From codicology to the history of the Islamic book

Jan Just Witkam
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Illustration on front cover: MS Leiden, Ter Lught Collection, No. 49, ff. 16b-17a (Ottoman, dated 1784-5).

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Images from the Prophet Muḥammad's mosque in Medina. The tradition, *ḥadīth*, has it that ‘whatever is between the Prophet’s grave (right, behind the grille, together with the tombs of the first two caliphs) and his pulpit (left) is one of the gardens of Paradise’. The reader of the book finds him or herself exactly on that spot. Either part of the sanctuary is placed under a niche in which a lamp is hanging. Illustrations in the 19th-century Ottoman prayer book *Enʿām-i Sharīf*. MS Leiden, Ter Lugt Collection 201, ff. 49b-50a.
From codicology to the history of the Islamic book

Introduction
I feel very honoured to have been invited to deliver this lecture about the Islamic book, a subject that has been the centre of my life and work for many years. I am grateful to all whose organizational and technical efforts have made it possible for me to speak to you now.

My personal Islamic seal is in nastaˈlīq script and reads: ‘Jan Just Witkam’. It was cut by a professional seal cutter in the Friday Mosque in Tehran, in April 1970. The tughra-like design is a bit kitschy, but at the time it was perfectly acceptable. I used the seal to sign, or stamp, the receipts of my weekly allowance when I had a bursary to study at the University of Tehran.

I intend to give my audience an idea of techniques and ideas in the form of a few selected chapters taken from my own research, brought together now as a single thread of thoughts. My approach to manuscripts is simple: I look at my material and I write down what I see. The difficulty, of course, is knowing what to look at in the first place, before one can write down one’s observations. This is a craft, not an art, and it can be learned. Talented students will, of course, always succeed better than the less-talented, but everybody can learn it. The point of departure is that the manuscript is always right, and that the student

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1 This is a slightly expanded version of the text that I read during the workshop, to which I have now added the illustrations from the associated PowerPoint presentation, and which is now also supplemented with captions, footnotes, and a bibliography.
can only strive to attain that level. As with all crafts, daily exercise is the key. The student’s daily exercise in codicology could consist, for instance, of constructing quire formulas. In his *Islamic Codicology*, François Déroche summarizes the easy-to-use method that I first published in 1982. In Western bibliography, describing the quires is a universally accepted practice. One sees it only rarely, however, in Islamic codicology. Many Islamological book experts who style themselves as codicologists lack routine and experience, and they are unaware of the advances and techniques of Western bibliography. If their work ethics were to be transposed to the medical profession, many of them would soon be behind bars. From another field of expertise: if one wants to learn how to play the piano, one must practice at least several hours a day. Only then will one’s play sound like music. My own course on paleography is still available on the internet. It contains the study and testing material that I composed for my students at Leiden University. It is organized as a ‘teach-yourself’ guide. There is no need for long courses, as the student learns better in solitude and from predecessors. Ours is a lonely occupation and there is nothing wrong with that. Some practical paleographical advice may be offered here. - Students should not read and interpret at the same time. They must first concentrate on the script that they see, and take a further step by trying to find out what the text actually means. - Students should do the exercises found in paleographical atlases and similar teaching aids. - It is unusual for a student to be able to copy a text exactly. Precise copying is a capacity long gone from the school curriculum, and, consequently, students will inevitably commit innumerable errors when writing down what they think they see. Indeed, I still suffer from that myself.

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3 <http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/courses/index.html>
This necessitates students to give much of their time and effort to reading, re-reading, collating, and correcting their transcriptions. They should do so till they are certain that their copy is (almost) error-free. Only God is perfect, but the student can at least strive for perfection.

A word may be devoted here to repositories of manuscript materials. By this, I mean libraries and, to a lesser extent, archives and museums. Libraries are the places where students of manuscripts will spend their days. These institutions bear a heavy responsibility for the survival of books, manuscripts, and other unique and rare documents, across the generations. Managers and curators of libraries have no right to refuse their readers access to the material that they study. The concept of 'access' should be interpreted as broadly as possible. Physical access means having the manuscript that one has ordered on the table quickly, for an unlimited period, and without unnecessary formalities. Students, of course, should possess a minimum of experience in handling rare materials. Library opening hours for special collections should be long. Manuscripts should be well catalogued, foliated, or paginated, and be offered for study in a presentable state. Better still, there should be published inventories. Photographs by the reader should be permitted without restriction (as long as the manuscript is not damaged in any way as a result), and the website of the institution should be overflowing with good-quality images. All this should, of course, be free of charge. The use of such images in publications should be free of charge as well. Exacting money under the pretext of copyright should be decried for what it is: a fallacy. No institution truly sustains itself from reproduction fees. And one can be sure that the money thus obtained will almost never be used to directly benefit the collections or its readers. Too often, readers and students find themselves dependent of the favours of authorities at such institutions.

Hence I compiled the inventories (not catalogues!) of the Oriental manuscripts of the University of Leiden:
<http://www.islamicmanuscripts.info/inventories/leiden/index.html>
Researchers should always remember that it is they who add value to what otherwise would be a pile of old paper. Students make the library rich in terms of knowledge; the library should not, therefore, make them economically poor. Unfortunately, this apparently revolutionary sentiment is lacking too often and, sadly, the world that I am advocating for here is called Utopia.

Examples of research: The Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt
Over the years, one of my research interests has been the shift of the illustration patterns in the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt, the prayer book of the Moroccan Sufi al-Ḡazūlī (d. 1465). Although the text is an impressive and eloquent example of religious prose, its study is not part of the Orientalist academic curriculum. Yet, any librarian or bibliographer can confirm the abundance of copies of the book in numerous collections. The collections in the library of Leiden University, for example, contain no less than thirty-four copies. The Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt is a collection of litanies for the eight days of the week (Monday through Monday), focusing on the devotion of the Prophet Muḥammad. It has become a much-used textbook in the Shādhiliyya and Qādiriyya brotherhoods. The prayers are preceded by an introduction that contains, among other things, a compilation of the 201 names of the Prophet and a description of the Prophet’s burial chamber in the mosque in Medina.

