

### Clair-obscure in Copenhagen\*

The two volumes of the catalogue of the Persian manuscripts in the Royal Library in Copenhagen, Denmark, by Dr Irmeli Perho make a splendid impression, as indeed does the entire series of catalogues that is being published by or on behalf of the Royal Library. One cannot praise too highly an institution that takes its task of collection description so seriously.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, I have rarely had so many misgivings about a project. In this review, I try to accommodate both opinions, even if they seem mutually exclusive. In order to better understand the situation regarding this Persian catalogue, a short historical survey of the Copenhagen catalogues may be useful.

Since the early 1990s, a huge effort has been undertaken in Copenhagen to describe the Middle Eastern collections. The first result of this is the work, in Arabic, by ‘Alī ‘Abd al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥaydarī (also written Ali Abd Alhussein Alhaidary) and Stig T. Rasmussen.<sup>2</sup> Rasmussen’s introduction to the history of the Oriental collection in Copenhagen occupies some two and a half pages in it.<sup>3</sup> The first shock derives from Rasmussen’s ‘Parameters of Description’, on p. 17 of the 1995 volume. These ‘parameters’ are the template employed by Rasmussen and al-Ḥaydarī, and later by Dr Perho, for their descriptions. This template, which is meant to contain the basic elements of the description of the manuscripts, omits any mention of the place of copying. A regrettable oversight, one might say; but, it is worse than that: in none of the subsequent volumes of the Copenhagen catalogue is there a single mention in the template of the place of copying. This is one of the many mysteries of the Copenhagen catalogue. The Arabic-writing and Persian-writing worlds are expansive landscapes and the

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- 1 Quite a number of manuscripts in the Royal Library, both Western and Oriental, are now available online in good quality images: <<http://www.kb.dk/permalink/2006/manus/n/>> where ‘n’ is the serial number within the digital library.
- 2 *Al-Daḥā’ir al-‘Arabiyya fīl-Maktaba al-Malikiyya*, see Ali Abd Alhussein Alhaidary and Rasmussen 1995. The English title-page is more prosaic: *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts* [...], and mentions Stig T. Rasmussen as co-author, namely of the introduction and the short-title handlist that covers the same collection that al-Ḥaydarī describes *in extenso*. After that, came the catalogues by Perho 2003 and 2007.
- 3 It is a pleasure to see how, some twenty years later, the same author treats the same subject in more than five hundred pages, see Rasmussen 2016. Text both in Danish and English. Some subjects have their incubation times indeed ...

reader of a catalogue might wish to know where exactly a particular source was produced, especially if that information is simply available in the colophon, often written next to the date of copying. Mentioning the place of copying is so elementary that I am not going to explain here why it is important.<sup>4</sup> Nor am I the first to have detected this curious lacuna in the Copenhagen catalogues. Criticism of the absence of localities in the catalogue was published as early as 2004,<sup>5</sup> but Frédéric Bauden's remarks in this regard have not led to any changes in the 'Parameters of Description' for the three subsequent Arabic catalogue volumes, or for the two Persian volumes that were to follow. The omission of an important element in the template is therefore a conscious act by the Copenhagen cataloguers, not a simple oversight. In the Persian catalogue, this *horror loci* is even extended to the description of the lithographs. There, the place of printing and the name of the publisher are absent from the 'parameters' as well, although they are occasionally mentioned in the notes at the end of the descriptions. In the old Copenhagen catalogue, places of copying are mentioned, as they ought to be.<sup>6</sup> For fairness' sake, it should be said that geographical names have been inventoried in a special 'Index of Places', which mentions 26 localities between the island of Jerba (Tunisia) in the West and several towns in India in the East.<sup>7</sup> Yes, Jerba. Apparently, the Ottoman copyist Muḥammad b. Tūrmuṣ wrote a copy of Šam'ī's commentary to Sa'dī's *Gulistān* there in 1073/1662.<sup>8</sup> Looking at Dr Perho's description of that manuscript we see, on p. 413, the illustration of what is said to be a detached page from that volume, described as f. 1a. To me, the text on that page originates from a *Dīwān* of Ḥāfīz, whereas the author says that pp. 1–6 of that volume are 'blank except for detached notes'. Here, and in many more instances in the catalogue for that matter, the reader finds himself following up a certain interesting feature, only to be frustrated by the lack of an adequate description or explanation. One is inclined to ask whether the author has looked at the illustrations in her own book before having it printed.

