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**Inventory of a Manuscript Collection from Al-Mağrib:
Preliminary Remarks**

Abstract

The aim of the present article is to introduce an enigmatic handwritten document in Arabic from the 2nd half of the 19th c., mixing elements from Al-Mašriq with those from Al-Mağrib. It is a list of more than 300 titles of various Arabic books, a sort of a catalog, which the author proposes to study in detail at a later stage. Now, the basic information on the document is given, resulting from the study of the manuscript itself.

Keywords: Arabic manuscripts, Mağribian book culture, Islamic librarianship, Islamic book collecting

1. Introduction

This is the first presentation of a handwritten book inventory which comprises titles of books belonging to an unspecified collection from North-Western Africa.¹

The document under study was included in a set of Oriental papers titled *L'Archive de Sa Majesté l'Impératrice [sic!] Napoléon*, as its private vendor insisted in Paris in 1975. He also told that the original paper file bearing that handwritten notice was in such a bad condition that he simply threw it out. Nothing of this information can be verified *ex post*. Even if the veracity of that statement (including the title's faulty orthography) seems rather doubtful, it has been retained for documentary purposes until new information appears. All the papers from the file, including this manuscript, are now in the possession of the author.

¹ I thank Dr. Philip Matthews of Lower Hutt, New Zealand, and my son, Piotr A. Zagórski, for their kind help in preparing this paper.

The manuscript, the initial study of which I would like to present here, is that of a curious and rarely seen kind of work, a catalog – or rather a hand list – of some unspecified book collection, maybe a formal public library. I believe the presumed library was located somewhere in North-Western Africa (Al-Magrib). The inventory includes more than 300 titles which, by their mere number, make up a significant book collection of local importance.

Original catalogs of traditional libraries are mentioned *en passant* in general monographs of Muslim librarianship; however, those occasional remarks are not developed further and little is known of the character of such catalogs, their organization and how they were used.² A very important contribution to our limited knowledge of that aspect of book use was done by Stojanka Kenderova in her insightful monograph of an 18th–19th century Ottoman public lending library in the Rumelian city of Samakov/Şamāqōv (صماقوو, at present Samokov in Bulgaria). However, the information contained in her book – concerning a card catalog – does not shed light that would help to elucidate the question of the particular document under study.³

Another curious list of the books that were found in the libraries of Aleppo in the thirteenth century⁴ was compiled for apparently educational purposes, as a recommendation and reference tool; however, even that list can not be directly compared with our inventory.⁵

2. Physical description and contents

Physically, the document under study is composed of two parts (f. 1 and f. 2).

The main part of it is a broad sheet of paper 46 cm long and 35 cm high, written on both sides (f. 1 *recto* and f. 1 *verso*). The paper was apparently originally white but with the passing time it has become rather yellowish, with occasional brown spots which do not prevent reading.

The broad sheet is covered with a long list of titles placed in four neatly arranged columns on each side of it, with catalog items starting – like the usual Arab writing – from the right side and continued to the left. When one side (f. 1 *recto*) of the paper was filled, the text continued in the same manner on the other side (f. 1 *verso*).

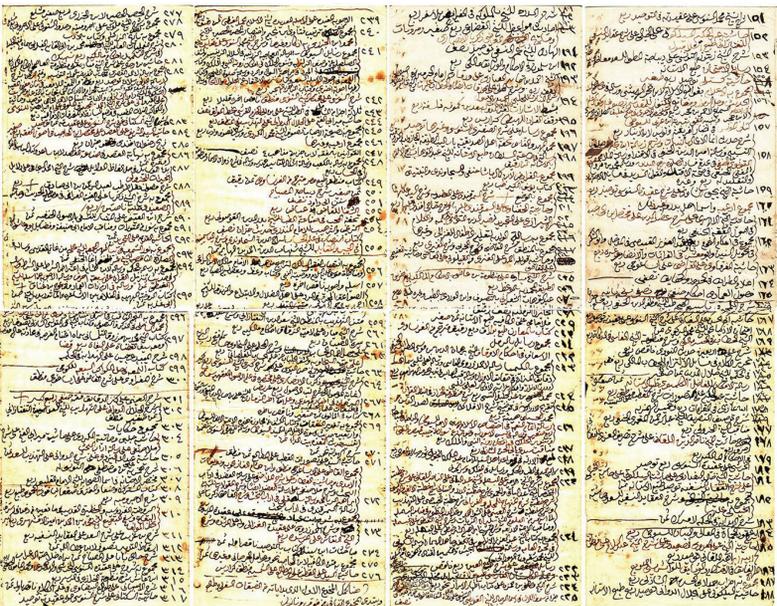
With this arrangement the sheet was then folded in two, thus creating four pages with two columns of the text on each of them. The result is a sort of a brochure or a folder. However, this arrangement of numbered titles did not allow the sheet to be sewn into covers as the study of it would require reading the text in the following sequence: p. 4, p. 1, p. 2, p. 3. The correct sequence of the listed items can only be discerned when the whole sheet is spread wide.

