

Islam's Rationalist Heritage and the Preservation of Yemeni Religious Manuscripts

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) Project

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Reducing the intellectually rich and diverse Islamic heritage to a bare minimum of what is seen as allegedly authentic is a strategy that is characteristic of Wahhabism, Salafism, and jihadism and their respective proponents. Whatever goes against their interpretation of Islam is classified as "heretical" and banned from distribution. Moreover, libraries holding books and manuscripts that are seen as containing deviant views are targeted for destruction, as is also the case with historic monuments, shrines, and religious sites, which have been destroyed over the past decades by Muslim extremists in an attempt to allegedly "purge" Islam.

For historical reasons, the libraries of Yemen preserve up until today the bulk of Islam's rationalist heritage, as expressed in a rich body of literature of discursive theology, legal theory, and Qur'anic exegesis which propagates the primacy of reason over scriptural sources. None of this literature has survived elsewhere in the Islamic world and its rationalist bias is one of the primary reasons prompting Salafis to try and physically destroy the Yemenite manuscript collections.

The Zaydi community is a branch of Shii Islam that has flourished mainly in two regions, namely the mountainous Northern Highlands of Yemen and the Caspian regions of Northern Iran. The two Zaydi states that were established in the ninth century C.E. initially constituted separate political and cultural entities. The situation changed in the early twelfth century, when a rapprochement between the two communities began that 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.

As a result of their continuous presence in Yemen since the ninth century, the rich and still largely unexplored manuscript tradition of the Zaydis has largely survived until today: Zaydi Yemen is characterized by a religio-dynastic continuance that stretched over nearly a

millennium until the abolition of the Zaydi imamate in 1962, and witnessed various initiatives to affirm and renew the state's Zaydi identity during the thirteenth, seventeenth, and twentieth centuries. During these periods, the production of books rose exponentially and new libraries were founded. Vicissitudes notwithstanding, the remarkable political continuity of the Zaydis is reflected in an almost uninterrupted library tradition in the country which remains unexplored.

The Zaydi literary tradition is among the richest and most variegated strands within Islamic civilization, and at the same time one of the least studied. The literary production by Zaydi scholars stretches over more than a thousand years covering a wide spectrum of traditional disciplines. Moreover, Zaydis were at all times intimately familiar with the relevant intellectual strands beyond the confines of their own community, and they actively engaged in them. The typical library of a Zaydi scholar would comprise not only works belonging to his own religious tradition, but also an array of titles of authors from other communities, including the literary legacy of the Mu'tazila, one of the most important rational schools in the history of Muslim theology. The Yemeni manuscript collections thus constitute a unique treasure trove for large segments of the Islamic intellectual tradition—Sunni as well as Shii.

At the same time, the Zaydi manuscript tradition is widely dispersed. The most significant and by far largest collections of Zaydi manuscripts are housed by the many public and private libraries of Yemen (estimates of their holdings range between 40,000 to 100,000 manuscripts). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, European, Ottoman-Turkish, and Saudi scholars, diplomats, merchants and travelers to Yemen began to purchase manuscripts which are nowadays housed by libraries outside of the country (a rough estimate being some 20,000 manuscripts)—important collections of Yemeni / Zaydi manuscripts are held in Milan and Rome, Berlin and Munich, London and Leiden, as well as in some Middle Eastern libraries, in Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran and Iraq.

Over the course of the second half of the twentieth century and during the early twenty-first century, various microfilming and digitization projects have been carried out by teams from Egypt, Kuwait, Iran, Germany, and the United States in an attempt to facilitate access to the manuscript holdings of the libraries in Yemen.

Despite the enormous significance of all these efforts, there are also several downsides. The Egyptians, and later the Kuwaitis, had a selective approach in their choice of manuscripts to be microfilmed (they were aiming particularly at the literary legacy of the Mu'tazilites, a theological movement with a rationalist approach that dominated Islamic doctrinal thought from the ninth through the thirteenth century). Scholars of Egypt managed to publish a fair amount of works they had brought from Yemen during the late 1960s and 1970s, and with this rendered a great service to scholarship. Moreover, the publication of these works evoked a reappraisal of rationalism as evidenced in the theological writings of the Mu'tazila, resulting in a movement that was summarized under the label Neo-Mu'tazila. The Iranians, who microfilmed and later digitized significant amounts of Yemeni manuscripts during the early 2000s, had a far more comprehensive approach—in many cases they filmed entire collections. The various digitization efforts supported by the German Foreign Office (2010) and the Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft in conjunction with the National Endowment for the Humanities (2010-2013)—both carried out in cooperation with the local Imam Zayd bin Ali Cultural Foundation—aimed at digitizing a select number of private collections in their entirety.

However, the various initiatives to produce surrogates of manuscripts, be it in microform or digitally, did not aim at preserving the manuscripts—the intention was rather to make them accessible to the respective local scholarly community in Egypt, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia or Iran. Characteristically, the surrogates are housed in the relevant institution that was in charge of filming them in the first place with no attempt to make them available to a larger audience. It is only in the case of Iran that the results of the digitization endeavors are available in the major libraries throughout the country. Moreover, the Iranians also digitized the microfilms that had been prepared in earlier decades by the Egyptians and the Kuwaitis, and they contributed to the production of additional manuscript catalogues. The digital surrogates prepared by the Iranians were also partly made available to various NGOs in Yemen—particularly the aforementioned Imam Zayd bin Ali Cultural Foundation and Markaz Badr—whose personnel continued to digitize the holdings of additional private libraries.

