

Book Review



Hassan Ansari and Sabine Schmidtke (eds.), *Yemeni Manuscript Cultures in Peril*. Piscataway: Gorgias Press, 2022 (Gorgias Handbooks, 49). 541 pp., ISBN 978-1-4632-4202-2.

The renaissance of the manuscript as a prime area of research in the humanities over the past decades has entailed a concern for the preservation of these material artefacts in the present day. This is especially true for the study of the Middle East where the high number of armed conflicts has significantly endangered manuscript cultures in countries such as Syria and Iraq. The book under review turns to a particularly rich manuscript culture under acute threat of devastation, the Yemeni manuscript culture, focusing on the Shiite-Zaydi tradition. The genesis of this book is closely linked to the editors' splendid online platform, *The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition*, which offers, amongst others, access to digitised manuscripts.

In their Introduction (pp. 1–19), the two editors provide a fascinatingly rich account of the development of Yemeni manuscript collections since the early twentieth century and the translocation of Yemeni manuscripts to libraries in the Middle East, South Asia, Europe and the US. Along the way, they use their long-standing experience to survey published catalogues and unpublished resources such as handlists as well as the numerous initiatives to produce paper, microfilm and digital reproductions of Yemeni manuscripts in Yemen and outside Yemen. There is no doubt that this Introduction will remain an indispensable starting point for research on Zaydi-Yemeni manuscripts for a long time.

The book's first part, *Manuscript Libraries in Yemen*, consists of four studies dedicated to manuscript libraries in Yemen. The fifth article on the thirteenth-century administrative manual *Nūr al-ma'ārif* by Daniel Martin Varisco (pp. 213–33) is a superb piece, but only of marginal relevance to the topic of manuscript libraries (or cultures). Two of the four studies focus on specific libraries: Zaid bin Ali al-Wazir discusses the al-Wazir Library, a family

collection of books probably going back to the twelfth century, originating in the Waqash village close to Sanaa. As is typical for family 'libraries', this collection was continuously reconfigured over the centuries with books being taken out, the collection being divided among family members and new books being added. The exact history of this amorphous collection, including its multiple physical locations, remains to be written. It seems that this will require using the notes on the manuscripts that, at one point or the other, belonged to members of the al-Wazir family. Brinkley Messick turns to the much more straightforward case of the first 'modern' Yemeni library, the Khizāna al-Mutawakkaliyya founded in 1925 at the Great Mosque of Sanaa (pp. 149–70). He superbly sets its foundation in the framework of hybridised post-Ottoman institutions and the much deeper history of Zaydi governance. With a particular focus on law, he shows that the new library reflected broader changes in how the post-1918 Zaydi imamate intended to organise the production of authoritative knowledge.

The two other studies in this first part take a broader view of Yemeni libraries and manuscript culture. Anne Regourd focuses on the role of Yemeni state actors in protecting and regulating manuscript collections in the country (pp. 189–212). She discusses the various institutions responsible for manuscripts since the 1960s and the protagonists in this field. This is a very useful survey for understanding the internal dynamics of manuscript policies and manuscript politics until the present day and for understanding the role of foreign initiatives in this field. Gabriele vom Bruck offers an interesting attempt to employ anthropological approaches to write the history of private libraries during recent armed conflict, including that of a member of the al-Wazir family (pp. 123–48).

The book's second part, *Yemeni Manuscripts in the World*, consists of six studies focusing on the translocation of Yemeni manuscripts abroad and a further contribution by the two editors. The latter (pp. 237–345) deals with the oeuvre of the thirteenth-century scholar 'Abd Allāh b. Zayd al-'Anṣī, in particular based on manuscripts in Berlin and Munich as well as a microfilm reproduction of a manuscript that has since been lost. Stefanie Brinkmann approaches the second part's topic by way of a case study (pp. 347–83), namely the Vienna manuscript of al-Bukhārī's *ḥadīth* compendium (Cod. Glaser 30) that was among the numerous manuscripts moved from Yemen to European libraries by Eduard Glaser (1855–1908). She does not focus on this translocation, but rather on the manuscript's earlier trajectory as she argues that this was originally an Iranian fifteenth-century manuscript that came to Yemen by the sixteenth century at the latest. Based on ownership statements and the commentary in the margins, the author can present a dense analysis

