

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: Virtual Repatriation of Cultural Heritage

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The manuscript tradition of the Zaydi branch of Shi'ism, which since the 9th century has been preserved primarily in Yemen, is nowadays dispersed over countless libraries in Yemen and the Middle East, Turkey, Europe, and the United States, of which only a fraction has been digitized and is available for open access. Its treasures came to the attention of scholars outside Yemen at a relatively late stage. Whereas the bulk of Arabic manuscripts nowadays housed in the libraries of Europe were acquired between the 17th and 19th centuries in centrally located cities and regions such as the Ottoman capital Istanbul, Syria and Palestine, and Egypt—all strongholds of Sunnism—the collections of Zaydi/Yemeni manuscripts were established only at the end of the 19th and first decades of the 20th century.¹ Among the European explorers and merchants who collected manuscripts in South Arabia and later sold them to libraries in Europe was Eduard Glaser, who visited Yemen on four occasions between 1882 and 1894. After Glaser sold the manuscripts purchased during his first and second journey to the Königlische Bibliothek zu Berlin in 1884 and 1887, Wilhelm Ahlwardt made them the last acquisition to be included in his *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts*, published between 1887 and 1899. The third Glaser collection was purchased in 1889 by the British Museum in London—with the exception of the Lane collection that was purchased in 1891 and 1893, it was the last acquisition to be included in Charles Rieu's *Supplement to the Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts* published in 1894. The fourth Glaser collection was sold in 1894 to the Kaiserlich-Königliche Hofbibliothek in Vienna, constituting the most important acquisition of Arabic manuscripts by the library at the time—unlike the Berlin and London Glaser collections, the Vienna Glaser manuscripts were never described in a published catalogue. An even larger collection of Zaydi/Yemeni manuscripts was brought together by the Italian merchant Giuseppe Caprotti during his sojourn in South Arabia from 1885 to 1919. Portions of the Caprotti collection now belong to the Bavarian State Library in Munich and the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, while the majority of the collection is owned by the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan. European libraries and increasingly US libraries have continuously purchased manuscripts of Yemeni provenance during the 20th and 21st centuries.

Scholars based in Middle Eastern countries also began to appreciate the Yemeni manuscript treasures relatively late. The Ottoman scholar and bibliophile 'Ali Amiri Efendi (1857–1924) accumulated an important collection of manuscripts of Yemeni provenance that is nowadays part of the Millet Kütüphanesi in Istanbul; in 1883 the Medinan scholar and book dealer Amin al-Madani (d. 1898) visited The Netherlands, bringing with him a collection of 664 manuscripts, among them a fair number of manuscripts from Yemen; and during the 1950s a sizable collection of Yemeni manuscripts was amassed by the former ambassador of Saudi Arabia to Yemen, al-Sayyid Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-'Ubaykan (1899–1993), which has been

donated to the University Library of King Saud University in Riyadh.² Manuscripts of Yemeni provenance were also purchased by other Saudi libraries over the course of the 20th century, among them the libraries of Umm al-Qura University in Mecca and King Faisal University.

In 1951–52, 1964, and 1974, scholarly expeditions from Egypt were dispatched to Yemen. They explored the holdings of various public and private libraries in Sanaa and other cities, and they produced microfilms of selected manuscripts which they brought back to Cairo. In 1982 and 1985, delegations from Kuwait assessed and partly microfilmed the manuscripts of the Maktabat al-Ahqaf (Ahqaf Library) in Tarim in Hadhramaut and the Dar al-Makhtutat (House of Manuscripts) in Sanaa. Various Iranian governmental and private institutions also filmed significant numbers of Yemeni manuscripts at the turn of the millennium.

These initiatives to produce surrogates of manuscripts, whether in microform or digitally, did not aim to preserve them. Instead, they aimed to make them accessible to their respective local scholarly community—hence, their selective approach. Characteristically, the surrogates are housed in the relevant institution that was in charge of filming them in the first place, and these institutions have made no attempt to make them available to a larger audience. Only the digital surrogates prepared by Iranian entities were made available to the Mu‘assasat al-Imam Zayd ibn ‘Ali al-Thaqafiyya (Imam Zayd ibn ‘Ali Cultural Foundation) in Sanaa—whose personnel continued to digitize the holdings of additional private libraries.

Although attempts have been made to gather select manuscripts of Yemeni provenance online, none of these initiatives have a clear structural foundation or strive for comprehensiveness. Digital images of numerous Zaydi manuscripts are included, for example, on Archive.org. These are poorly documented and the provenance of the material remains uncertain. As limited as these attempts may be, they testify to the enormous interest among scholars worldwide, and particularly in the Islamic world, in the Yemeni manuscript tradition and specifically the rational Mu‘tazilite heritage that is exclusively preserved in the country.