Some iconographical features of the book catch our attention. From the mid-sixteenth century onwards, manuscript copies are known that have a pictorial extension of the passage on the Prophet’s burial chamber in Medina. This chamber is schematically shown in the shape of a vaulted room with a niche and a lamp, and three burial sites, those of the Prophet Muḥammad and his first two caliphs, Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. These coffins are usually provided with explanatory...

5 Sessions during which the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt is recited in a Sufi milieu are described by the Egyptian novelist ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm Qāsim (1934-1990) in his Ayyām al-Insān al-Sabʿa, first published in 1969.
captions. The version that has just one illustration is considered to be the original version, and possibly the oldest known. The commentary by al-Fāsī (second half of the seventeenth century), which includes what, for practical reasons, we consider the vulgate version of the book, only contains the single image.

From the early-seventeenth century onwards, a double image becomes popular at this place in the prayer book. One half shows the burial chamber, the other half, on the opposite page, features an addition: the Prophet’s minbar (pulpit), which is also in the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina. The minbar is not mentioned in the introductory text of the prayer book, and for a suitable interpretation of this additional image I formulated a simple heuristic principle: if an illustration
is not the pictorial expression of a passage *inside* the text, it must be the expression of a well-known passage *outside* the text. In other words: a pictorial quotation. So, to what text outside the *Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt* could this double image refer?

It is not very difficult to see in the Medinan double image the text of the well-known *hadīth*, Tradition, of the Prophet Muḥammad, saying ‘what is between my grave and my pulpit is one of the gardens of Paradise’. This text transports any reader who has the prayerbook at hand exactly there: to a garden of Paradise. It is a surprising innovation in book design. When I first developed this interpretation, based on manuscripts in Leiden, it was a mere hypothesis. Later, I found
manuscripts, most notably in Paris, which explicitly mentioned this hadith. My hypothesis was thereby tested and confirmed.6

From taṣliya to tawḥīd
The development of the adornment of the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt did not come to an end with this image of the Prophet’s pulpit. From approximately the mid-eighteenth century onwards, another set of images became fashionable, albeit only outside the Maghrib.

The Mecca-Medina image in the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt. A copy from the Ottoman realm. MS Leiden, Ter Lugt Collection, No. 122, ff. 10b-11a.

Instead of the Medinan double image of the burial chamber and the pulpit, another double image became popular: one showing the mosques in Mecca and Medina instead. Whereas the Medinan double image features the interior of the mosque from nearby, as if one could touch the burial chamber and the pulpit with one’s hand, the Mecca-Medina double image shows the holy places from a greater distance,

as if to inspire with awe and reverence. More can be said on this new double image.


Anyone viewing an image of Mecca may associate it with the pilgrimage. However, pilgrimage is not a theme in the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt and the concept of pilgrimage does not provide an answer to the question of where this particular combination of images originates from. It is more useful, therefore, to search for an explanation with the help of the simple aforementioned heuristic principle, which I repeat here: ‘if an illustration is not the pictorial expression of a passage inside the text, it must be the expression of a well-known passage outside the text’. The next question should then be: ‘what is this new double image the pictorial quotation of?’ It must be something well-known, that would immediately be understood by the average educated believer, in the same way as the ḥadīth that explained the Medinan double image is. I will give the answer in a moment.
The Mecca-Medina image has become a common illustration in numerous manuscript copies of the *Dalā’il al-Khayrāt*, especially in Turkey, its Levantine provinces, and further East, in Central Asia, India, and the Malay world. The result of this wide distribution and the great popularity of the prayer book is that the Mecca-Medina double image has become the best known. It has found imitators, including copies of the Ottoman compilation *Enʿām-i Sharīf*. These, too, often contain a Mecca-Medina double page (but see above, p. 4, for a different image), as does the anonymous mawlid from Indonesia, *Sharaf al-Anām*. In the end, I became convinced that this Mecca-Medina double image had to be the pictorial expression of no less than the Muslim declaration of faith, the ‘two words’ (*al-kalimatayn*) in which both God and the Prophet Muḥammad are mentioned. The double image showed ‘the house of God’, the Kaʿba in Mecca. The other half of the double image shows the Prophet’s Mosque in Medina.

I also asked myself why did this double image emerge at this time, and I connected it with eighteenth-century reform movements, in which a shift can be observed from *tasliya*, devotion for the Prophet Muḥammad, in favour of *tawḥīd*, the unicity of God. I have tried to connect the pictorial shift to Wahhabism in particular or Salafism in general, but to date this has remained an unconfirmed hypothesis.

Interestingly, an example of this conflict between popular piety and orthodox dogma in connection with the *Dalā’il al-Khayrāt* is described by Ṭaha Ḥusayn (1889-1973) in the second volume of his autobiography:

... But one day our friend heard his father reading aloud from *Dalā’il el-Khairāt* as he usually did after morning or afternoon prayer. Whereupon the boy began to shrug his shoulders and shake his head from side to side, till finally he burst out laughing in front of his sisters. “To read *Dalā’il el-Khairāt*”, said he, “is an idiotic waste of time.”