of the manuscript's trajectory and functions within its Yemeni contexts. The remaining articles take a wider view and approach the topic from the angle of collections and collectors. Christoph Rauch draws attention to the fact that the Yemeni manuscripts in Berlin State Library go well beyond the well-known 264 items that the library bought from Eduard Glaser in the late nineteenth century (pp. 385–415). He surveys a further 140 volumes that gradually came to the library from the seventeenth century until the present day and that go back to individuals such as Carlo Landberg and Hermann Burchardt. This article makes highly interesting observations on the methodology for identifying the local provenance of manuscripts despite the incomplete and often erratic cataloguing data that is all we have in many cases.

Eduard Glaser and his *Nachlass* is the subject of Jan Thiele's explorative article (pp. 417–38), more precisely the large number of letters that are today in archives in the Czech Republic (in particular in Louny, Žatek and Prague). Here we see Glaser corresponding with other European actors central to the translocation of Yemeni manuscripts, such as Giuseppe Caprotti (1862–1919), and with other experts in manuscripts studies, such as the cataloguer of the Berlin collection, Wilhelm Ahlwardt. Giuseppe Caprotti was arguably the most active trader in Yemeni manuscripts and he is the focus of Valentina Sagaria Rossi's article on Yemeni manuscripts in Italian libraries (pp. 439–83). Most of the over 2,000 Yemeni manuscripts that Caprotti collected ended up in Milan making the Ambrosiana Library the most extensive collection of Yemeni-Zaydi manuscripts outside Yemen. The article discusses in detail the acquisition process in Italy, but – as so often – we know little about how Caprotti purchased the manuscripts in Yemen. Yet, the fact that many of them left the country hidden in coffee sacks indicates that at least the export was not perfectly legal according to the standards of the time.

Karin Schepper and Arnoud Vrolijk scrutinize the provenance of Yemeni manuscripts in Leiden University Library and the main protagonists in these translocations (pp. 485–515). As is the case for Berlin State Library, and virtually all other collections, the information is mainly limited to the person of the scholar/trader who sold the manuscripts to the library with little insight into the manuscripts' history in Yemen itself. In the second part, the article focuses on Yemeni bookbindings that display some characteristic features, such as the continued preference for leather bindings when many other regions in the Middle East had shifted to using marbled papers. In the volume's final contribution, Bernard Haykel turns to a non-European protagonist, Muḥammad al-ʿUbaykān (1899–1993), the Saudi envoy to Sanaa between 1957 and 1961 (pp. 517–32). During these years al-ʿUbaykān acquired some 250 manuscripts, most of which are today at the King Salman Manuscript Library

(King Saud University/Riyadh). This collection is arguably a good indicator of the books circulating within Yemeni scholarly milieus in the pre-revolutionary period.

Overall, this is a highly interesting volume with many insightful articles. Two points might need more consideration in future: Firstly, from the footnotes it is generally not evident whether the authors have consulted the actual manuscripts or reproductions. This is of high relevance for the reader when it comes, for instance, to discussions of manuscript notes. Scratched-off or pasted-over notes are often only evident when working with the actual manuscript. Hence, information on the mode of access is crucial for assessing arguments built on the notes of a specific manuscript. Secondly, the ethical dimension of translocated manuscripts is not systematically discussed, which would have been particularly helpful as intensively debated concepts such as 'digital repatriation' (p. 119) are employed.

Of particular pleasure in this volume are the numerous high-quality reproductions of Yemeni manuscripts that give an excellent impression of this manuscript culture. Even though the volume does not directly address the 'in peril' part of the title, it is an excellent introduction to the (primarily nineteenth-century and following) history of Yemeni manuscripts and their potential for pertinent case studies.

Konrad Hirschler

Universität Hamburg, Islamwissenschaft/Cluster of Excellence

Understanding Written Artefacts, Hamburg, Germany

konrad.hirschler@uni-hamburg.de