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Middle Eastern Manuscripts: identifying cultural sensitivities and establishing procedures for their care

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ABSTRACT

The University of Melbourne's Middle Eastern Manuscript Collection contains approximately 200 manuscripts that date from the 15th-19th Centuries. Muslim devotion was expressed in fine binding, calligraphy and illumination and the collection is of worldwide significance for its many fine examples of these crafts. This study focuses on the establishment of procedures and protocols for the conservation and use of the collection. Islamic bindings have different structures and areas of vulnerability to Western bindings, and often require a different treatment approach. Contact has been made with a number of European conservators specializing in treatment of collections of this kind, and with their guidance, procedures are being established for treatment of the collection. In addition to the treatment aspect, protocols that address cultural sensitivities

are being defined. This component of research is being undertaken with the assistance of representatives from the Muslim community, Arabic and Persian language scholars, curators, conservators, manuscript librarians and cataloguers.

INTRODUCTION TO THE COLLECTION

The University of Melbourne's Middle Eastern Manuscript Collection was established as a research and teaching tool in the 1960's by Professor Emeritus John Bowman, Professor of Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Melbourne. Arabic and Persian manuscripts are strongly represented in the collection, but there are also several Syriac, Urdu, Ethiopic, Sanskrit and Turkish texts. The manuscripts include Qur'ans and related texts, books of poetry, astrology, grammar, mathematics, logic dictionaries, prayer books, biographies and books of sayings. The majority of the

Arabic manuscripts were purchased through Luzac's, a book and manuscript dealer in Bloomsbury, London. Prior to Luzac's, many of the texts are thought to have formed part of the private collection of Mr Ellis, the Keeper of Arabic Manuscripts at the British Museum (Sloggett et al 1999 p20). Professor Bowman purchased most of the Persian texts through Luzac's, when he was Head of the Department of Semitic Studies at the University of Leeds and he has provided invaluable information about the collection (Smith 1993).

CONDITION OF THE COLLECTION

The University of Melbourne Conservation Service undertook a condition survey of the collection in 1993, which established that 30% of the texts require interventive treatment before scholars can access them. The condition of the collection is affected by inherent vice as well as general wear and tear. To avoid loss of contextual information such as evidence of use, treatment should be minimal. The collection is of worldwide significance and is of great interest to scholars and researchers and some remedial treatment is necessary to make the bindings function sufficiently for the manuscripts to be accessed.

PAPERMAKING

Within the manuscript collection there is an enormous array of decorative and handmade papers and in any one manuscript there are up to 30 different paper types. The papers are of both Islamic and European origin. Most of the undecorated papers are laid and have a highly burnished, smooth surface that resembles parchment. The decorative papers include examples of marbling, dying in a variety of colours, stenciling, stamping, hand painting and in-laying.

From the 11th century AD, there was a flourishing trade of exportation of Islamic papers to the Byzantine Empire and other areas of Christian Europe (Bosch et al op.cit. p32). Flax and hemp were the traditional fibers used for Islamic papermaking, there were abundant crops of both plants in the Middle East and

irrigation canals provided a constant water supply for papermaking (Loveday 2001 p23). Fibres were not routinely used in their raw state, but were extracted once they had been processed into textiles, ropes and cordage (Loveday op.cit. p32).



Figure 1: MUL – 86 Persian, 951 A.H., 1544C.E. Each set of facing pages in the manuscript has a different pair of decorative pages. The papers shown are decorated with a tannin-ink stamp.

Paper was either tub sized or surface sized with rice water, bran water, starch or gum (Levey 1962 p10). Inks and pens had been developed to work on parchment and a parchment-like surface was required to create the same calligraphic effects (ibid). Once dry, paper was coated with equal quantities of chalk and starch to create similar surface characteristics to parchment (ibid). After coating, the paper surface was burnished with a variety of tools depending on the region.¹ Surface sizing and burnishing were done by the paper maker, paper dealer or by the scribe or calligrapher. (Bosch et al op.cit. p36).

