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# ***ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPTS AND NEW INFORMATION TECHNOLOGIES***

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## **THE ASIATIC MUSEUM PROJECT: 1. DATA-BASE ON MUSLIM SEALS**

### **I**

The St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, Academy of Sciences, Russia, is the oldest center for oriental studies in the country. Its history dates back to November 11 (23), 1818, when the Asiatic Museum was founded within the framework of the Russian Imperial Academy of Sciences.

The St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies is famous today for its collection of ancient and medieval oriental MSS, the largest in the Russian Federation. It can only be compared to the collections of the British Library and Bibliothèque Nationale. The collection includes 30 funds, the total amount of MSS is 85 thousand units. Here one can find texts produced in the Near, Middle and Far East, as well as from Innermost and South Eastern Asia, written in sixty languages and dialects on different sorts of paper, parchment, leather, palm leaf, birch bark, wood, metal, stone — practically on all materials ever used for writing. Some of the funds of the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies are unique or very rare. Among them there are the collections of Tangut secular and Buddhist MSS, Old-Khwarezmian business documents, the best European collection of the Tibetan MSS and block-printed books, MSS representing the written tradition of the Karaites of the Crimea, a collection of Muslim MSS created in the late Middle Ages in the regions of the Volga river, the Caucasus and Central Asia [1].

In August 1992, according to the results of an open competition, the Ministry of Science, High School and Technology of the Russian Federation took the decision to start sponsoring the project "Asiatic Museum" presented by the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies. The aim of the project is to produce a data-base on the MSS collection of the Institute as a part of the future

net of data-bases to be created in the principal museums and research centers of St. Petersburg. For some time the "Asiatic Museum" project was sponsored by the Russian Foundation for Fundamental Researches.

It will be a three level computer description of all the MSS collections. The differences between the levels are connected with the scope of description and the degree of access freedom to the information via the network. The first level represents basic information on a MS, which is almost common to all the national manuscript traditions. The second includes image files of incipit and some other elements of a MS as well as the block of codicological information. The questions which are posed by a scholar to a MS on the second descriptive level are common to all the MSS within the corresponding national tradition. The third level of description can be connected with any specific approach to this or that kind of manuscripts or any of their features. On the second and third level it will be possible to use national languages for the description [2].

It was decided to start the creation of the "Asiatic Museum" data-base with nearly ten thousand Arabic [3] and ten thousand Tibetan MSS from the above mentioned collection. The latter will be described by Russian scholars together with the Asian Classics Input Project (USA, Dr. Michael P. Roach, Director).

Unfortunately, because of the shortage of funds we have to begin the work not with the general description, but with the two data-bases of the third level. The paper by Efim Rezvan which was presented at the Durham University in December 1993 was devoted to one of them — the data-base on the early Qur'an MSS [4]. A computer data-base on seals in Muslim manuscripts is the subject of the present paper.

## II

Only few catalogues of Muslim manuscripts mention the existence of the owner's seals in MSS. Usually the description of seals is confined only to their owner's names and their date (if these are available in their legends). Meanwhile, our preliminary statistics shows that nearly one fourth or even one third of Muslim MSS have one or several imprints of their former owner's seals. This rich historical and cultural material is omitted while describing the MSS. In our opinion, this practice has a bad influence on the development of Muslim sphragistics as a whole.

At present, we can hardly speak about the sphragistics of the Near and Middle East of the period after the Muslim expansion [5].

In Western Europe and Russia interest for Muslim seals rose in the 18th century. It became even greater in the 19th century. But only at the end of the 20th century, after the first catalogues of individual collections had been published, there appeared the possibility to examine the problem in a new perspective. The year 1981 added 138 Muslim seals from Bibliothèque Nationale de Paris [6] to the 72 published by J. Hammer-Purgstall in 1850 [7]. Afterwards 155 waqf seals from the Turkish collections (1984) [8] and 67 seals and 175 imprints of Bukhara seals (1987) [9] were published by Turkish and Soviet scholars. L. Kalus recently announced the publication of nearly 200 seals from the collections of the Ashmolean museum in Oxford. 605 seals from the Hermitage collection (St. Petersburg, Russia) were catalogued but only 70% of the inscriptions are deciphered by now [10]. The publication of several other collections seems to be expected in the near future. It should be taken into account that several seals were published separately [11].

Publication of seal-matrices is very complicated and laborious. It is connected not only with reading many legends of a very specific calligraphy and contents, but also with the necessity of arranging them in some system based on the chronology and geographic attribution of the objects. To do this now when Muslim sphragistics is "non-existent" is really a difficult task.

The imprints of owner's seals present an independent object of research and description within the frames of Muslim sphragistics. In comparison with seals-matrices they have a special advantage. Pages of manuscripts bear much more imprints of seals in comparison with the number of seal-matrices preserved in museums and private collections. That is why the study of imprints can give us a much more detailed picture of how their shapes and styles were changing in the course of time and from region to region. Being a part of a manuscript, imprints still exist in the necessary historical and cultural background which was lost by seal-matrices [12].

