

Fahras maḥtūṭāt Maktaba^t al-Azhar aš-Šarīf. Al-Maṣāḥif. ^cUlūm al-Qur'ān. Al-Qirā'āt. At-Taḥsīr [Catalogue of Manuscripts of the Honorable Al-Azhar Library. Copies of the Koran. Koran Sciences. Recitation. Interpretation], Saqīfa^t aš-Šafā al-^cIlmiyya^t, [Al-Qāhira^t] 1435 h.-2013 m. 1015 p., CD-ROM.

The Honorable Al-Azhar University and Mosque (Al-Ġāmi^c al-Azhar aš-Šarīf) in Cairo, the biggest and most important centre of Islamic Sunnī learning in the World, was built by Ġawhar aš-Šiqillī (d. AH 382 / AD 992), a famous military commander of the Shiah dynasty of the Fāṭimids. It was first open to prayer in Ramaḍān AH 361 (AD 972), and in Ramaḍān three years later to study.

The Library of Al-Azhar, commonly also known as Al-Maktaba^t al-Azhariyya^t, is second in importance in Egypt only after the National Library and Archives (Dār al-Kutub wa-al-Waṭā'iq al-Qawmiyya^t) in Cairo. Al-Azhar's holdings of Islamic manuscripts comprise something close to 50 thousand separate items – at the time of printing of this catalogue – with about 7 million pages¹. This extraordinary treasury of Islamic written heritage is currently being digitalized (about one third so far) but a more traditional printed catalogue is still very much in demand.

Old catalogues of the Al-Azhar Library's collections have long since become obsolete and the sizeable growth of the holdings in recent decades even more necessitated a new union catalogue.

The initiative is one of the most praiseworthy. The immense quantity of information, if properly arranged and made accessible, will be a significant contribution to the better communication, study, research and teaching in all kinds of academic domains and an important tool of intercultural encounter in our global world.

The complete series of catalogues of Al-Azhar manuscript collection is planned to consist – reportedly – of about twenty volumes. The first of them, the one under review, is devoted – as Islamic tradition dictates – to the copies of the Koran and to several branches of Koranic sciences. The entire volume is in Arabic.

¹ For comparison, holdings of the National Library in Cairo include approximately 57,000 codices, most of them in Arabic, but including also ca. 1,000 in Persian and ca. 2,010 in Ottoman Turkish, while the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris has a collection of nearly 12,000 Islamic manuscripts, of that number, beside the Arabic ones, there are: 20 in Berber (manuscripts in Berber or Amazigh are generally, for historical reasons, of extreme rarity, because it was simply not a part of the cultural tradition in the Maghreb to write in Berber, divided into many most diversified oral dialects which never created a literary language), 2,468 in Persian and 2,010 in Turkish. The British Library's holdings are estimated at 23,250 manuscripts (10,600 Arabic, 32 Buginese, 80 Javanese in Pegon/ Arabic script, 4 Kurdish, 2 Makassarese, 3 Malgash, 91 Malay, 14 Panjabi, 131 Pashto, 9,450 Persian, 10 Sindhi, 11 Swahili, 1,890 Turkish, 880 Urdu plus a few in Belorussian and Polish in Arabic script). The Library of the University of Tehran has 14,203 manuscripts; the National Library in Tehran has 11,877, but there are other three Iranian libraries with even greater number of Islamic manuscripts: Maḡles-e Šūrā-ye Eslāmī Library (16,000), Āyat Allāh Mar'āšī Naḡafī (25,000), and Astān-e Qods-e Razavī Library (29,000). However, the largest one of them all, with its 67,571 manuscripts arranged in 92 different collections, is definitely the Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi in Istanbul.

The volume begins with the *Forward of the Book* (Ṭalīḥa' al-kitāb, pp. 5–13 [not numbered]) by Aḥmad aṭ-Tayyib, the Superior of Al-Azhar (Šayḥ al-Azhar) from which readers can glean a general knowledge of the Mosque's and University's history and their present state and functions, and specially of their Library and its holdings.