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7 See on this work Alexandra Bain’s thesis.
8 The seminal study on *tasliya* is by Fritz Meier.
His small brothers and sisters, of course, understood nothing of this and paid no attention to it. But his elder sister scolded him roughly and in so doing raised her voice high enough for her father to hear. He did not interrupt his reading, but as soon as he had finished, he came up to the boy with a quiet smile on his face and asked him what it was he had said. So the boy repeated his remark. “What business is it of yours?” replied his father, with a shake of the head and a short, sardonic laugh. “Is that what you learnt at the Azhar?” “Yes, I did,” retorted the boy, “and I also learnt that a great deal of what you read in this book is impious, and does more harm than good. Man must not seek the intercession of prophets and saints or believe that there can be mediators between God and men. That’s idolatry.”

The old man was furious, but managed to control his anger and keep on smiling. His reply made the whole family roar with laughter: “Be quiet, and may God cut off your tongue! Don’t talk like this again, or I warn you I’ll keep you here in the country, stop your career at the Azhar, and make you a Koran-reader for funerals and family gatherings.” Then he turned on his heel and went off, amid a chorus of laughter from the family. But this reprimand, however harsh and galling, only served to increase the boy’s obstinacy and willfulness.⁹

The ornamental addition

But there is more. The illustration scheme of al-Ḡazūlī’s prayer book is not as straightforward as one might think. There remain local variations that differ considerably from the general line, and several problems remain unsolved. A few instances may be considered here.

In the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries, some Maghribī makers of Dalāʾīl manuscripts at the top end of the book market devised an extra ornamental programme for their luxury products. This consisted of adding a few pages with illuminative and illustrative elements that preceded the text of the prayer book. These additional ornaments are not part of the text of the prayer book. They are, in order of occurrence:

⁹Hussein, The Stream of Days, pp. 87-88. About a connection between Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt and the visiting of graves, see ibid., p. 89. I owe these references to Mr. Hans van der Meulen.
- an illuminated genealogy of the Prophet Muḥammad, connecting back to Adam, with a list of al-ʿAshara al-Mubashshara, the ten companions of the Prophet who had been promised paradise during their lifetime;

Part of the genealogy of the Prophet Muḥammad, written in boustrophedon, undated but before 1798. MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Oct. 240, f. 3b (rotated 90° to the left).

Part of the list of the twenty-one expeditions (ghazawāt) of the Prophet Muḥammad, undated, before 1798. MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Oct. 240, f. 5a.
Topographical images of Mecca and Medina in the ornamental addition, undated but before 1798. MS Berlin, Staatsbibliothek Or. Oct. 240, ff. 5b-6a.

The sandal of the Prophet Muḥammad, with poetry by al-Maqqarī in the calligraphic bands, dated 1705. MS Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France Arabe 6983, ff. 16b-17a.

- an illuminated list of the twenty-one expeditions (ghazawāt) of the Prophet Muḥammad;
- an illustration of a double topographical image of the mosques in Mecca and Medina;
- an illustration of the sandal of the Prophet Muḥammad.

The uniformity of this ornamental addition points to a single source of initiative or inspiration. Information about that single source is still lacking.

These additions were not part of the text of the prayer book itself, but were placed in front of it. Sometimes, the thus-ornamented volume would be provided with double carpet pages at beginning and end. The actual text of the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt began only after the ornamental addition. The illustrations (Mecca, Medina, the sandal) were possibly designed after existing iconographical models. The Meccan and Medinan mosque images may have been inspired by earlier illustrations on paper or on tiles, and the sandal may have been added after the theme of the sandal had become popular following the publication of the book on the Prophet’s sandal by al-Maqqarī (d. 1632), whose lifetime would then count as a date post quern for this feature.

These four additional ornamental elements all focus on the Prophet Muḥammad, although they were not originally mentioned or treated by al-Ǧazūlī. They may have been intended as complementary elements to the main text. This implantation added value to luxury manuscripts of the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt in the Maghreb. One may think of a drive to commodify the book. If that is the case, the idea for such an extra feature may have originated from a workshop at the higher end of the market.

The number of manuscripts that have this additional ornamental element seems to be relatively small. At present, some twenty of them are known to exist, all of which originate from the Maghreb. The fashion appears to have been short-lived. After about a century, it disappeared as suddenly as it had emerged. It never became known beyond the Maghrib, and because of the costs involved, it never became a widespread feature.

References to these manuscripts in Witkam, ‘Medina and Mecca revisited’.
Non-traditional pictorial extensions
The story of the iconography of al-Ǧazūlī’s Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt does not end here. The manuscripts of the Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt have been illustrated in a variety of ways. A survey of a larger corpus of manuscripts of the text reveals more illustrations, some expressing passages of the text, some with seemingly unrelated illustrations, but always showing images that can be associated with tasliya, the devotion of the Prophet Muḥammad. We may look, for instance, at the miniature in a nineteenth-century manuscript of the Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt from India. It illustrates the dream of ʿĀʾisha, in which the three moons are explained. The dream predicts that someday the Prophet Muḥammad and his first two successors, will ‘take up residence’ in her room, the place where the Prophet was to be buried with the first two caliphs. The three moons are depicted. Adding the miniature to the manuscript seems to have been an individual initiative. I do not know this from any other manuscripts than the one that I show here.

The three moons that ʿĀʾisha saw in her dream, in an undated manuscript of the Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt from India (late-nineteenth century?). MS Kuala Lumpur, ISTAC, Ar-Cat-2-061, f. 10a.

A late-nineteenth-century manuscript of the Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt from sub-Saharan Africa shows, among a plethora of illustrations, al-Burāq, the riding beast on whose back the Prophet Muḥammad made his nightly journey. The animal has an evident association with the Prophet, but it is not mentioned anywhere by al-Ǧazūlī.

The cemetery of Baqīʾ al-Gharqad, just outside Medina, houses the tombs of many descendants of the Prophet and other important personalities from the early history of Islam. It is depicted in the manuscript of the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt shown here. That was copied in Bandar Natal, Sumatra, Indonesia, in 1814. It is abundantly illustrated: a Mecca-Medina double image (ff. 68b-69a) can be seen outside the text.
of Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt. It has a detailed Medinan image inside the text of Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt (f. 183a). It also has an image of Baqīʿ al-Gharqad (f. 69b) and many more images that have a religious or magical dimension.