European paper production did not immediately affect the Middle Eastern paper industry, however by the 14th century, the European industry had become more established. Local producers could not compete with the level of production or the price of European paper, so the direction of paper trade reversed (Loveday op.cit. p26). Some European paper, particularly Italian paper from Fabriano and Treviso, was specifically made to appeal to the Islamic market and often featured watermarks designed specifically for the Middle Eastern clientele². Watermarks would have been quite a novelty in the Middle

East because the structure of the Islamic papermaking mould made the formation of watermarks difficult. As a result, watermarks are quite rare on Islamic paper.

The majority of papers in the collection appear to be of European origin. An Italian watermark that reads 'BELLANDO' was found in an undated Arabic manuscript in the collection. Italian papers came down to the Middle East via Venice and the Eastern Mediterranean (Petherbridge 2003). Once European papers arrived in Istanbul, paper merchants would set teams of people to work burnishing them with chalk and stones to create the same highly polished surface as Islamic paper. By the 17th century, the use of European paper for manuscript production had become widespread (ibid).

In general, paper in the collection is in very good condition. This can be attributed to the absence of lignin, the high alpha cellulose content in both flax and hemp and the treatment of the surface of the paper with chalk. The main examples of damage to the paper in the collection are the result of surface dirt, mould activity, insect attack and the degrading effects of the commonly used pigment, verdigris. The surface dirt evident in the collection is generally minor, but on some manuscripts it is quite severe. Soft brushes are ideal for reducing surface dirt, except where the paper is particularly damaged by bookworm activity. The use of erasers should be kept to a minimum on highly burnished paper because of their effect on surface reflectance. If used, erasers should be grated rather than used in block form.

The insect damage evident in a number of the manuscripts is consistent with bookworm activity, which was prevalent in countries near salt deserts (Atiqi 1995 p152). Throughout history, a number of methods have been used to protect manuscripts from insect attack. Techniques included placing tobacco leaves or powdered tobacco between the manuscript pages (particularly in Iran), wrapping texts in a large cloth dyed with

orpiment (which contains arsenic) and using charms (Jacobs and Rogers 1990 p129, Bencherifa 1995 p23 and Atiqi op.cit. p152)³.



Figure 2: MUL 150 – Kitab al-antighadi fi sharhi umdat al-a'taghadi., severe bookwork activity throughout text block and case. Pages possibly require full lining with thin tissue (Arabic, approximately 780 A.H. or 15th Century C.E.).

Verdigris, which is produced by combining copper with vinegar, was used extensively on manuscripts in the collection to draw rectangular borders around script. Verdigris causes acidic degradation along these borders, causing the area of script to detach from the page (Clare et al 1979 p3)⁴. Many of these fractured borders have previously been repaired with toned light-weight paper. Where appropriate, these repairs will be left for their historical value, but in cases where they obscure text or have caused severe localized cockling they may be removed and replaced.

The variety of repair techniques devised for Islamic manuscripts reflects the pitfalls of treating the highly burnished and water-sensitive paper. The paper's water sensitivity and tendency to develop tide-lines can be addressed by using thin Japanese tissue and heat-set adhesive. (Clare et al op.cit. p4). Heat set adhesive lacks the flexibility required for spine fold repairs, for these regions remoistenable tissue repairs are more suitable (Bish 2004). Remoistenable tissue requires the introduction of less moisture than standard repair techniques, thus minimizing the chance of creating tidelines. The addition of ethanol to the repair can also help prevent staining (Baker op.cit. p34). For areas of extensive insect damage, pulp

filling is the most suitable repair technique, once partially dry fills can be burnished through silicon release film to impart a similar surface reflectance to that of the manuscript page. If possible, full lining of pages with thin tissue should be avoided as this would conceal indications of manufacture (such as ruling lines) that are of great interest to codicologists⁵. Unfortunately some manuscripts in the collection are so severely insect damaged, that full lining appears to be the only solution for stabilizing pages.

