*, which was “designed to aid in

recovery of antiquities stolen from Iraq's regional museums during the insurrection following the Gulf War, 1991." Fascicle 3, prepared by Hideo Fujii and Kazumi Oguchi and published in 1996, lists two codices containing works by Ibn Kammūna as having been looted from the Kirkuk Museum (Makḥṭūṭāt Dār Ṣaddām). The first codex is described as follows:

- 1) manuscript no. 14757 (no. 263 in Fujii and Oguchi, *Lost Heritage*), a multitext volume containing *Lubāb al-manṭiq wa-khulāṣat al-ḥikma* by al-Nakhjiwānī, *Talkhīṣ al-kitābayn al-madhkūrayn*, *al-Maṭālib al-muhimma min 'ilm al-kalām wa-ghayruhā*, and other tracts

The first item matches Āghā Buzurg's description of a multitext manuscript containing those three works—*Lubāb al-manṭiq* by al-Nakhjiwānī plus two of Ibn Kammūna's writings, *Talkhīṣ Lubāb al-manṭiq wa-khulāṣat al-ḥikma* and *al-Maṭālib al-muhimma*—as given in *Dharī'a*, vol. 26, p. 225 no. 1133. That the codex ended up among the Makḥṭūṭāt Dār Ṣaddām suggests that it had become at some stage part of al-Samāwī's library, where it remained until his death, and that it was among the manuscripts that subsequently came into the possession of the National Museum of Iraq. At the time I used this scant information from the *Lost Heritage* series for a monograph I co-authored, *A Jewish Philosopher of Baghdad: 'Izz al-Dawla Ibn Kammūna (d. 683/1284) and His Writings* (Brill, 2006).

A few years ago the UK auctioneer Dreweatts offered for sale a slim codex, identified as "Lot 69" in its web-based catalog, together with a brief, mostly incorrect identification. The item was sold on October 22, 2019, to an unidentified buyer for £2,500. I corresponded with Dreweatts in November 27, 2019, providing a proper identification and tentatively suggesting that the codex originally belonged to the Rawḍa. Since Lot 69 had been sold at this point, the auctioneer kindly offered to pass the information on to the codex's new owner.

The codex resurfaced on the market in October 2020, when it was offered for auction by Sotheby's as "Lot 406," with an estimated value of £40,000–£60,000. I again notified Sotheby's about the likely provenance of the codex. Sotheby's kindly provided me with digital images of the entire lot and closed the bidding. Sotheby's also withdrew the codex from the auction at the time.

In 2022 I published a detailed study of the codex and its fate, including a facsimile of the entire manuscript.

On 13 December 2022 the manuscript was again up for sale, by the French auctioneer Millon, this time as Batch 389 in Arts d'Orient et de l'Inde (<https://www.millon.com/en/auction-item/343387>) with an estimate of €25,000.00 - €30,000.00.

Lessons learned:

From my correspondence with Dreweatts and Sotheby's I could sense that auctioneers are very reluctant to talk to scholars. I was never given any information on the immediate provenance of the codex, certainly not about the seller and the buyer of the lot, and the auction houses apparently did not know how to deal with the detailed documentation that I provided them with and that contradicted the – rather invented and simply wrong – counter information that was supplied by the seller. Of course I had only a vague idea how the codex may have ended by among the Makḥūṭāt Dār Saddām and I had no clue what had happened to the codex between 1991 and 2019.

More than once I was told that the only party that would be able to prompt the item's possible relocation would be the library in Najaf. And while I was able to persuade Sotheby's to withdraw the lot from the auction at the time, the seller evidently just approached a different auction house.

Above all I understood that the lack of catalogues (or digital copies) constitutes the greatest danger for any manuscript collection. Without any such documentation it is virtually impossible to prove ownership.

Sadly, a comparison between the information supplied by Āghā Buzurg and al-Shabībī on the one hand, and the resurfaced codex on the other, suggests that the codex in its initial form was dismantled – *al-Maṭālib al-muhimma*, a work by Ibn Kammūna, is no longer part of the codex that was offered by the auctioneers. Moreover, I have no idea where this part of the codex ended up. And the same applies to other writings by Ibn Kammūna (again holographs for the most part) that belonged to the Rawḍa earlier on but are now lost. And this is just one example of lost manuscript treasures.

My question remains the same as before – what can we as scholars effectively do to help prevent or at least reduce the trafficking of written artefacts.