The various digitization efforts supported by the German Foreign Office (2010) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities (2010–13) also aimed to capture a select number of private collections. These efforts were defined at the time as pilot projects that would include additional personal collections following their completion. The outbreak of the armed conflict in Yemen made the continuation of these efforts impossible.

The past undertakings to microfilm/digitize manuscripts in Yemen have aimed to provide scholars outside of Yemen access to the Yemeni material. However, little thought has been given to how Yemeni scholars might gain access to holdings of libraries outside their country and only a fraction of the Zaydi/Yemeni manuscripts outside of Yemen are available through open access. In some cases Yemeni scholars remain unaware of the extremely rich and valuable holdings outside their country, including catalogued collections. But even when they are aware of such holdings, they are unable to consult them. The enormous costs associated with the acquisition of surrogates of these collections are beyond the reach of Yemeni scholars and research institutions, and the languages in which some of the relevant catalogues are written (Latin, German, Italian, and English) render them largely useless to scholars who are proficient only in Arabic.

Yemenis have made attempts over the past few decades to “repatriate” some of the important collections of Yemeni manuscripts in the West, but none of them have come 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.”³ At one point a senior Yemeni diplomat negotiated with the Ambrosiana to purchase surrogates of portions of the Caprotti collection in Milan, but this proved beyond the means of the Yemeni embassy.⁴ In 2014 the then newly appointed minister of cultural affairs approached the US ambassador to Yemen, Matthew H. Tueller, about facilitating the return of “any Yemeni historical manuscript in the US” to Yemen, but the initiative was never pursued further.⁵

To make matters worse, the manuscript libraries in Yemen itself are under imminent threat. Throughout much of the second half of the 20th and the first decades of the 21st century Yemeni authorities have been battling, with limited success, to prevent manuscript dealers from smuggling manuscripts out of the country.⁶ Moreover, over the course of the 20th century many of the private libraries in Yemen were severely damaged, looted, or even destroyed as a result of political turmoil and war. The ongoing war in the country, with its daily bombardments, constitutes an imminent threat not only to the local population but also to the country’s cultural heritage, including its many manuscript collections.⁷

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) aims to salvage the Zaydi literary tradition by gathering digital surrogates of as many Zaydi manuscripts as possible in a single repository and providing scholars worldwide comprehensive and systematic open access to them, regardless of whether the physical manuscripts are preserved in Europe, North America, Yemen, or elsewhere in the Middle East. The ZMT is a joint project initiated by the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS) at Princeton University in partnership with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) at Saint John’s University, Collegeville, Minnesota. Work on the ZMT began in September 2016 and to date the project comprises 939 digitized manuscripts from several European and Yemeni libraries accessible online through the Portal and HMML’s *virtual* Reading Room (vHMML). The initiative consists of two components: a Digital Portal on the IAS website that serves as a comprehensive research guide to relevant collections of Zaydi manuscripts, providing precise information on the location of each collection with a full list of its holdings and the relevant bibliography for every codex.⁸ The Digital Portal also functions as a *gateway* to the manuscript surrogates that are available in HMML’s *virtual* Reading Room,⁹ which serves as a repository of digital surrogates of manuscript codices and will eventually include full metadata for the manuscripts through its cataloging tools.

The ZMT envisages three distinct (though not necessarily consecutive) phases. During the first phase surrogates of the earlier endeavors by the Egyptians, Kuwaitis, Iranians and the Yemenis will be collected, prepared, and uploaded unto the vHMML repository (with parallel pointers in the Portal)—a process already underway. This includes digital scans of the microfilmed material produced by the various Egyptian and Kuwaiti expeditions to Yemen, digital surrogates of various (as yet partly unidentified) private libraries in Yemen that were produced during the early 2000s by Iranian entities, and images of manuscripts that were digitized in the framework of the two above-mentioned projects funded by the German Foreign Office and the joint NEH/DFG project. Although the quality of some of the earlier material is wanting, in many cases

the surrogates are all we have left. Many of the original personal collections have been confiscated, dispersed, or even destroyed, and it remains uncertain whether the individual physical codices are still extant. During a second phase, the Yemeni/Zaydi manuscripts that are preserved in libraries outside of Yemen are being digitized and uploaded onto vHMML (with pointers in the Portal). Although the metadata for the images will remain minimal during Phase 1 and 2, the aim of Phase 3 will be the preparation of detailed descriptions.