² Lévi-Provençal 1922, Bielawski 1961, Ibn Dohaish 1989, Benjelloun-Laroui 1990, Binebine 1992, Benchikh-Boulanouar 2015.

³ Kenderova 2002.

⁴ Sbath 1946.

⁵ A new similar inventory was discovered recently, see chapter 4 of the present article.



Manuscript collection inventory. From top right to left (f. 1 recto): pages 1 and 2, ms. nos. 001–150; in the middle, from the right (f. 1 verso): pages 3 and 4, ms. nos. 151–317; at the bottom, from the right: pages 5 (f. 2 recto) and 6 (f. 2 verso), ms. nos. 401–410 and [411–419]

Later on, the sheet, now folded in two, was again folded in two along the divisions between the columns, creating a narrow and long paper bundle, and then again in two in the middle of its length. With time the folds harmed the paper and now the upper part of the manuscript is separate from the lower part.

This part of the catalog contains titles and (very occasionally) authors of books numbered 1–317, with nos. 226–238 omitted. Are titles with those numbers missing? Maybe yes, but not necessarily. Numbering of the titles before 226 was changed and corrected, but the corrections did not extend consequently any farther than that. Maybe there were some numbering mistakes or changes that were discontinued through forgetfulness and not carried out to the end of the list. For that reason the numbering does not correspond exactly to the actual number of listed titles. Their exact number is yet to be carefully established. It also seems that several entries may contain more than one title.

The second part (f. 2) of the manuscript is an irregular rectangular scrap of paper, about 23 cm long and 8 cm wide, obviously torn out from some bigger sheet (not from the broad sheet with the first part). On the front page (f. 2 *recto*) it contains the entries numbered 401–409 in the first column, while in the second column we only find the entry numbered 410 and then four not numbered entries [411–414]. On the reverse (f. 2 *verso*) there is one column with five titles bearing no numbers [415–419].

The handwriting of the document is an Oriental *nashī*, executed with experience and even some elegance seen despite apparent wish of the author to write quickly.⁶ The whole appearance of the manuscript would not suggest an attempt at producing an object of artistic calligraphy, but rather a simple list destined for some practical purposes.

The same hand of a writer, named here A, may be identified in all the entries of the first part as well as in the entries numbered 401–404 of the second part of the catalog, and also in the five unnumbered entries on its reverse [415–419]. Title no. 404 was started by A and completed by a different writer (B) who also wrote numbered entries 405–410 and remaining four unnumbered entries [411–414] on the same page. That second writer – B, it must be strongly underlined, was quite different from the first one. He used a typically Maghribian, very hasty cursive script.⁷

Missing items numbered 318–400 were most presumably noted down with the same hand as that of the writer A, similar to the preceding (1–317) and following titles – 401–404 and [415–419]. They could occupy an additional sheet of paper of a size similar to the main part of the catalog. That middle part (ca. 20% of the list) is missing altogether.

All numberings were executed with the use of Oriental Arabic figures.

It can be concluded that the document under study is complete with its beginning and the end, except for a missing part towards the end of the list. It means it did not have the title or the name of its author. Theoretically – and practically – they could be placed in one of those two places that are still preserved, at *incipit* or *explicit* (in the form

⁶ Vajda 1958, Schimmel 1984.

⁷ Ben Sedira 1893.

of a *colophon*), but they were not.⁸ No space for such information was reserved in the manuscript. It may also testify of the document's temporary and strictly practical character.