While scholars outside of Yemen are nowadays able to access only a fraction of the relevant manuscript materials housed by Yemeni libraries, scholars of Yemen are for all practical purposes unable to consult any of the Zaydi manuscripts housed by libraries outside of Yemen—

the costs for digital images render them unaffordable, and only a fraction of the close to 20,000 manuscripts have so far been digitized.

While the various efforts to capture manuscripts in Yemen aimed at providing scholars outside of Yemen access to the material, little thought has been given to the question of how Yemeni scholars might gain access to holdings of libraries outside their country and only a fraction of the Zaydi/Yemeni manuscripts held outside of Yemen is available through open access—even when they are aware of the existence of manuscripts outside of Yemen that are relevant to their work, it is virtually impossible for Yemeni scholars to consult them. In some cases they have only limited access to information on the Yemeni manuscripts held by European and North American libraries and often remain unaware of the extremely rich and valuable holdings outside the country. This holds true not only for the collections that are still uncatalogued: in addition to the enormous costs that make most existing catalogues unaffordable for Yemeni scholars and research institutions, the languages in which they are written (Latin, German, Italian, and English) render them largely useless for scholars who are proficient only in Arabic. On the other hand, Yemenis have made attempts over the past decades to "repatriate" some of the important collections of Yemeni manuscripts in the West, but none of them came 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", and at one stage a senior Yemeni diplomat negotiated with the Ambrosiana to purchase surrogates of portions of the Caprotti collection in Milan, but the costs were beyond the means available to the embassy. Moreover, during 2014 the then newly appointed Minister of Cultural Affairs approached the US ambassador to Yemen, Matthew H. Tueller, in order to bring about the return of "any Yemeni historical manuscript in the US" to Yemen, an initiative that was never pursued any further.

To make matters worse, the manuscript libraries in Yemen itself are under imminent threat. Throughout much of the second half of the twentieth and the first decades of the twenty-first century Yemeni authorities have been constantly fighting manuscript dealers, trying to prevent them from smuggling manuscripts out of the country, with only limited success it would seem. Moreover, many of the private libraries in 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. The continuing war in the country has accelerated this process.

In view of the poor state of scholarship in the area of Zaydi studies, the challenges that result from the dispersal of the material, and the disastrous situation in present-day Yemen, the tasks at hand are threefold, namely "preserving" and "studying" the Zaydi manuscript tradition, as well as "democratizing" access to these materials.

Today's digital technology offers entirely new possibilities to salvage the Zaydi / Yemeni literary heritage from destruction and to make it available through open access to Muslim and non-Muslim scholars and intellectuals worldwide. It further allows for digital repatriation of the extensive holdings of manuscripts of Yemeni provenance in libraries outside the country. The idea is to democratize access to a unique corpus of literature which will be instrumental in creating a powerful countervoice to the prevailing Salafi trend and will serve as an effective support for moderate strands in the Islamic world.

The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) project aims at gathering digital surrogates of as many Zaydi manuscripts as possible in a single repository and providing comprehensive and systematic open access to them for scholars worldwide, regardless of whether the physical manuscripts are preserved in Europe or in North America, in Yemen, or elsewhere in the Middle East. The ZMT is a joint project initiated by the Institute for Advanced Study (IAS), Princeton, in partnership with the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library (HMML) at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota.

Through its digital portal, the ZMT 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 (shelf marks) and the relevant bibliography for every single codex. Each entry is linked to a corresponding entry in the virtual reading room of the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library. This provides a stable HMML Project Number and permanent link for each manuscript. In a second phase of the project, full metadata will be produced for the manuscripts included in the project using the vHMML reading room's cataloging tools.

In addition to this, the digital portal functions as a *gateway to manuscripts* within the confines of the ZMT that have already been digitized. Provided a repository has uploaded digital images of its own holdings, the portal links the user directly to those repositories. Images of holdings of other collections of Zaydi manuscripts, to the extent that these are available or can be produced, will be uploaded to the digital reading room of vHMML, and links to the respective digital codices are again provided through the portal.

The project, which aims to provide open access to an estimated number of about 25,000 digitized manuscripts over the course of the next three years, will help to salvage the rich Yemeni heritage, which is on the verge of destruction. These measures will also effectively *democratize* access to the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition, which is expected to result in an upsurge of this important field of study and will serve as a model for other fields within Islamic Studies where scholars face similar challenges. At the same time, the ZMT project will help to bring more of the enormous richness and intellectual diversity of Islamic culture to the forefront and make it accessible for everyone.

Most importantly perhaps, the preservation and dissemination of the mostly unknown Zaydi theological and legal literature will underscore the fact that a rationalist epistemology continued in Islamic thought for a longer period than is generally recognized. The preservation, dissemination, and study of these rich manuscript materials will thus not only have an immediate impact on several fields of scholarship in the humanities but also bring the rational heritage of Islam to the forefront and thus contribute to a more nuanced picture of the Islamic intellectual tradition and culture among Western observers.