Topographical image of the cemetery Baqīʿ al-Gharqad near Medina, in an illustrated convolute manuscript from Bandar Natal, Sumatra, Indonesia, dated 1814, with captions in Malay. From top to bottom, the image shows the garden of Fāṭima, the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad, the graves of the first four caliphs, once more the grave of the Prophet Muḥammad, and the other graves. MS Leiden University Library Or. 1751, f. 69b.

From the different images in al-Ǧazūlī’s prayer book that show graves, one may interpret this as an open invitation to visit the graves. The exclusive devotion of the Prophet and the visiting of graves, and Sufism in general for that matter, could be a source of the controversies that the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt have been embroiled in with Salafist or Wahhābī milieux.

The al-Riyāḥī family workshop
The Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt brings us to another feature, the research of which has so far received little attention: teamwork and workshops.
Let us look at a few sample pages from a manuscript in the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York.


It is an incomplete copy of Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt with remnants of the ‘ornamental addition’. The manuscript was produced for a patron whose name is mentioned in the colophon (f. 124a) as Sīdī Aḥmad b. Dirham al-Mālikī, otherwise unidentified. The copyist is also mentioned by name. The colophon reads: ‘alā yad kātibihi Muḥammad b. Ahmad b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Riyāḥī and is dated 1035/1625-6 (the year is partly written in words and partly in ghubār numerals). However, when one looks at different pages of the manuscript, it is clear that more hands than that of al-Riyāḥī were involved in its production. The colophon is in fact the only sample of his hand. Al-Riyāḥī signs as kātibuhu, the ‘one who writes it’, but calling him the
copyist of the entire text in the volume would be a mistake. Rather, he must be the head of a workshop, because he is mentioned by name, and he apparently signs in that capacity.

More script and illumination samples from a manuscript of the al-Riyāḥī workshop. MS New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art 2017-301, ff. 15b, 96b.

A small corpus of commercially important devotional texts (copies of the Qurʾān and the Dalāʾil al-Khayrāt) from that workshop can now be constituted with several other manuscripts: MS Cambridge, University Library Dd. 6. 22; MS Dublin, Chester Beatty Library 4223; MS Leipzig, University Library Vollers 65; MS Paris BnF Arabe 1184 and MS Paris, BnF Arabe 7253. It is no coincidence that all these are references to well-described collections. Further research, in less well-described collections, will no doubt yield more results.

As we can see, the New York manuscript shows several hands, at least five:
- the colophon (f. 124a), in red ink, signed and dated;

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"For more details of the manuscripts from the al-Riyāḥī workshop, see Witkam 'Medina and Mecca revisited'.

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- the main text, preceding the colophon, evidently in a different hand.
- the caption Ṣifat Masţid al-Nabī and his Rawda (f. 15b) in green.
- text within an ornamental frame (f. 15b), in red.
- illuminated band, possibly by more than one artist (f. 96b).
- the frames (blue is usually the finishing touch) in all images.

People involved: four copyists, one or more illuminators, one or more miniaturists. Therefore, the entire volume may have been made by between at least five to ten craftsmen with varying degrees of expertise.

Who are these al-Riyāḥī’s? From the manuscripts it becomes clear that there is at least a father (Muḥammad b. Aḥmad) and a son (Muḥammad b. Muḥammad) al-Riyāḥī. For now, that is all we know.

**Terminology for describing script**

Different hands can be easily detected; a quick look is usually enough. Positive identification of hands, by contrast, is more difficult to establish. That can only be done after careful analysis of graphical elements in the script involved, and even then, much remains uncertain. Strategies for tackling this problem are not described in the paleographical literature. Instead, we must find a minimal strategy that brings us slightly closer to a method for describing script types. It originates from Western typography.\(^\text{12}\)

The idea of the x- or n-height in Latin typography must be considered here. In Smitshuijzen’s scheme, the starting point is the baseline. There are three measures for ascending letters: tooth height, loop height, and the actual ascenders. Underneath the baseline are the descenders. The semantic element of the script is usually realized between the baseline and the loop height. This general approach to the phenomenon of script potentially works for all different types of Arabic writing styles.\(^\text{13}\)


\(^{13}\) I owe this idea of looking at the n- or x-height to the Dutch surrealist painter J.H. Moesman (1909-1988), who was also a typographer and a calligrapher of Arabic in his own right.
Mixed techniques

Having touched upon the idea of teamwork, we will now go back in time, a little. In the Mamlûk era (Egypt and the Levant, 1250-1517), the making of Qur’ân manuscripts was a major activity, and teamwork played an important role. The production of Qur’âns enjoyed great popularity in several layers of society. There are a number of modern monographs about the subject, the works by David James in particular, but he has concentrated on the highlights of Mamlûk Qur’ân production only. Thanks to his work, the production of the princely and royal Mamlûk masâḥif is well-documented, and the names of some of their calligraphers and illuminators have become well-known.

A close look makes clear that these prestigious manuscripts were the product of teamwork. Teams of craftspeople must have worked on such projects, and certainly if we assume that special types of paper had to be created for the production of very large copies. Traces of such teamwork can be seen in the prestigious manuscripts. Usually, these are signed in the colophon by a copyist/calligrapher, but he would not be the sole person responsible for making the manuscript. He may have been the head of a production unit, like the aforementioned al-Riyâhi, and usually the names of other craftspeople remain unmentioned. While David James mentions names, and even shows the signatures, of a few illuminators, that is exceptional. Even if we
have no names, however, awareness of codicological details helps us to uncover the actual circumstances in which a manuscript was produced.