In place of *incipit* we find the beginning of the list (f. 1 *recto*):

الحمد

1. النور الوهاج في الاسراء والمعراج للشهي على الاجهور ربع

2. جزء من اخر الصحاح ثمن ناقص اخره / من / انة / الى / يا

Al-ḥamd

1. *An-nūr al-wahhāğ fī al-isrā wa-al-miḥrāğ li-aš-Šayḥ ʿAlī al-Uğhūr rubʿ*

M2. *ğuz' min aḥir Aṣ-Šiḥāḥ tumn nāqiş aḥiri-h /min / anaha / ilá / yā*

That means:

Glory [to God]

1. *The glowing light on the [Prophet Muḥammad's] night journey [to Jerusalem] and ascension to heaven, by aš-Šayḥ ʿAlī al-Uğhūr[ī], a quarter part⁹*

2. *a section from the end of The Perfect [Book in Arabic Language by Ismāʿīl al-Jawharī],¹⁰ an eighth part, with its final fragment missing, from anaha to yā.*

In place of *explicit* we find the last titles of the list (f. 2. *verso*):

كتاب في الافعال

كتاب في العروض

كتاب في النحو

[417] *Kitāb fī al-aʿfāl*

[418] *Kitāb fī al-ʿarūd*

[419] *Kitāb fī an-naḥw*

That means:

[417] *A book on verbs*

[418] *A book on prosody*

[419] *A book on grammar.*¹¹

⁸ See the attached photograph of the manuscript.

⁹ The author (1559–1656) was a Māliki šayḥ at-Al-Azhar; see Brockelmann II 317 and S II 437.

¹⁰ Author (d. between 1002–1008) of a famous dictionary of Arabic language, containing over 40,000 entries.

¹¹ These three last titles of the list apparently are just descriptions of the contents of the books, not the proper titles.

It is of pertinence to observe that both titles from the beginning of the list refer to incomplete books. The full study will reveal more of them.

At this very early stage of research one can have a feeling of seeing an old library in disorder. Was it an old dismantled collection of educational books, from some abandoned centre (zāwiya¹)? In any case, such impression could be acquired after seeing mostly books on religion and language.

3. Character of the document

In fact, we do not know the purpose for which this list of books was produced. Maybe it was a commercial catalog (a sort of a delivery note) accompanying the transport of books from some of the Arab Oriental countries, ordered by a customer (maybe also a trader?) in one of the Magribian countries. The Magribian customer could complete the list by adding to it some titles for unknown reason (in between texts written by A?). In any case, it may be assumed with high likelihood that the list was originally produced in the Orient (or at least by an Oriental writer – A) and later on was completed in Al-Magrib (or at least by a Magribian writer – B). Al-Magrib was apparently the final destination of the list and of the Oriental books mentioned in it. What exactly was the destination and the whereabouts of all the manuscripts listed in this catalog we cannot know at present, unless it is matched with some hitherto unknown collection of books.

Here a question arises: was it a catalog of manuscripts (handwritten books) or a list of printed books? A partial answer to that question is connected with the possible dating of the document.

A few of the titles in the catalog have a remark *printed here and there* and accordingly it should be concluded – by opposition – that all other titles refer to handwritten books whose production in the Orient was abundant and lasted long, well into modern times. But when this document was written exactly may only be said in approximation, in reference to the dates of the printed books from the same list.

As an example let us take item No. 24 from the list as the first point of reference in time. It is written in our catalog:

الاتقان في علوم القرآن للسيوطي خط وهو مطبوع بلكوته

Al-Itqān fī ʿulūm al-Qurʾān li-s-Suyūṭī ḥaṭṭ wa-huwa maṭbūʿ bi-Kalkūta^h – meaning a popular book by a prolific Egyptian writer As-Suyūṭī (1445–1505), in handwriting, with a remark: *and it was printed in Calcutta*. As we know from the Sarkīs’ *Dictionary of Arabic Printed Books*, vol. 1, col. 1074, the book was first printed in Calcutta in 1852.¹² It means the list could have been composed in 1852 at the earliest, or later, but certainly not before that date. Similar dating should be possibly undertaken as regards other titles in the catalog, marked as *printed* – *maṭbūʿ* مطبوع. Furthermore, the exact meaning of this statement in Arabic is still unclear: does it refer to a manuscript *and* a printed version

¹² Sarkīs 1928.

that were in the collection, or it was just an additional, explanatory information that this particular handwritten book from the list was also printed somewhere? In any case, all dates of printed books will allow us to finally fix a date *a posteriori* when the document was written; in rough lines it is most probably the second half of the nineteenth century. Also it seems obvious that the majority, if not all, of listed books are manuscripts.

The unique character of this Arabic document makes us thinking about other cultural areas. In Poland, for example, catalogs, hand lists and inventories of book collections were quite frequent in the sixteenth to the twentieth centuries; a number of them survived. Their investigation supplies additional important data on the material and intellectual life of the past, evoking the memory of book collections, depositories of intellectual products of older generations. Many of those collections perished or were dispersed in the turbulent times and now we may only learn about them from such inventories.¹³

It is hard to know why in the Islamic World such documents were not that popular. Or, perhaps, they just remain disregarded, buried among papers and not inventoried, leaving thus a rich source of information not retrievable. May be some of them will come back to light again?