It would be of interest to learn, in this connection, how the present holders of the collection have handled and settled the delicate question of the manuscripts' ownership. The pious foundations (*awqāf*), to which category many of the catalogued items used to belong in the past, were specific institutions clearly designated by donators and it is of common knowledge that, as a rule, according to the tenets of the Islamic law, manuscripts should not be removed from an indicated place. Transferring the endowed objects to another place could be considered as contravention of the conditions of the endowment itself. We are not informed how transfers of manuscripts were made possible, especially in this very particular case of such an exemplary religious institution as Al-Azhar².

The *Forward* is followed by a *Word from the Publishers* (Kalima' Saqīfa' aš-Šafā al-ʿIlmiyya'), pp. 14–16 [not numbered], by ʿUmar Sālim Bā Ğuḥayf, the President of the Publishers' Board of Trustees (Ra'īs Mağlis al-Umanā'). The *Word* presents a short outline of the technical cooperation between the Library and the Publishers and the main four fields of that cooperation: maintenance and conservation, digitalization, cataloguing and publishing.

The last of the three prefatory texts is an *Introduction* (Muqaddima') pp. 17–25 [not numbered], by Maḥdī Hādī Maḥmūd Šaltūt, Chief of the Central Administration of the Library of Al-Azhar (Ra'īs al-Idāra' al-Markaziyya' li-Maktaba' al-Azhar), in which the author describes a history of the Library's catalogues and on that canvas he puts the general description of this particular catalogue whose publication has just started. We learn (p. 23) that the catalogue is divided into chapters according to subject matters treated in individual manuscripts, and in each chapter manuscripts are arranged in alphabetical order of titles. When finished, the catalogue will be supplied with indices of the names of authors, the names of copyists, the names of benefactors to the pious foundations (*awqāf*) and the names of owners to whom individual manuscripts belonged.

No index is planned, regretfully, for the names of the places where the manuscripts were written or preserved, but that valuable historical information may be still added in some time to come. It will require, however, a huge additional work since the place names, even if mentioned in manuscripts' colophons, were not searched for by compilers and are not part of the standard descriptions (see below).

² This problem is not unique for Egypt, naturally; for instance, in Saudi Arabia this highly delicate question of endowed property was seriously considered and in the year 1426/2005 a special fatwa No. 23194 was issued regarding that problem by the Permanent Committee for Ifṭā', ruling that, among others, "it is permissible to transfer a library endowed for the use of students from a place where it is not being used to one which is more appropriate and beneficial"; see: *Rare Saudi Arabian Manuscripts*. King Abdulaziz Foundation for Research and Archives, Riyadh 2011, p. 24.

We also learn from the *Introduction* (p. 24) that the structure of the individual description of a manuscript consists of the following elements:

- title of a manuscript;
- author's name with a date of his death, if available;
- copyist's name and date of copying; the compilers of the catalogue deliberately refrained from approximate (estimated, comparative) dating of manuscripts that do not bear an exact date on them;
- details of *awqāf*: name of a donor, to whom it was donated, and date;
- details of ownership: owner's name and date of ownership;
- details of technical description: dimensions of the book, number of pages etc.;
- beginning (*muqaddima*^t) sentences of the text (of whatever is preserved of the manuscript, even if it is highly incomplete);
- closing (*hātima*^f) sentences of the text (same as above);
- call (shelf) numbers (*arqām al-ḥifẓ*): an individual number (*ar-raqm al-hāṣṣ*) in brackets, and a general number (*ar-raqm al-ʿāmm*) outside brackets, are sometimes accompanied by an indication of the origin of a manuscript, i.e. from which library it was transferred to Al-Azhar.

All cited dates refer to *Hiğrī* years exclusively. The names of authors that are apparently given in some sort of standardized form (not necessarily as written in the manuscript), and their dates of death, appear as such in the catalogue, without referring them to any other existing sources³. We cannot know how these names in full extent were established.

A close look at manuscript descriptions included in the catalogue reveals some more technical details, e.g.:

- language of the manuscript;
- style of calligraphy (*nash*_h, *mağribī*, *muʿtād* – *customary* or *common*, *ṭulṭ* and others);
- number of lines (*aṣṭur*) per page;
- number of parts (*ağzā'*) and/or volumes (*muğalladāt*) in a given copy;
- occasional additional remarks, stating that a given manuscript is acephalus etc.

When the author is not known, it is mentioned as *mağhūl* (unknown) When information about the copyist, copying date and *awqāf* is missing from the manuscript, any mention of these elements of description is simply omitted altogether.