The workshops developed strategies and techniques in their production lines that saved time and, of course, money. We can see that writing the *rasm* and noting the vowels and other reading marks involves several different pens. We may assume that the use of more than one pen involves stages of production and the presence of more than one craftsman in the assembly of the book. This already indicates an evident division of labour.

Repetitive actions in Qur’ānic manuscripts such as writing the āya dividers were rationalized and mechanized. The floral ornaments that separate the āyas are the product of a division of labour that involved writing, painting, and stamping. Such printing with stamps was first documented by Nil Baydar.\(^{14}\) Her identification of the manuscript as Seljuq, thirteenth century, seems improbable, though. I would rather think it to be a Mamlūk technique, given that I encountered it so frequently in Mamlūk Qur’ān manuscripts.\(^{15}\)

![Evidence that stamps were used. MS Istanbul, Milli Kütüphane, C 44, after Baydar 2010.](image)

\(^{14}\) Nil Baydar, ‘Newly Identified Techniques’, figure 8, herewith reproduced.

\(^{15}\) Between 2011-2016, I spent several prolonged stays in Cairo and worked for over a year in total on the great collection of Mamlūk maṣāḥif in Dār al-Kutub. I am most grateful to Mr. Adnan Bogary of Jeddah, who made this possible in a most generous way.
The production of the āya dividers was in fact a complex affair.

After the pointed rasm of the Qur'ānic text, with or without the vocalization, had been written, the āya dividers were added in four stages:

- placing a red circle, written or stamped, indicating the location of the āya divider. The person who places these circles must be knowledgeable about the text.

- the red circles were then overpainted in gold with a brush or covered with gold leaf. The red circles thus become invisible.

- the contours of the petals of the floral ornament are drawn or stamped in black on top of the gold.

- blue and red dots are placed in the centre and on the circumference of the divider.

For the dividers alone already four actions are necessary, the first one involves an expert who understands the text, the other three actions do not need such expertise and the craftspeople simply follow the expert. The placing of the complete divider alone requires at least two
categories of persons: an expert and a non-expert, but one may assume that the production line for this detail in fact took four people.

Between lines 1 and 2 is the red circle, only the first stage in making the āya divider. The following stages were not realized. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 144, vol. 2, f. 117a, detail. (Qurʾān 8:4-5).

The marginal ornaments in Mamlūk Qurʿāns are also repetitive, and mechanical devices were sometimes employed to produce these in a uniform way. The sağda marks that can be found in many Qurʿānic manuscripts are a case in point.

Evidence of the use of a blind stamp for the indication of the contours of a marginal sağda mark. The mushaf of Sulṭān Sha‘bān, dated 1369. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 9, vol. 1, f. 363a (left, Qurʾān 17:110) and its verso, f. 363b (right).
Layout instructions

One may assume that the craftspeople who produced Mamlūk Qurʾān copies had artisanal knowledge. They must have fully internalized the rules that they followed. This is indicated by, among other things, the uniformity in execution. Such rules were continually implemented, but only rarely made explicit. Several sets of such rules have been preserved nevertheless and I summarize two of them here.

Set of rules for the layout of a Mamlūk Qurʾān manuscript. MS. Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 90, f. 1b, detail, preceding the Qurʾānic text (dated 1454-5).

One such set of rules for the layout of Mamlūk Qurʾāns has the following instructions (MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub Maṣāḥif 90):
- the beginning of each page should be the beginning of an āya, and the end of each page should be the end of an āya;
- the end of each āya in which there is one of the sağdas should end with the end of the line;
- the end of each sūra should coincide with the end of the line;
- every two hizbs should be written on ten leaves plus one page, except for the first ğuzʾ and the last ğuzʾ, because these two should be written on twelve complete leaves because of the illuminated opening and illuminated closing sūras;
- every ḥizb must be divided into an eighth, a quarter, and a half, [and the words must be] written in an illuminated circle in the margin of each page;
If there is something missing in this respect, it is the copyist's negligence.¹⁶
This is the end [of the rules], thanks be to God, the Almighty. May God, the Highest, forgive the copyist, the reader, and whoever looks into the book.

A Mamlūk Qurʾān manuscript in which the layout rules have been followed. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 90 (dated 1454-5), f. 132b (Qurʾān 12/13).

¹⁶ This implies that the reader, who discovers faults (especially in vocalization and reading marks), must correct them. This belongs to a generally followed etiquette with the Qurʾān, for which see e.g. al-Ḍabbā’, Fath al-Karīm al-Mannān, p. 24.
By way of comparison, I summarize the twenty-nine rules for the layout of nineteenth-century Ottoman Qur’âns, a set of which I accidentally came across several years ago in MS Leiden Or. 11.701 (7):

- each one of the thirty aǧzāʾ is to be written on ten leaves [...];
- the beginning of each ġuzʾ coincides with the beginning of the page;
- on the beginning of each page is the beginning of an āya, and at the end of each page is the end of an āya;
- the end of each sūra coincides with the end of the lines; [...]  
- no word is split into two, one part being at the end of the line, the other part at the beginning of the (next) line, and everything that must be observed is written in red ink.

Limiting the number of leaves per ġuzʾ or two ḥizbs, and making the ġuzʾ coincide exactly with the quire, makes it possible for a complete copy of the Qurʾān to be written by a number of copyists with near-identical or very similar hands, and whose aǧzāʾ are then bound together into one muṣḥaf. In this way a complete handwritten copy can be produced in a very short span of time, as quickly as one or two days. There is a further issue with respect to the nineteenth-century Ottoman Qurʾāns. For a while, manuscript producers must have been working in competition with printers, and the above-mentioned uniformity in procedure must have enabled them in this regard, at least for a while.

All these little birdies, what are they?