The task of reading a legend seems to be the most complicated. Most often they bear the names of persons never mentioned in any other source. For example, two oval seals with the legends: "al-Mutawakkil 'alā Allāhi 'Abdallāh b. 'Abd al-Salām. 1199 H." and "Muḥammad Shākir b. Aḥmad Shāh Madjkaravī" seem to have nothing in common except their shape. The imprints of these seals were found in manuscripts C 2023 and C 2027 of our collection. With the help of written additions to these manuscripts we can find out that the above mentioned seals belonged to a grandfather and his grandson. Thus the second

seal can be dated to the middle of the 19th century. The owners of both seals were Russian subjects and this fact enables us to continue the biographical research if necessary [13].

The vastness of the seal-imprints repertoire and the possibility of research on them within wider historical and cultural context (manuscript background) make the imprints of owner's seals a really important sphragistic source. This special selection of seals will be of great importance for the research on Muslim seals in general. It could help in establishing significant dates and locations and thereby stimulate the description of the museum's seal collections. On the other hand the proposed data base will give the possibility to verify dates and locations of many Muslim manuscripts from different collections.

The proposed data base will contain the following two principal points: 1. Basic "passport" data on a MS: country, city, library, shelf code, and number of the folio with seal-imprint; other folios of the manuscript with the same imprint or other manuscripts with the same imprint are also taken into account marked with the sign of special inquiry. 2. Image file (representation of the seal imprint, scale sufficient to see the details).

To classify the imprints according to any of their features or groups our data-base will contain the following points: 1. Form of the imprint (round, oval, rectangle, square, almond shaped, hexagonal, octagon, rhomboid, etc.). 2. Dimensions (in millimeters). 3. Type of seal: a) intaglio (text in white); b) embossed (text in black or other color); c) combined (texts in white and other color). 4. Seal legend (full text in original language; undeciphered words will be marked by dots; standard note for illegible legend will be "illegible"). 5. Scallops of the seal (Y/N) 6. Name of the seal's owner (taken from the legend) 7. Motto (aphoristic part of the legend, if present) 8. Date engraved on the seal 9. Shape of the cartouche with text (according to the numbered templets, for brevity) 10. Belonging to waqf (Y/N) 11. Additional notes (important mainly for the compilers of the data-base: bibliographical data if published; existence in other manuscripts of imprints close in this or that point to the imprint described — important for the typology; existence of the same imprints in the manuscripts from other collections; biographical data of the owner of the seal, etc.).

We decided not to reserve special sections for the description of such important characteristics of imprints as different types of seal's fillet and decorative elements. The typology which is not far advanced as well as the absence of generally accepted terminology make it impossible. Nevertheless image files will give the possibility to obtain full information about the elements of the imprint mentioned above (not in the automatic mode, but in the way of free sorting and comparison of the imprints; typological observations of this kind will be mentioned under Point 11).

Every described seal adds new information to the history of this or that manuscript and the biography of its owner. It is not important even whether this person is mentioned in historical sources or not. According to the famous Russian scholar V. S. Lublinsky, "it is necessary to study and publish indexes of names even of a "secondary"

and "third rate" former owners of books, as well as lists of their books, even of insignificant ones. Only after the appearance of such publication chains, series, spheres and regularities will start to reveal themselves among the poor infinity of isolated, single or accidental facts" [14].

In connection with separate MS collections often stored as museum collections of rarities, this approach seems to be of great importance. Modern collections are only the result of destruction and disunity of medieval private and public libraries as well as of centuries long movements of manuscripts from one city or country to another. As for the previous state of these masses of MSS, all modern collections have accidental repertoire and all are a complement to each other. Only due to the study of seal

imprints it became possible to collect the 62 Arabic MSS titles from the library of Muhammad Pārsā (d. 822/1420) scattered about the depositories of St. Petersburg (Russia), Kazan (Russia), Tashkent (Uzbekistan), Dushanbe (Tadjikistan) and Paris (France).

Only a unified data-base embracing all possible seals and imprints can be of primary importance. Bearing in mind such a perspective for the project we can predict with confidence that it will be significant contribution to the formation of Muslim sphragistics in general, to the identification of hundreds and thousands of illegible imprints, to the study of miniature calligraphy and its special style, to the research of problems connected with the medieval libraries in the Muslim Orient.

### Notes

1. Basic information on the funds and bibliography see in: Val. V. Polosin, "Fondi rukopisei i staropechatnih knig, aktovih i epigraficheskikh materialov na yazykah narodov sovet'skogo i zarubezhnogo Vostoka v SSSR (Funds of the MSS, incunadulae, statements and epigraphic materials written on the languages of Soviet and foreign East in the USSR)", *Archaeographia orientalis. Materiali vsesoyuznogo rabocheho sovestchaniya po problemam vostochnoy arheografii*. Leningrad, 1—4 marta 1988 g (Moscow, 1990), pp. 183—9 (In Russian).