MINIATURES

A few of the manuscripts from Persia and Ethiopia contain examples of miniature painting. Miniatures are not very common in Arabic manuscripts because the depiction of living creatures would be considered usurping the creative power of God (Porter 27 March 2003). The miniatures in the collection are generally in good condition, but in MUL 134, a Persian epic love poem written by Muhammad Murad in 1737, a number of the thirty-four gouache miniatures are affected by areas of flaking and powdering pigment.

Several consolidants have been recommended for the flaking media, these include low viscosity methyl cellulose, ethyl hydroxyethyl cellulose and isinglas (which is slightly more flexible and less likely to yellow than animal-based gelatin) (Wheeler 2003)⁶. If possible, animal gelatin should be avoided because it may contain traces of animals that should not be incorporated into Islamic bindings (e.g. pig) and if animal glues must be used, halal gelatin can be sourced (Kartiko Eko Putranto 2003).

Losses are generally retouched using watercolour once an isolating layer has been applied to the paper surface. Before undertaking retouching on Middle Eastern manuscripts, it is important to establish whether the loss has resulted from intentional erasure.⁷ Sometimes alteration or erasure was due to political or religious reasons. (Wheeler op.cit.).



Figure 3: MUL 134 – Muhammed Murad, The love story of Kamrup and Kamlata, written in Nasta'liq script, with 34 miniatures, some requiring consolidation (Persian, 1115 A.H or 1737 C.E.).

CALLIGRAPHY

According to Allah, 'Beautiful writing gives to truth more clarity. It demonstrated that when the pens are good, the books smile.' (Levey 1962 P39). Calligraphy was an attempt to make a spiritual connection with God via the written word (Saeed 2003). There is a number of Arabic scripts and there were strict rules about what scripts could be used to write what texts⁸. The Qur'an was written in the divine Kufic script which is considered sacred and the status of the calligrapher writing the Qur'an was very high,⁹ (Porter 27 March, 2003). There were two types of writing inks used: soot-based and tannin-based and they were made from a variety of materials¹⁰. As with their Western equivalents, soot-based inks are more stable than tannin-based inks; generally the inks in the collection are in sound condition.

ISLAMIC BINDING STRUCTURE

The bindings in the collection are covered in a variety of materials including marbled paper, leather and silk. Traditionally leather was the most common covering material, but textiles were sometimes applied to precious manuscripts. Not all of the bindings include the traditional Islamic envelope flap, but on those where it features, it extends from the left side of the case (the back cover), and tucks under the front cover to protect the foredge of the textblock.

Many of the cases have sustained wear

along the front and back outer joints and the joint between the envelope flap and back cover. If the case was to be embellished with tooling, the leather was pared very thinly so that the decorative elements would be well defined (Bosch et al op.cit. p63). As a result, leather cases are often badly worn along the outer joints and boards are detached because these are the areas that undergo the most flexing when the book is used. Several of the manuscripts with silk covers are affected by 'silk shatter'.

The majority of bindings in the collection are straight backs, with the boards cut flush with the textblock. On most Islamic bindings, paste was used to attach paper or thin leather hinges to the textblock and the case (Bosch et al op.cit. p46). In addition to the hinges, inner joints were sometimes reinforced with a pasted strip of paper or alternatively the doublures may have a projecting hinge pasted onto the adjacent first and last leaves (Bosch et al op.cit. p50). This form of attachment is generally not strong, and a number of the cases have separated from the text blocks. At this stage, no interventive treatment on cases is planned because the damage described is so closely related to evidence of use. The manuscripts are currently boxed, but in future, clear wrappers may be constructed for each binding so that the bindings can be studied and the case can return to some level of functionality.



Figure 4: MUL 134 – Muhammed Murad, The love story of Kamrup and Kamlata, showing broken outer joints (Persian, 1737 C.E.).

