

Traces of the Hand from Africa to Asia: A Symposium on the Palaeography of Arabic-Script Languages

London, 24 August 2015

The 2015 annual symposium of The Islamic Manuscript Association (TIMA) took place in King's College London on 24 August 2015 and focused on the palaeography of scripts based on the Arabic alphabet. After a learned keynote by Adam Gacek, aiming at giving an overview of the studies realized by Western scholars in the last twenty years, the contributions of four invited speakers illustrated the fields of Arabic, Persian, Turkish and Jawi palaeographies. Among the most recent publications, Adam Gacek mentioned the volume *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies. An Introduction* (2015) as an important contribution that marks a turning point in the study of the Oriental manuscripts.

Sāqī Bāburī, curator of Persian manuscripts at the British Library, presented a paper entitled 'Persian Palaeography. A Millennium of Writing'. The paper focused, in particular, on the origins of the Persian *kāf/gāf* distinguished by the diagonal stroke (ک) as a datable feature, as well as on the earlier experimental *nuqtah* (pointing) in seventeenth-century South Asia. The speaker explored also the possible connections of this phenomenon with subscript single or triple dots for the *g*-sounding *kāf* in South East Asian scripts—as Annabel Gallop then showed for Jawi, pointing out that there is a lot more to be explored on the emergence of these allographs.

Annabel Gallop, lead curator for the South Asia section at the British Library,¹ gave an inspiring speech focused on the 'Jawi Palaeography', which was illustrated with manuscripts and documents—especially letters—in Malay using the Jawi alphabet. Jawi is an extended version of the Arabic alphabet to which five additional consonants are added. While characters for the sounds *p* (ڤ), *č* (چ), and *g* (گ) were earlier developed for Persian, the shapes of *p* (پ) and *g* (گ / ك) are different in Jawi. Hypothesis has been made that the Jawi characters had an independent evolution. The path of research on this particular matter, considering the hints given by Sāqī Bāburī, is to be exploited.

1 Cp. also A. Gallop, *A Jawi Sourcebook for the Study of Malay Palaeography and Orthography*, published as a Special issue in honour of E.U. Kratz of the journal *Indonesia and the Malay World* 43, 125 (2015), cp. <<http://britishlibrary.typepad.co.uk/asian-and-african/2015/05/a-jawi-sourcebook-for-the-study-of-malay-palaeography-and-orthography.html>>, last accessed 20 October 2015.

Hakan Karateke, Professor of Ottoman and Turkish Culture, Language, and Literature at the University of Chicago, spoke of ‘The Calligraphic Empire: The Many Uses of Arabic Script in the Ottoman Empire’. The title of his contribution was inspired by the seminal work by Brinkley Messick, *The Calligraphic State. Textual Domination and History in a Muslim Society* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993). Hakan Karateke considered, in his talk, not only documents but also epigraphs, in order to examine the complex relation between script and contents. The analysis of the layout and style of inscriptions, considered as public texts, was particularly interesting and reminded of the work by Armando Petrucci, *La scrittura: ideologia e rappresentazione* (Torino: Einaudi, 1980). A comparative approach to the study of the urban space and to the role of inscriptions seems a fruitful domain of research that deserve further attention.

In the paper ‘Arabic Palaeography: Lights and Shadows’, Arianna D’Ottone, Associate Professor of Arabic Language and Literature at Sapienza University of Rome, pointed out the many results achieved by researches devoted to the script of Arabic manuscripts, especially for the Umayyad and ‘Abbasid periods. She also highlighted some weak points in the current approaches to the study of Arabic script. In particular the confusion between the fields of palaeography and calligraphy has to be avoided. The slow progress of Arabic palaeography, if compared to classical palaeographies (Latin and Greek) can be explained also in the light of the rare, almost non existent, number of courses dedicated to Arabic Palaeography. Therefore a proper education for young generations is needed.²

A final questions and answers panel closed the one-day symposium. The full programme and abstracts are available at <<http://www.islamicmanuscript.org/symposia/traces-of-the-hand-from-africa-to-asia-a-symposium-on-the-palaeography-of-arabic-script-languages.aspx>> (last accessed 20 October 2015).

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2 Cp. A. D’Ottone, ‘Un’altra lezione negata. Paleografia araba ed altre paleografie’, *Rivista degli Studi Orientali*, 87 (2014), 213–221.