All manuscripts described in this catalogue are numbered from 1 on p. 29 to 3757 on p. 1014.

³ In such cases, in the European tradition, the basic data are usually checked and compared with those found in such cornerstone histories of the Arabic writing as Carl Brockelmann's *Geschichte der Arabischen Litteratur* (GAL, 2 vols.) with its *Supplement* (GALS, 3 vols.), Leiden 1937–1949, and Fuat Sezgin's *Geschichte des Arabischen Schrifttums* (GAS, 13 vols.), Frankfurt 1967–2000, occasionally with necessary corrections and amendments. It ensures much required homogeneity of citation in the treatment of bibliographical data, especially important in the situation of great variability when different sources mention the same name in different ways. C. Brockelmann's *Geschichte* is also known in Arabic translation as *Ta'rīḥ al-adab al-ʿArabī*, which was published in 9 volumes by Al-Hay'a^t al-Miṣriyya^t al-ʿĀmma^t li-l-Kitāb, Cairo 1993; but even that edition was not used for reference in the reviewed catalogue (or at least it was not mentioned).

The main corpus of the book is divided into four chapters: *Copies of the Koran* (Al-Maṣāḥif), *Koran Sciences* (‘Ulūm al-Qur’ān), *Recitation* (Al-Qirā’āt) and *Interpretation* (At-Tafsīr). These chapters correspond to the main fields of study of the Koran as singled out, applied and practiced in Muslim learned circles and outside the Islamic World by foreign Orientalists.

It may be therefore reasonably expected that the next volume will cover at least (according to available resources) the biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad (Sīra^t), the Prophetic Tradition (Ḥadīṭ) and perhaps some other religious studies, but this has not yet been announced.

The chapter titled *Copies of the Koran* is found in pages 27–227 and includes items consequently numbered from 1 to 795 (795 items).

Naturally, in contrast to later chapters, the descriptions in this section do not have authors, but all other elements of standard descriptions are preserved. The manuscripts display a great variety of sizes, styles, external outlooks, and divisions into separate parts, sometimes reaching as far as 30 volumes for a single copy; many of the manuscripts are but parts of the whole text because only some elements of a bigger entity were preserved or the copy is incomplete. That rich variety of physical appearance of the manuscripts is connected with the extremely wide use of the Koran both in religious and educational establishments, or among private individuals. It must also be due to the variety of geographical locations where the copies were produced, but that question would require a separate study. Numerous manuscripts are not dated, others have a date of copying or a date of *awqāf* endowment, or both. Relative dating was not attempted here.

Then comes the chapter titled *Koran Sciences* on pages 229–285, comprising manuscripts numbered from 796 to 1006 (211 items).

This chapter covers in fact a large variety of themes connected with the Holy Book, like the questions of *nāsīḥ* and *mansūḥ* (abrogator and abrogated), *asmā’* (names), *āyāt* and *aḥzāb* (verses and divisions of the text), *faḍā’il* (excellent properties), *ḡarīb* or *ḡarā’ib* (marvellousness), *ma’ānī* (meanings), *i’rāb* (utterance and inflection), *luḡāt ‘aḡamiyya’* (foreign words), *nuzūl suwar* (revelation of chapters), *tartīb* (arrangement) of the Koranic text, and many others. The appearance of such catch words like *tafsīr* (interpretation) or *ḥadīṭ* (tradition) in quite a number of the titles here may lead to questions about the proper attribution of some manuscripts to this particular chapter, but – taking into account sometimes very floristic and figurative style in formulating titles of Islamic writings – we should indeed trust and rely on the correct choices done by the compilers (unless it is proved otherwise through direct study of a given book). In any case, the exact verification of the contents may only be done through careful examination of particular manuscripts.

The chapter titled *Recitation* (Al-Qirā’āt) occupies pages 287–634 and includes manuscripts nos. 1007–2362 (1,355 items).