Traditionally, fine silk or linen thread was used to sew Islamic manuscripts. The

colour of the thread was often related to the subject matter of the text, for example, green thread was used for works on the life of the Prophet and red thread was used for works on Islamic law (Jacobs and Rogers op.cit. p84). Sewing was done using a link stitch and two sewing stations, regardless of the size of the text.

Kettle stitches were often omitted, and the primary endband threads of the traditional Islamic chevron endband acted as a kind of kettle stitching.¹¹ (Fischer 1986 p183). These threads however are not anchored around the sewing stations of the gatherings and they commonly cut into the spine folds, eventually tearing the endband (Bosch et al op.cit. p53). The sewing thread only served to keep the pages of the individual gatherings together and the real strength of the sewing came from lining the spine with the leather of the cover (Fischer op.cit. p182).

The sewing on many of the manuscripts in the collection has broken down. Several have loose pages as a result of the fine sewing threads tearing the spine folds making these pages vulnerable to theft. If treatment is to be undertaken, numerous small repairs will need to be carried out on the spine folds. To avoid creating too much swell, thin Japanese tissue would be used for repairs (Fischer op.cit. p 194).



Figure 5: MUL 5 - Extracts from the Qur'an, written on sheets of highly burnished paper, sewing has broken down, note remnant of fine red silk sewing thread at the tail end. (Arabic, approximately 1180 A.H. or early 19th century C.E. .)

Resewing should be done in the location of the original sewing stations, in the past silk was recommended for resewing because it was the original type of thread used and fine enough to prevent swelling

of the spine. The poor ageing properties of silk have led conservators in recent years to adopt fine polyester thread for resewing.

CULTURAL SENSITIVITIES

There are a number of cultural sensitivities that should be considered and respected when displaying, storing and handling Islamic manuscripts.

DISPLAY

A selection of manuscripts from the collection formed part of an exhibition entitled 'Mightier than the Sword'¹². Research was undertaken to ensure that the Qur'anic material in the exhibition was presented in an appropriate manner.

In consultation with Dr Venetia Porter, Curator Islamic Material, British Museum, the Qur'ans in the exhibition were positioned on cradles that provided them with the highest and most prominent position in the display cases (Porter 14 February 2003). In some instances the envelope flap rested on the open page of the text with an archive-text isolating layer between the flap and the page. In one case a cradle was made that accommodated the extended envelope flap so that filigree decoration on the inner side of the flap could be viewed.

Exhibition panels describing each text were written in collaboration with Persian and Arabic language scholars from the University. Given the importance of script to Muslims, information relating to the type of script featured in the manuscripts was incorporated into the labels. Ideally dates according to the Islamic and Christian calendars would also have been provided.¹³

HANDLING

Due to the condition of the collection, handling is kept to a minimum, but when the collection is accessed, all care is taken to ensure items are handled appropriately. There are restrictions specified by the Shari'ah (divine law) for handling Islamic objects of religious reverence such as Qur'ans. According to Muslims who assisted with this research, the Qur'an should be handled with clean hands and due reverence. In addition, Qur'ans

should not be held or displayed at groin level because this is considered disrespectful (Mandana Barkeshli 2001).

Some Muslims do not handle the Holy Qur'an with the left hand because this is the hand traditionally used for cleaning and instead, they either handle the Qur'an with the right hand or both hands. (Kartiko 2003). While it is not practical for a conservator to only work with the right hand, in some cases it may be appropriate to invite a member of the Muslim community to assist with placing sacred objects in display cases (Wheeler 2003)¹⁴

STORAGE

Muslims believe the Holy Qur'an contains the words of God that are pure and therefore should be stored in a pristine environment (Abdou 2003). One of the outcomes of the condition survey undertaken in 1993, was the construction of individual phase boxes for the manuscripts. For the past decade, the collection has been stored vertically in a lockable metal cabinet. The Librarian of the London City Mosque advised that any manuscript that contains verses from the Holy Qur'an should be stored physically above all secular texts (Abdou 2003). In keeping with these recommendations, the Qur'ans in the collection are now stored on the top shelf of the cabinet, further research is required to determine if any of the other manuscripts in the collection contain verses from the Qur'an. Although horizontal storage is traditional and suits the structure of Islamic bindings, space restrictions prohibit horizontal storage of the University's collection (Petherbridge 2003).

