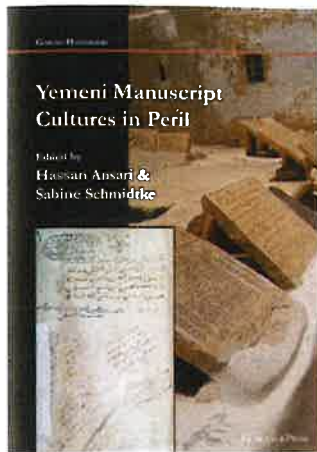


Yemeni Manuscript Cultures in Peril

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This finely produced and solidly bound book by two Princeton scholars is monumental in quality and quantity (253 colour photographs!). It brings together almost everybody with a name in the field of Yemeni manuscript (MSS) studies. Its subject: Zaydi religious and juridical literature in manuscript form and the peregrinations of many MSS from Yemen to libraries in Europe, Istanbul, and India. I will give an overview of the book's contents and briefly mention Yemeni MSS resources in two other fields: economic history and the genesis of the Qur'an.

The extensive introduction by the two editors is a quasi-monograph on book collecting and libraries in Yemen (119 pages, including 85 photos). While Zaydi Imams needed to be descendants of the Prophet via Caliph Ali and Mohammed's daughter Fatima, rulership was not inherited from father to son but subject to specific prerequisites: a candidate was required to be in excellent physical condition, to be of sound mind, and to have proved his religious knowledge and his capacity for legal and doctrinal reasoning. Many Imams, therefore, authored treatises in these fields and collected books. These libraries were not institutionalised: at the death of an Imam – if not before – they were dispersed.

It was only in 1925 that Imam Yahya established the *al-Khizana al-Mutawakkiliyya* (today *Maktabat al-Awqaf*, Library of Endowments), housed in the Great Mosque. Ansari/Schmidtke retrace the history of many of these books through ownership notes, colophons, etc., and provide an overview of Yemeni MSS in Cairo, Najaf, Istanbul, Hyderabad, Lucknow, Berlin, Leiden, Riyadh and others.

Two more substantial collections of Zaydi-Isma'ili books are now housed at the Isma'ili centre in London (the Hamdani collection and the Zahid Ali col-

lection). Neither, unfortunately, are accessible.

Gabriele vom Bruck speaks in vivid detail of the looting and dismemberment of libraries of certain prominent Yemeni families (al-Wazir, al-Iryani, Bayt Zayd). Brinkley Messick puts the establishment of the Imam's library in 1925 into its political and practical context (i.e., tools for the jurist, including the non-Zaydi *madhabs* in Yemen). Zaid bin Ali al-Wazir describes in detail the 800-year tradition of his family's library and its scattered remains.

Anne Regourd, the well-known specialist on Yemeni MSS, details the history of the various institutions dealing with antiquities and libraries established in the last few decades. She also notes how precious MSS have again and again disappeared from these treasures.

Daniel Martin Varisco gives a survey (the first in English) of "*Nur al-ma'arif*," the unique medieval (691/693-1292/1294) trade, taxes, customs duties, productions, prices, etc. register of Rasulid Yemen. For a detailed analysis of this unique economic compendium, which, as far as I know, is without parallel in other medieval Arab societies, Eric Vallet's *L'Arabie marchande*, 2010, should be consulted. Unfortunately, the finely edited Arabic text (by Muhammad Jazim, see my review in *BYSJ* 14/2006) is still unavailable in translation. I have used its extensive descriptions of jewellery and metalworking in my article in the *Rodionov Festschrift*, 2016.

Then follows the definitive scholarly study (by the two editors) of Abdallah al-Ansi's (13th c.) writings on the doctrinal developments of Yemeni Zaydism, especially against its origins in the Caspian Zaydi state and his arguing against the Mutarrifiya and other currents. A beautiful MS of al-Bukhari, filled with owners and "borrowers" remarks, allows a glimpse into the process of the "Sunnisation of Zaydism," which culminated in the works of Muhammad al-Shawkani, in the 19th century.

Christoph Rauch, head of the Oriental Collection at the Staatsbibliothek Berlin, describes the history of their conspicuous Yemeni holdings (Eduard Glaser, Count Landberg). Highlights include the earliest copy of the *Kitab al-Azhar* (dated 806/1404), the foundational text of Zaydi doctrine, parts of al-Hamdani's *Iklil*, a recently discovered poem by Imam Yahya, and a Hebrew poem by Shalom Shabazi.