The ZMT aims to provide open access to an estimated 20,000 digitized manuscripts over the next three years (2018–20), which would make it the single largest library of the Zaydi literary tradition. When implemented, the ZMT will effectively democratize access to the Zaydi manuscript tradition, likely initiating a surge in this important field of study. The ZMT follows a trend in recent scholarship in digitally reconstructing library collections and entire literary traditions, so as to encompass a religio-intellectual strand's entire literary legacy dispersed across many countries and libraries. Examples include the "Bibliotheca Laureshamensis digital," an attempt to reconstruct the monastic library and scriptorium of Abbey Lorsch,¹⁰ and the digital reconstruction of the 18th-century Arnarnagnæan collection of Icelandic manuscripts.¹¹

Moreover, through the ZMT scholars in Yemen will finally have unlimited access to their own intellectual, cultural, and religious heritage as reflected in the Zaydi manuscripts preserved in Europe, North American, and the Middle East, alongside scholars based in other parts of the world. As such, the ZMT will bring about a digital "repatriation" of the Yemeni/Zaydi manuscript treasures dispersed all over the globe. In the long run, protecting and preserving an important part of Yemen's cultural legacy, its rich manuscript tradition, will help enable future generations of Yemenis to have a firm sense of identity and belonging.¹²

NOTES

¹For a detailed account of the history of collections of Zaydi manuscripts, see Sabine Schmidtke, "Preserving, Studying, and Democratizing Access to the World Heritage of Islamic Manuscripts: The Zaydi Tradition," *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 23 (2017): 103–66.

²Geoffrey Roper, ed., *World Survey of Islamic Manuscripts* (London: al-Furqan Islamic Heritage Foundation, 1994), 3:38.

³"Yemen, Turkey to Sign Manuscripts Protocol," *Saba Net*, accessed 21 September 2017, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news147557.htm>.

⁴Gabrielle vom Bruck, personal communication with the author, 26 June 2017.

⁵"US Ready to Return Yemen's Manuscripts: Ambassador," *Saba Net*, accessed 21 September 2017, <http://www.sabanews.net/en/news379181.htm>; Matthew H. Tueller, personal communication with the author, 25 June 2017.

⁶See, for example, "Antiquities and Manuscripts Captured with Three Persons," 2008, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://www.almotamar.net/en/4739.htm>; "Attempted Smuggle of 40 Manuscripts, Failed," 2008, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://www.almotamar.net/en/5414.htm>; "51 Yemeni Antiquity Pieces, 312 Manuscripts Seized," 2010, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://www.almotamar.net/en/7886.htm>; Fakhri Al-Arashi, "14 Stolen Manuscripts Returned to the Ministry of Culture," *National Yemen*, 2013, accessed 2 October 2017, <https://nationalyemen.com/2013/11/17/14-stolen-manuscripts-returned-to-the-ministry-of-culture/>; and Nasser Al-Sakkaf, "Authorities Thwart Smuggling of 14 Historic Manuscripts," 2013, accessed 2 October 2017, <https://www.yementimes.com/en/1731/news/3152/Authorities-thwart-smuggling-of-14-historic-manuscripts.htm>.

⁷See David Hollenberg and Anne Regourd, "Manuscript Destruction and Looting in Yemen: A Status Report," *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 21 (2016): 157–77; and Gabriele vom Bruck, "Saada: Ground

Zero" (memo presented at a workshop on "Yemen's Urban–Rural Divide and the Ultra-Localisation of the Civil War," organized by the LSE Middle East Centre, 29 March 2017), accessed 2 October 2017, http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2017/06/19/saada-ground-zero/?from_serp=1.

⁸The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, accessed 2 October 2017, http://www.ias.edu/digital-scholarship/zaydi_manuscript_tradition.

⁹vHMML, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://www.vHMML.org>.

¹⁰Bibliotheca Laureshamensis Digital: Virtual Monastic Library of Lorsch, accessed 2 October 2017, <http://www.bibliotheca-laureshamensis-digital.de/en/index.html>.

¹¹The Árni Magnússon Institute for Icelandic Studies Manuscript Collection, accessed 2 October 2017, http://www.arnastofnun.is/page/handritasafn_en. See also Ivan Boserup, "The Manuscript and the Internet: Digital Repatriation of Cultural Heritage," *IFLA Journal* 31 (2005): 169–73.

¹²The connection between the preservation of cultural heritage and security is also explicitly mentioned in United Nations Security Council Resolution 2347 (2017). See also Nabil Al-Makaleh and Fahd al-Quraishi, "Preservation of Cultural Heritage Is the Preservation of Cultural Identity and Belonging," in *Architectural Heritage of Yemen: Buildings that Fill My Eye*, ed. Trevor H.J. Marchand (London: Gingko Library, 2017), 215–22.