2. The project was presented in 1990 at the Table Ronde organized by Prof. J. Hamesse in Université Catholique de Louvain, Louvain-la-Neuve, Belgium. For details see: E. A. Rezvan, I. G. Tikhonova, "Bazi dannih po rukopisnim sobraniyam: problemi i perspektivi", *Vostok/Oriens. Afro-aziatskie obtcheshstva: istoriya i sovremennost'* 6, (1992), pp. 109—13 or in *idem*: "The Databases on Manuscripts' Depositories: the Problems and Perspectives (on the beginning of the Programme)", *Databases on the History of Eurasia in the Middle Ages*. Issue 1, (Moscow, 1992), pp. 55—63.

3. Detailed information and bibliography see in: *Bibliografiya arabskikh rukopisej (Bibliography of the Arabic Manuscripts)*. Sostavlena I. B. Mikhailovoj pri uchastii A. B. Khalidova..., (Moscow, 1982), pp. 230—41.

4. See: E. A. Rezvan, "The Data-base on Early Qur'an MSS: new approach to the text history reconstruction", *Proceedings of the 3rd International Conference and Exhibition on Multi-Lingual Computing (Arabic and Roman Script)*. 10—12 December, 1992, (Durham, 1992), 3.3.1—18 or *idem*: "The Qur'an between textus receptus and critical edition", *Les probléms posés par l'édition critique des textes anciens et médiévaux*. Ed. by J. Hamesse (Louvain-la-Neuve, 1992), pp. 34—51.

5. See: A. A. Ivanov, "Muslim Sphragistics: State-of-the-Art and Prospects of Studies", *Oriental Historical Source Studies and Special Historical Subjects*. Fasc. 1 (Moscow, 1989), pp. 236—246.

6. L. Kalus, *Catologue des cachets, bulles et talismans islamiques* (Paris, 1981).

7. J. Hammer-Purgstal, "Abhandlung uber die Siegel der Araber, Perser und Turken", *Denkschriften der Keiserlichen Akademie der Wissenschaften*. Philosophisch-historische classe. Bd. 1 (Wien, 1850), S. 1—36.

8. G. Kut and N. Bayraktar, *Yazma eserlerde wakif mühürleri* (Ankara, 1984).

9. K. Kurbanov, *Buharskie pechaty XVII—nachala XX vekov* (Bukhara seals of the 17th—20th centuries) (Tashkent, 1987).

10. Ivanov, *Op. cit.*, p. 239.

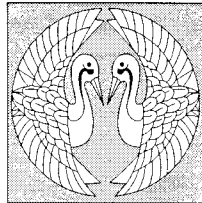
11. See: *e. g.*: N. I. Veselovskij, "Persten'-pechat' Miran-shaha mirzy, syna Tamerlana" (Ring-seal of Miran-shah mirza, son of Tamerlan), *Kaufmanskij Sbornik* (Moscow, 1910), p. 229—34; A. A. Bykov, "Pechat' fatimidskogo khalifa Zahira" (Seal of the Fatimid khalif Zahir)", *Zapiski Kollegii vostokovedov*, T. 5 (Leningrad, 1930), pp. 201—19; A. A. Ivanov, "Pechat' Gauhar-Shad (Seal of Gauhar-Shad)", *Strani i narodi Vostoka*, X (Moscow, 1971), pp. 199—201. According to the preliminary estimations of A. A. Ivanov nearly 140 published works are devoted to Muslim seals.

12. See illustrations in: *Localities and Dates in Arabic Manuscripts. Descriptive catalogue of a collection of Arabic manuscripts in the possession of E. J. Brill*, compiled by P. S. van Konigsveld and Q. al-Samarrai (Leiden, 1978), p. 62, No. 91; p. 104, No. 183.

13. For more details see: Val. V. Polosin, "Four Muslim Seals from Tataria", *St. Petersburg Journal of Oriental Studies*, VII, 1995 (in print).

14. V. S. Lublinski, "Kniga v istorii chelovecheskogo obshchestva (Book in the History of the Human Society)", *Sbornik izbrannykh knigovedcheskikh rabot* (Moscow, 1972), p. 257.

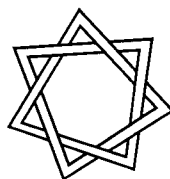
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**Color plates: 'Adjā'ib al-Makḥlūqāt by Zakariyā' al-Qazwīnī (d. 682/1283), MS D 370  
from the collection of St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies,  
Russian Academy of Sciences (see p. 56).**

**Front cover:**

Fol. 34a. The Archangel 'Izra'īl, 160 × 124 mm.

**Back cover:**

Plate 1. Fol. 13b. The Planet Venus, 225 × 145 mm.

Plate 2. Fol. 35b. The Angels of the Second Heaven, 171 × 94 mm.