Between the naked, undotted rasm and the abundantly filled script of many a Mamlûk Qurʾān copy there are worlds of difference. It looks as though each letter in this fragment of a Mamlûk Qurʾān has been adorned with at least one extra sign. We can make a few general observations concerning the large muṣḥaf that is herewith illustrated. The size of the original is quite formidable, 105 x 80 cm, whereas the pages give the impression of having been cropped. The size must have

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been slightly larger. The weight of the book is 97 kg. I assume that extra strong and heavy paper was produced in order to stabilize the text block. In the present manuscript, one hundred leaves on top of each another measure ca 3.3 cm.

Detail of a page of giant *muṣḥaf*, showing a large array of auxiliary signs over, inside and underneath the *rasm*. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 13, f. 4a (*Qurʾān* 2:29).

- a complex *miṣṭara* can be observed: text lines 5.3 cm high, interline 2.3 cm high.
- an illuminated āya divider, possibly stamped.
- the *rasm* and punctuation are written in one pen.

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18 Information received on 30 March 2015 from Muḥammad al-Ṣāwī (conservator in the TIFDAK project in Dār al-Kutub).
19 Measuring the thickness of a considerable number of leaves is a practical way of establishing the approximate thickness per leaf.
- the ihmāl signs are mostly written in one and the same pen, but a few seem to have been written in another pen or with lighter ink, by a second munaqqit.\textsuperscript{20}
- the vowels and sukūn are written in a different pen.
- instructions for pronunciation written in red ink.
- the gold frame covers the flourish of the lām, but the blue frame, which is always the final touch, is interrupted.

All these peculiarities somehow indicate that the muṣḥaf is the product of teamwork.

\textit{Revealing peculiarities}

A thorough look at the codices reveals all sorts of anomalies and peculiarities, and sometimes downright mistakes. These mistakes may tell us something about the teamwork with which the manuscript was produced, or about the competences of the members of the team.

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=\textwidth]{image.png}
\caption{An illiterate illuminator? The \textit{sūra} header is upside-down. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 144, vol. 2, f. 251b, detail. Possibly a hybrid codex, pre-Mamlūk (dated 1160) and upgraded in Mamlūk times (\textit{Qurʾān} 28/29).}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{20} See on \textit{ihmāl} Witkam, 'The Neglect Neglected'.
In a pre-Mamlûk 

\textit{muṣḥaf} copied in 1160 and possibly upgraded in the Mamlûk era, we see that the \textit{sūra} heading of \textit{Qurʾān} 29 (\textit{al-ʿAnkabūt}) is written while the paper was in the upside-down position. The header reads: ‘\textit{sūra} in which the Spider is mentioned’. This is not an uncommon type of header. Sometimes, instead of a header such as ‘\textit{sūrat al-Baqara}’ (\textit{Qurʾān} 2) there is written: \textit{al-sūra allatī tudhkaru fīhā al-Baqara}, ‘the \textit{sūra} in which the Cow is mentioned’, and the same can be seen in other \textit{sūra} headings. We may assume that, in this particular case, it has escaped the illuminator that he was working on a leaf that was upside-down, but then we have to wonder to what extent he was literate. Whatever the answer, it is yet another instance of division of labour.

The guide word for the \textit{sūra} heading is written in the outer margin, from where it will disappear once the page is trimmed during binding. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, \textit{Maṣāḥif} 150, \textit{ǧuz}’ 28, f. 36a, and the same in detail. Copy with a \textit{waqfīyya} from the Madrasa of Ṣarghatmish in Cairo, which was built in 1356 (\textit{Qurʾān} 66).
The ‘guide word’\textsuperscript{21} is a note that is written by the copyist of the main text in the outer margin. It contains an instruction to the illuminator or calligrapher for the writing of the text of the \textit{sūra} heading. The location of the guide word(s) is chosen in such a way that when the volume is bound it will be cut off and thereby disappears. Remnants of such guide words may be observed in many codices, and not only in Qur’ānic manuscripts. Comparable, but not identical in use, are the quire marks that serve to indicate the proper order of the quires of a codex. These, too, are sometimes written in such a way, in the upper-left corner of the first page of the quire, that they will be cut off when the paper is trimmed by the binder. Such notes usually consist of numerals in figures or words, but sometimes also contain the short version of the title of the text. If the text has become incomplete for whatever reason, this kind of short title may be the only title left. This is the case with MS San Lorenzo de El-Escorial, No. 1947, the uniquely preserved copy of the memoirs of the Syrian nobleman Usāma b. Munqidh (d. 1188). Without the quire mark, we would not even know the short title of this highlight of Arabic literature: \textit{Kitāb al-Iʿtibār}.

\textit{Correcting mistakes}

The Qurʾān is not an easy text to copy. Many scribes know at least parts of the text by heart. This is not helpful to them, however, while they are copying. It can result in them writing words that are different from the exemplar, simply because they have a different sound or image in their memory. Another instance is not exclusively Qurʾānic: words can be overlooked by the copyist, simply because they are not essential for the understanding of the text. In general, the learned scribe is a great

\textsuperscript{21} ‘Guide word’ in French is \textit{représentant}. The phenomenon of guide words, or guide letters if it is a single sign, is not exclusive to Islamic manuscripts. It can be observed in medieval Western manuscripts and early printed books as well. When and where it was invented remains the question. Déroche and Gacek do not appear to treat the ‘guide word’ in their handbooks.
asset, but his erudition may jeopardize the production of a faithful re-
production of the model for copy (Vorlage).
We may assume that for the large and costly Qurʾān projects, a correc-
tor would read the text in search of scribal mistakes, and in numerous
volumes we see traces of the corrector’s work.
In general, scribes and readers of the Qurʾān are required to correct
the text whenever they find a mistake in their exemplar. All sorts of
corrections can be found, ranging from simple and crude to highly so-
plicated. It would be interesting to analyse the types of mistakes
that are made by copyists of Qurʾānic texts. Rhyming words and less-
significant interjections seem to be the most obvious pitfalls.