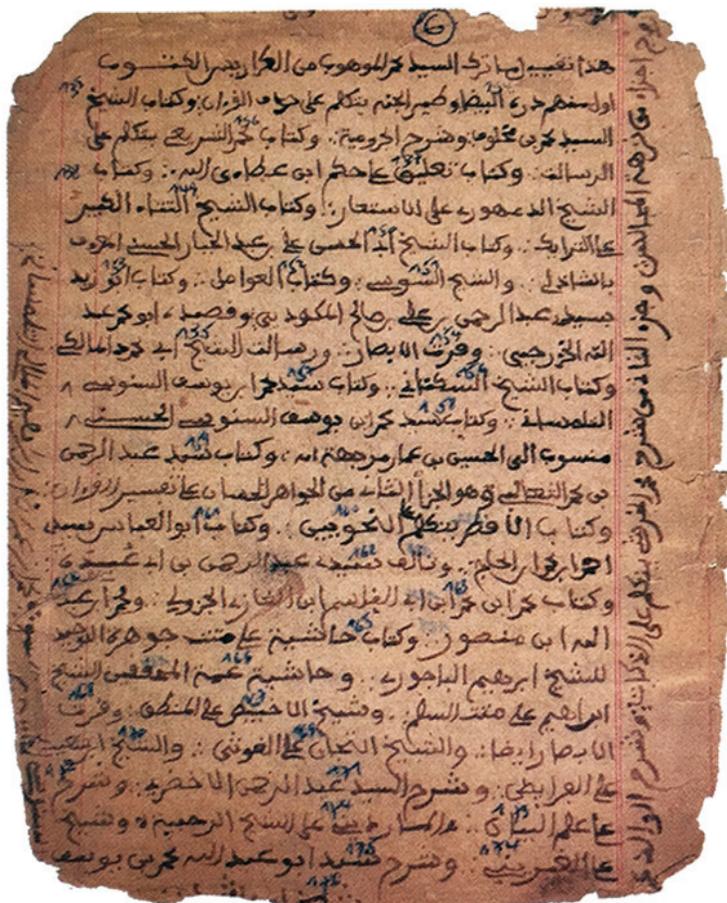
4. Unexpected analogy

A day before receiving final proof sheets of this article, its author returned from a conference in Constantine (Qusanṭīna¹), Algeria, with a newly acquired catalogue of manuscripts preserved in the Ūlaḥbīb family library in Upper Kabylia.¹⁴ The catalogue contains, among its 624 listed items and over 100 unidentified loose fragments, a document which bears certain resemblance to the manuscripts inventory, the subject of this article. The Algerian document Ms. N^o DVS 06 is a 19th c. inventory of manuscripts written by (?) or owned by (?) the šayḥ al-Mawḥūb Ibn al-Ḥabīb. The exact nature of the document is not clearly described, the catalogue includes two contradictory statements on this point: p. 175 (catalogue entry): *Liste des ouvrages de Shaykh al-Mūhūb b. al-Habib*; p. 179 (caption of a photograph): *Répertoire des manuscrits de la bibliothèque de Cheikh Lmuhub*. A closer look at the only reproduced page from the inventory would rather suggest the latter possibility.

The catalogue supplies no information about actual extent (length) of the document or whether it was published already or not (presumably not). However, a reproduced page of the inventory has the page (or *folio*?) number 6 added in the top margin of the sheet. Individual titles of books on this page are numbered from 134–176 by a hand clearly different from one of the original writer. All numberings are executed in European figures. Apparently, some researcher took interest in the document and tried to obtain more orderly knowledge of its contents.

¹³ Paszkiewicz 1990, Paszkiewicz 1996.

¹⁴ Aissani, Mechehed 2010.



Manuscripts inventory from the Algerian collection

It is to be hoped that more inventories of book collections, similar to the two described in this article, will come out from oblivion and become available to historians, helping to enhance our knowledge of book preservation and circulation in the Arab World.

5. Conclusion

This short study has concentrated on the origin of the manuscript, its tentative dating and paleographical characteristics. It constitutes a prelude to a full research which that written monument certainly deserves. At a further stage the author shall examine all titles included in the inventory, proceed wherever possible with their exact identification together with authors' names, and try to establish what was the possible informative and functional value of the entity to which the books once belonged. Following that we shall be able to appreciate its place in the general history of librarianship in the Islamic World.

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