THE FUTURE

The Centre for Cultural Materials Conservation at the University of Melbourne is hosting a symposium on the care and conservation of Middle Eastern manuscripts in November 2004. The proposal to hold the symposium extends directly from the treatment needs of this important University collection and the fact that there is limited expertise in this field in Australia. Under the guidance of a diverse group of specialists from the United

Kingdom, Malaysia and Australia, delegates will gain an understanding of the materials and techniques of manufacture that contribute to the inherent condition problems evident in Middle Eastern manuscripts. Delegates will also develop an appreciation for cultural sensitivities related to the display, handling, storage and treatment of these extraordinary manuscripts.

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ENDNOTES

¹ Generally a pestle-like implement with a rounded base was rubbed over the paper while it lay on a wooden board. In Turkey large oval glass balls were used and sometimes rectangular agate stones on wooden handles were also used (Bosch et al op.cit. p37).

² Popular watermark motifs in the 17th and 18th centuries included the single crescent, the triple crescent or *Trelune*, the star and crown (Loveday op.cit. p26).

³ The most famous talisman used to preserve manuscripts was 'Yakikatj' (Bencherifa op.cit. p23)

⁴ A recent study has found that early master artisans were aware of the damaging affects of using verdigris, and they would combine it with saffron to prohibit the natural destructive tendencies of the pigment (Barkeshli 1999 p.489).

⁵ Indented blind lines were ruled on paper to guide even spacing of the lines of writing and margins so that the pages looked balanced and unified. Pricking was done to site lines and the ruling may have been done on individual pages or on whole gatherings. A ruling frame was often used also and this sped up the process. Leaves were pressed over the frame and the wires or strings of the frame would leave an impression to guide the scribe (Bosch et al op.cit. p41).

⁶ I am indebted to Mike Wheeler, who specializes in the treatment of Indian miniatures at the Victoria and Albert Museum for generously sharing his approach to miniature consolidation.

⁷ Inks were removed using vinegar solutions or yoghurt combined with salt (Levey 1961 p9).

⁸ Kufic, the first script was developed at the end of the 7th century and was the principle script for copying Qur'ans, Naskh script was developed for bureaucratic purposes and was used predominately from the 12th century, Farsi was a specialized style used for signatures, Nasta'liq script was used predominately in Iran and India from the 16th century and Divani script was developed in the 13th century and was particularly used for chancellery documents (Saeed 2003 and

Porter 2003 p63).

⁹ Nask script is the main legible script used for writing the Qur'an (Porter 27 March, 2003).

¹⁰ Soot inks were made from a number of different ingredients including chickpeas, pomegranate rind and the seeds of ripe dates and tannin ink was made from the gallnut of terebinth and tamarisk (Levey 1962 pp 7, 16 and 17).

¹¹ The primary endband threads are usually silk and the same colour and the thread used to sew the textblock. The Chevron endband is woven rather than sewn as is the case with a Western endband (Bosch et al op.cit. p53).

¹² 'Mightier than the Sword' was a British Museum touring exhibition held at the Ian Potter Museum of Art and Venetia Porter was the Guest Curator. The exhibition showcased and celebrated Arabic script

¹³ The first year of the Islamic calendar is equivalent to 622AD.

¹⁴ At the Victoria and Albert Museum a representative from the local Sikh community was involved in the installation of a copy of Guru Granth (the Sikh Holy Book used in a Gudwara) for the Art of the Sikh Kingdoms exhibition held in 2003 (Wheeler 2003).

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