An interlinear correction, supplying three words that were not essential for the
understanding of the text, in a pre-Mamlūk Qurʾān. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub,
Maṣāḥif 144, f. 40b, detail, dated 1160 (Qurʾān 3:88).

The scribal error lilladhīna kafarū (line 4) has been crossed through. The correct
word līl-kāfirīn, which has almost the same meaning, has been supplied by a cor-
rector (or reader?) in the margin. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 142, f. 90b,
detail (Qurʾān 14:1-2).
All sorts of erasure can be observed as attempts to correct mistakes in texts. It is a crude way of interfering with a text and its use never results in a smooth and invisible improvement of the text. A particularly sophisticated method of correcting involves covering the mistaken passage with a thin layer of paper pulp. Occasionally, this causes a slight discolouration. This precursor of the correction fluid Tipp-Ex™ then serves as the base for the new, corrected text. It is obvious that when that method is used the paper underneath becomes slightly thicker. This cannot be felt with bare fingertips, but a micrometer unambiguously shows the increased thickness.

A complete line of text has been corrected, possibly by the same scribe. MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 112, vol. 2, f. 184b, detail. (Qurʾān 40:50).

In MS Cairo, Dār al-Kutub, Maṣāḥif 112, vol. 2, f. 184b, line 7, I observed a full line of text that had been treated this way. I measured the average thickness of the paper of this leaf with a mechanical micrometer (Stewart MacDonald) and found its thickness for this Qurʾān (measuring 43.2 x 30 cm, with a thickness of one hundred leaves of c. 1.7 cm)
to be approximately 0.11 mm per leaf. The thickness of the corrected passage was considerably more, between 0.16-0.18 mm. The added substance, possibly paper paste or pulp, was applied onto the mistaken text, which was then burnished. It was not possible to detect a difference in thickness with bare fingertips in this case, but the micrometer measures the variation without a problem.

Errare humanum
In 1914, D.K. Pétrof published his edition of the Arabic text of the ‘Ring of the Dove’ by Ibn Ḥazm (d. 1064). It is a treatise about love and lovers. He based his edition on the unique Leiden manuscript. It is dated 738/1338 or earlier, as that is the date in an owner’s note on the title-page. It was produced as a Mashriqi manuscript, which means that, at some stage of its existence, the text was converted from Maghrabi to Mashriqi script. The copyist of the manuscript tells the reader in his colophon that he has skipped most of Ibn Ḥazm’s poetry, which now seems lost forever. The manuscript had been acquired in the mid-seventeenth century in Constantinople and had gathered dust on the Leiden shelves for more than two-and-a-half centuries, till Pétrof published his first edition. The text is one of the highlights of Arabic Andalusian literature, and after Pétrof’s edition innumerable editions have appeared in print.

Collation between the unique manuscript and Pétrof’s first edition shows that he overlooked two words, على ذلك, on f. 2a, line 3. With the exception of one recent edition, all Arabic editions of the ‘Ring of the Dove’ lack these two words as well. In fact, the omissions do not mean so much, and they play no role in enhancing understanding of the text – which may precisely be the reason why Pétrof accidentally skipped them. That these two words are lacking in practically all editions can only mean that the later editors based their editions on Pétrof’s work, rather than on the manuscript, without telling their readers. Looking at the first or second page of any edition for these two words is a simple test to determine whether or not the editor has used the
This touches upon another matter, that of the critical edition. Some scholars seem to think, as I have observed in conversations, that providing intelligent commentaries or useful conjectures equates to bringing out a critical edition of a text. But the term ‘critical edition’ refers to something entirely different. Critical editing means an attempt to get as close to the original version of a text as possible. This is done by weighing the manuscriptal witnesses by means of the application of a carefully developed set of rules and procedures. It has nothing to do with enlightening remarks, however clever or critical they may be.

Ibn Ḥazm, Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma fil-Ulfa wal-Ullāf. MS Leiden University Library Or. 927, f. 2a. The words ʿalā dhālika in line 3 were omitted by Pétrof in his edition, Leiden 1914, p. 2, line 17, and subsequently lack in almost all later editions.

In terms of dissemination and distribution, Ibn Ḥazm’s ‘Ring of the Dove’ is the very opposite of al-Ǧazūlī’s prayer book, of which so many copies exist. That in itself makes the production of a reliable edition problematic, and such an edition was in fact never made. Of Ibn Ḥazm’s masterpiece on love and lovers only one manuscript seems to have been preserved, and an incomplete one at that. This has created other, no less serious problems for the edition of the text. It would seem that the history of the editions of Ibn Ḥazm’s Ṭawq al-Ḥamāma is as picturesque and intriguing as that of the transmission of al-Ǧazūlī’s pious prayer book.

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22 See Witkam, ‘The Philologist’s Stone’ and the literature quoted there.
Conspectus of manuscripts

Berlin, Staatsbibliothek
Or. Oct. 240
Leiden, University Library
Acad. 33
Or. 927
Or. 1751
Or. 11.701
Or. 14.276

Cairo, Dār al-Kutub
Maṣāḥif 9
Leipzig, University Library
Maṣāḥif 13
Vollers 65
Maṣāḥif 90
Maṣāḥif 112
Maṣāḥif 142
Maṣāḥif 143
Maṣāḥif 144
Maṣāḥif 150

Dublin, Chester Beatty Library
No. 4223
New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art
No. 2017-301

Istanbul, Milli Kütüphane,
C 44
Arabe 1184
Arabe 6869
Arabe 6983
Arabe 7253

Kuala Lumpur, ISTAC
Ar-Cat-2-061

Leiden, Ter Lugt Collection
No. 49
San Lorenzo de El-Escorial
No. 1947
No. 122
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About the author
My father, Henricus Joannes Witkam (1914-1982) was an avid collector of old books. After a failed study in chemical engineering in Delft, and a study in law in Leiden that was interrupted by the war, he earned a living as a private tutor in Roman Law. From the mid-1960s onwards, he became a self-educated historian of Leiden University. My mother, Antoinetta Maria Francisca Peeren (1917-1997), studied classical languages (Greek and Latin) till the war interrupted her study as well, and later she taught these both privately and in several schools.