It includes not only manuscripts referring to *qirā’āt*, adopted here as the most general term in this category, but also other works usually appearing under such titles like *taḡwīd*,

tilāwa' and similar ones. These are all very practical sciences that refer to the proper pronunciation of single sounds, vocables and words of the Koran, their conjunctions, phrases, sentences and long passages; their psalmody, accents, vowel and consonant assimilation, irregular vowellessness due to rhyming requirements, and different styles (or schools) of recitation. The living tradition of reciting the Koran is widespread in the Islamic World even today and people who memorize the full text of the Holy Book by heart (*huffāz*) are quite numerous and highly respected. Competitions in artistic performance of the recitation for young and old are organized in almost all countries with sizeable Muslim population, and literature describing principles and rules of reciting is always very much in demand.

The last and the largest chapter in this volume is titled *Interpretation (At-Tafsīr)*; it covers pages 635–1015 and manuscripts nos. 2363–3757 (1,394 items).

Interpretation of the Koran is another important branch of Koranic studies. It does not only refer to the proper artistic treatment of the Koranic text, as in the case of *qirā'āt*: there is much more about it. The Koran laid the foundations of the Islamic law (*šarī'a'*) and, in view of the difficulties, intricacies and subtleties of the Koranic language, the deep study of the text is a key to its proper understanding. Interpretations of the Koran started very early, almost as soon as the text was formally compiled and edited, and that practice has survived until our times, with new attempts at contemporary explanation of the Holy Book, in various Islamic languages (Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Urdu, Malay or Indonesian and others) inciting always a big interest and hot debates.

The collection of various interpretations is therefore naturally huge and represents an extensive variety of authors and approaches, spread over three continents and many centuries (as regards their creation and copying). It is noticeable that the most popular *tafsīr* of all times, *Tafsīr al-Ġalālayn* (9–10th c. AH/15–16th c. AD), written by two authors: Ġalāl ad-Dīn al-Maḥallī and Ġalāl ad-Dīn as-Suyūṭī (a student of the latter and himself a renown prolific writer), which is generally considered as one of the most easily accessible works of the Koranic exegesis by virtue of its simple style and non-excessive length, is represented in Al-Azhar collection by 454 copies. It is evidence of how popular it was even before the epoch of printing. No other *tafsīr* can compete with this one; for comparison, another important and popular *tafsīr* by Ibn al-Kaṭīr (8th c. AH/14 c. AD), is preserved here in only seven copies.

The majority of 3757 manuscripts in the reviewed volume are in Arabic, only occasionally we can see a notice that a particular work is in Turkish. It means that the idea of the entire catalogue is to include all Islamic manuscripts and without dividing them by languages. It may be practical from the point of view of easy comparison of whatever had been written on a particular subject, it is nevertheless contrary to standard library rules of dividing manuscripts not only by subject but, first of all, by language. Distinguishing existing writings by their language is very important for the comparative study of the same branches of sciences developing in various cultural environments, while mixing them together in one catalogue and one order of items makes that task considerably more complicated.

Another novelty (*bid'a'*) of this catalogue is the alphabetical arrangement of all manuscripts by their titles, not by names of authors. That procedure would rather be more suitable for the index of titles contained in the whole volume, to be placed at the end of it. Furthermore, the titles are arranged seemingly mechanically with definite article *al-* taken into account – normally the definite article does not influence the alphabetical order of names or titles arranged in Arabic in one list. And thus in chapter 3, for example, the title numbered 1314 starting with the word *Ar-Risāla'* is on p. 369, while all other titles starting with the word *Risāla'* without an article, are on pp. 484–487. The same with all titles whose first word differs in the existence or non-existence of the article. It is very inconvenient and impels the user to jump continuously from one place to another in search of titles beginning (in principle) with the same word.

Indexes of names of authors, *awqāf* endowers and endowments and copyists were not planned for this volume: they are to appear at the end of the catalogue when the whole work is done and published. One may ask, however, how many years it will take before we can see and can use the announced indexes and if a collection of nearly four thousand manuscripts does not deserve those natural library aids right away. In the age of computers it is just a little additional work to do. The same remark would apply to names of places where the manuscripts were produced or endowed, or held in collections, available from the manuscripts themselves. That would be an information of great historical value, if found directly in the catalogue.

The catalogue is not illustrated. Instead, the publishers supply a CD-ROM with several series of selected photographs of manuscripts, their covers and inside pages, in *jpg* format. The contents of the CD-ROM are divided into four folders with titles corresponding to the four chapters of the book. In each folder there is a number of sub-folders; in each of them we can find either more sub-sub-folders, or ready *jpg* files with photographs.