V. Sagaria Rossi writes about the Caprotti brothers, merchants in Yemen around 1900, who procured MSS for the Ambrosiana, the Vatican Library, and the Staatsbibliothek München. One of the Caprotti vol-

umes (now in Naples), a medical treatise, proved to be an autograph of the Rasulid Sultan al-Malik al-Afdal al-Abbas.

Scheper and Vrolijk describe the Yemeni MSS at Leiden. I liked their accent on the material aspects of the Leiden books: the bindings, the repairs, and the *fata* of the *libelli* through ownership remarks.

The last chapter, about Yemeni MSS in Saudi Arabia, is by Bernard Haykel, to whom we owe the definitive study on Muhammad al-Shawkani.

The Ansari/Schmidtke book is a comprehensive historical presentation of the history of the Zaydi MSS tradition. Its incredible quantity of photographs makes for a rare aesthetic pleasure and (almost) an immersion into the real thing. The documentation of the losses is saddening. Still, as many texts have ended up in libraries abroad (in Europe, India, and recently in Saudi Arabia), they are secure and available to scholars.

Scholars working in more general fields might find Yemeni MSS on economic history (such as *Nur al-ma'arif*) and the vast corpus of historical and scientific writing of the Rasulid period (including such things as the unique *Hexaglot*, an Arabic, Persian, Turkic, Greek, Armenian, and Mongolian dictionary) of broader interest. Unfortunately, editorial work in these fields is still in its beginning stages.

The special issue vol. 98 (2021) of DER ISLAM is the nearest thing to it. My highlight there is Varisco's paper on yet another recently edited tax ledger (for Sultan al-Malik al-Muayyad Dawud, d. 1321) that contains 17 maps of Rasulid Yemen (southern highlands, South Yemen, and Tihama).

The other field where I would wish to see a comprehensive study of the quality of the Ansari/Schmidtke book is the epic tale of the discovery of what is now acknowledged as the oldest MS of the Qur'an, the so-called codex Sana'a I, a *palimpsest* (= a sheet with an erased but still recognisable lower text). Its *scriptio inferior* dates to the mid-first c. AH, or even earlier. Pages of codex Sana'a I were among the Qur'anic MSS that surfaced in 1972, during restoration work in the Great Mosque where they had been stored in a secluded place, a *jenaza* in Yemeni parlance, similar to a Hebrew *genizah*. The enormous quantities of parchments found in 1972 were put in ca. 20 big sacks and shown by Qadi Ismail to every visiting scholar who inevitably exclaimed: "that something must be done." These pious wishes did, of course, not materialise into concrete action. When I was shown this treasure in its miserable state in 1976, I was determined to find a way to finance a

preservation project. I submitted it to my superiors at the German Foreign Office. I followed it up after I was transferred to Aden and was no longer responsible for matters connected with Sana'a. I continued even after Aden, when I worked as a cultural attaché in Paris. My superiors were well-meaning. They recognised the importance of the parchments, but motivating a government to spend millions on a cultural project is not easy.

At last, my obstinacy succeeded. Getting rid of my nagging (Luke 11, 5-8) undoubtedly played a role. The photographs made by the German project are now accessible at the Staatsbibliothek Berlin.

Some of the parchments of the palimpsest disappeared and surfaced in London. When I pointed out to one of the famous auction houses that a folio corresponded in measurements and writing style to Sana'a I, I was met with harsh denial. On the other hand, this peregrination enabled detailed studies, including carbon 14 tests. The best discussion of codex Sana'a I is available online (*Islamic-awareness.org/quran/text/mss/soth.html*). In the early 2000s, an additional trove of 40 folios from this codex was identified, bringing the preserved total to 81 folios, ca. 41% of the text of the Holy Book.

Codex Sana'a I shows only very minor differences with the *textus receptus*. An initially partial commitment to writing can explain the different order of the *surahs*. Sana'a I proves that the Qur'an, as we have it, really originates from the time of Prophet Muhammad. I hope a critical edition of Yemen's most important manuscript will soon be available.

I do not wish to end without mentioning that pre-Islamic Yemen was already a land of writing, not only of monumental inscriptions on stone and bronze but also in cursive. The best introduction to this material is Peter Stein's two volumes (my review in JRAS 22/2012, pp. 466-468). The Sabaeans also invented the rhyme (my article in AAE 34/2023), which entered the Quran and Arab poetry.

WERNER DAUM

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