I was born in Leiden in 1945. With my bookish background, I started in 1964 my study of Arabic, Persian, and the History of the Middle East at Leiden University. In 1970, I studied for a period at the University of Tehran. In 1972, I obtained my MA in Leiden, and for a while I worked on the final volume of Wensinck’s Concordance et Indices de la Tradition Musulmane. For that I read and indexed the six canonical collections of hadith. The knowledge that I acquired then is still of great use to me. I defended my PhD thesis in 1989. It is the critical
edition of a Mamlūk encyclopedia, together with a bio-bibliography of the author, the Egyptian physician Ibn al-Akfānī (d. 1348). Although he was a great scholar and an interesting personality, he had completely been forgotten till I brought him back to life.

In 1974 I had been appointed curator of Oriental manuscripts in the Leiden University library. My only qualification was a master's degree in Arabic, Persian, and the Modern History of the Middle East. And I had been brought up among books.

So, there I was, in the famous Leiden library that I had hardly used as a student, and I was now in charge of one of the better collections of Islamic manuscripts in the world. To me, that collection was primarily known for its Islamic manuscripts from the Middle East, most of them in Arabic.

What did I really know about Islamic manuscripts at the time? No more than the bits and pieces that any amateur can pick up. There were no Déroches or Gaceks yet to guide me. I discovered useful books, such as Franz Rosenthal's *Approach and Technique of Muslim scholarship* of 1947, a book that should still be on everybody's desk.

Now that I would be professionally concerned with Arabic manuscripts, I felt it necessary to professionalize my knowledge of manuscripts. Nowhere in the Netherlands, in fact nowhere in the world, was there an academic curriculum for Islamic codicology. At the time, the word ‘codicology’ was still a neologism.

For many years in Leiden, we had had professors for the science of Western manuscripts. The last professional ‘manuscript person’ in the Leiden Faculty of Humanities was Peter Gumbert (1936-2016). I knew him personally, having lived with him in the same student house in 1964-1967. From 1975 onwards, I learned from him how to work with manuscripts. Students of Islamic codicology and paleography do not need to reinvent the wheel. A neighbouring discipline is there already.

In 2002, I was appointed to the newly established chair of Islamic codicology and paleography in Leiden. I retired in 2010. In the same year, the first issue of *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* appeared with Brill. In this journal, I try to introduce international standards to a field that
was hardly organized, and also to give younger generations of scholars the possibility of peer-reviewed publication.

In the 1980s I had begun to compile the catalogue of Arabic manuscripts of Leiden University Library, where I have been working for more than thirty years (1974-2005). From 2006 onwards, my *Inventory of Oriental Manuscripts* of Leiden has been available online in 25 volumes. In 1986, I founded the journal *Manuscripts of the Middle East*. It lived for six years.

The creation, in 2002, of my chair ‘Manuscript culture of the Islamic World’ at Leiden University was a novelty there. I was in the enviable situation of being the manager of the Leiden Oriental collections and, at the same time, teaching courses on paleography and codicology to second-year students of Middle Eastern studies. I also gave an MA course ‘The Islamic Book, from manuscript to modern media’.

![Professorial portrait of Jan Just Witkam by Suzanne Joubert, 2018. The original is on permanent display in the Humanities room of the main building of Leiden University.](image)

In 2021, friends donated my ‘official’ professorial portrait to Leiden University. It was painted by Suzanne Joubert (1933-2020), a painter from Montreal, Canada. It shows me in the middle of my collections of Islamic manuscripts and printed books.

Codicology has sometimes been defined as ‘everything connected with the manuscript, except its content’. It could be true, but in fact it is a description that is as seductive as it is false. The assumption that one can create a division between physical and spiritual aspects is
naïve. The study of writing materials and instruments, on the one hand, and getting acquainted with ideas in pre-modern books, on the other hand, need a holistic approach. It is the study of body and soul; or, to put it less philosophically, in Rosenthal’s words: approach and technique.

I sometimes think that codicology in its limited meaning, ‘anything but the content’, has become so popular because it seems to absolve the codicologist from acquiring the knowledge that is contained within the book, codicology as an excuse. The student can avoid unpleasant grammar books and can content himself with material matters: paper, quires, inks, rulers, etc.

An example of the holistic approach that I have in mind is what I have experienced with my own work since the beginning of the century on the shifting illustration patterns in the Dalāʾīl al-Khayrāt, the prayer book by the fifteenth-century Moroccan mystic and activist al-Ǧazūlī (d. 1465). I have described that in this lecture. After the Qurʾān, about which so much has been written, this is one of the most popular works in the sunnī world and many thousands of manuscripts of it exist. But literature about it is scarce, a description or analysis of its content has not been undertaken. This prayer book has only recently been taken up as an object of scholarly research. During my own study at university, I had never heard of it, and it is unlikely that any of my teachers had, either. Another subject that drew my attention is division of labour and teamwork in the production of manuscripts. I have devoted some attention to either subject in the present lecture.

Looking back at the reality of manuscripts in a library, I now understand that there are parallel worlds: the abstract world of the history of ideas and the very tangible world of popular books as physical objects, and as fields of study they do not always overlap.

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From codicology to the history of the Islamic book

Jan Just Witkam

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