Selection of the folders, sub-folders and individual files is haphazard and no system can be discerned. Usually the number of a folder agrees with the available call (shelf) numbers (*ʿumūmiyya'*). As a result, there is apparently only one way of matching photographs and catalogue entries – the one starting with the catalogue entry. Finding a description from just subtitles of photographs is virtually impossible.

Review of the CD shows the following problems for its practical use.

First example: the folder titled *Maṣāḥif* contains 790 sub-folders that is 5 less than the number of Koran descriptions in the book. They are not numbered subsequently: the lowest is no. 53, the highest is no. 926913. The sub-folder no. 56-1 includes three photographs of a manuscript that does not match no. 56 in the catalogue; there are further two sub-folders in the same location showing two other manuscripts: 56-2 with 4 photographs and 56-3 with 3 photographs. All three manuscripts have a similar paper label on the cover saying: 20 *ḥuṣūṣiyya'* 4 *ʿumūmiyya'* 56 – indicating some kind of numbering. The calligrapher's hand seems to be the same in all three manuscripts. The covers of 56-2 and 56-3 are similar but not identical, while the cover 56-1 is quite different and seems to be much better preserved than the other two. It is hard to know how to match these three manuscripts with the printed catalogue.

Then, the sub-folder no. 926913 includes three photographs of a manuscript; it has on its cover three different labels with three different numberings. One of them has no. 38, another one no. 27, and the third one two nos.: \underline{h} (ح) 966 and c (ع) 92613 (sic!). It is not clear how they conform with the printed catalogue.

Furthermore, the sub-folder 53 in the same CD-ROM catalogue *Maṣāḥif* includes a photograph not of a manuscript, but of a scrap of paper with a handwritten notice on it: *ar-raqm al-^cāmm 53 ar-raqm al-ḥāṣṣ 3 yaṣ^cub taṣwīru-hu*, that is: *general no. 53, individual no. 3, difficult to photograph*. Apparently, the material for this CD-ROM was sent to copying without verification. The same situation is found with CD-ROM sub-folders 54 and 55, as well as 766 (see below), and maybe some others too.

Let us see the things another way round and examine the first four pages of the same chapter *Maṣāḥif* in the book. There are 16 manuscripts described there, numbered from 1 to 16, in the following sequence of their *^cumūmiyya'* numbers: 164, 1305, 1390, 1509, 766, 1033, 440, 624, 910, 910 again (judging after the descriptions, it may be two parts of the same manuscript), 635, 1183, 1401, 775, 1384, 675. Out of these 16 manuscripts we find only nos. 766 and 775 on the CD-ROM. No. 766 is only a scrap of paper saying *difficult to photograph* (as above). Photographs of no. 775 in reality show the ms. no. 784 (as seen on the library label). Users will feel helpless.

If we take into account that the number of sub-folders for individual manuscript photographs on the CD-ROM nearly equals the number of printed descriptions (*Maṣāḥif*: 790/795, *^cUlūm*: 210/211, *Qirā'āt*: 1343/1355, *Tafsīr*: 1379/1394), and we compare these figures with the sample count of the four first pages of the *Maṣāḥif* chapter, we must realize that the discovery of what is really recorded on the CD-ROM may only be known after a detailed and extensive examination of the whole material, one item after another. This is a challenge in itself when a concordance between *arqām al-ḥifẓ* and printed catalogue numbers is not available.

To conclude, the world of learning should be extremely thankful to the management of Al-Azhar Library and the publishers for taking up the enormous task of compiling a new catalogue of one of the world's greatest (both in terms of quantity and of value) depositaries of the Islamic written heritage, and they deserve enormous gratitude for that. However, awkward rules of arrangement and apparent mistakes in execution make this first volume far from being user-friendly and, indeed, very troublesome. Receivers of the catalogue and its users would like to make a humble suggestion to the compilers and publishers alike, of reconsidering the editing style of up-coming volumes so as to present the accumulated treasures of Islamic history and culture accessible in a less cumbersome way.

At the same time it must be underlined that the fonts are neat and clear, the printing is of good quality and precise, the paper is of good quality and nice looking, plus the elegantly ornate hard binding – all these technical characteristics make the book very handsome looking and attractive in every respect.