A word about the completeness of the catalogue. The two volumes of the Persian catalogue contain descriptions of the 155 Persian manuscripts that Arthur Christensen (1875–1945) acquired in Iran in 1914. The volumes also describe the 112 Persian manuscripts that the Royal Library acquired on several occasions after 1918. In addition, the catalogue contains a description of

4 If that is not valid as an argument, just take Bausi et al. 2015, and search the volume for the term 'locality' for convincing context.

5 Bauden 2004.

6 Mehren 1851, 1857. See also Wulff 1992, 195, who mentions the place of copying in Mehren's catalogues.

7 Perho 2014, II, 478–479.

8 Ibid. 412–415, describing Cod. Pers. Add. 96.

Copenhagen's newer collections that arrived after 1857. Not only manuscripts are described in the two volumes, also lithographic editions. This makes sense, as lithographs are a sort of manuscripts anyway. However, the 143 Persian manuscripts in Copenhagen already described by A.F. Mehren in 1857 are not described in Dr Perho's catalogue. No reason is given for this omission. Mehren's catalogue is indeed available on the website of the Royal Library (although not easily, it must be said, and via an impractically huge colour pdf), but not re-cataloguing the old collection, in my opinion, is a missed opportunity. Mehren wrote his catalogue in Latin 160 years ago. Do researchers of Persian manuscript literature today all read Latin? Has there been no progress in cataloguing manuscripts since 1857? Do the 143 manuscripts that are left out by Dr Perho not deserve to be treated and illustrated like the rest of the collection? I cannot imagine that the sponsor of this catalogue, the Carlsberg Foundation, would have much minded publishing yet another volume, with descriptions of the older collections. In a spontaneous act of Danish crowd-sourcing, readers could solemnly pledge to buy more Carlsberg beer if the Carlsberg Foundation does this after all!

While working my way through Dr Perho's two Persian volumes, it struck me that the subject classification is also rather peculiar. In general, one can always differ about what exactly the subject of a text is, and one usually has little choice other than to follow the cataloguer's discretion, frequently against one's better knowledge as the author of the catalogue usually does not read the text he describes. However, giving 'poetry' as the subject of almost all poetical texts, as Dr Perho does, is the other extreme.<sup>9</sup> Is poetry the subject of poetry? Of course, it is not. The author has not even made an effort to divide the subject into lyrical, epic, mnemotechnic, or mystical poetry (to name but four large subdivisions), and this makes the subject indication in the descriptions a useless feature. Poetry is not the only instance, 'prose writing' is another one, but for prose this is less disturbing as the author uses several other categories as well for subject cataloguing.

Looking for the oldest dated Persian manuscript of the Copenhagen collection<sup>10</sup> the reader arrives at the description of Cod. Pers. Add. 40 A, a manu-

9 Perho 2014, in all descriptions of poetical texts, and repeating this in the subject index in vol. II, 445–446. An exception is Cod. Pers. A.C. 119 (vol. I, 426–428), a work on ritual purity and prayer.

10 With the help of the excellent palaeographical index 'Index of copying years' in vol. II, 473–476, which contains references to 143 dated or datable manuscripts, copied between 857/1453 and 1331/1913. A breakdown over the Hīgra centuries shows: 9<sup>th</sup>/15<sup>th</sup> cent.: 2 copies; 10<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup> cent.: 8 copies; 11<sup>th</sup>/16<sup>th</sup>–17<sup>th</sup> cent.: 22 copies; 12<sup>th</sup>/17<sup>th</sup>–18<sup>th</sup> cent.: 13 copies; 13<sup>th</sup>/18<sup>th</sup>–19<sup>th</sup> cent.: 63 copies; 14<sup>th</sup>/19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> cent. (only up to 1331/1913): 32 copies.

script that is presented as an identified *Tafsīr*.<sup>11</sup> A first glance at the two illustrations (first and last pages of the manuscript) tells the reader that this text cannot have been copied in 857/1453. It looks much younger. Dr Perho bases her dating on the number '857' that is written underneath the last words of the text, but is this really the year of copying? This number, without context, if meaningful at all, may be the outcome of a chronogram. It could refer to the numerical value of parts of the final line of the quatrain at the end of the text, which indeed hide a chronogram. However, the fourth line of the quatrain, as given in the manuscript, adds up to a much later date than 857, but the presence of a chronogram is beyond doubt. It is also clear from the illustration in Dr Perho's catalogue that the passage of the chronogram is part of the text, not of the colophon. So, whatever the correct date of the chronogram may have been, it is the author who composed it, and it is not an addition by the copyist. It therefore says something about the date of completion of the text, not of the manuscript. That said, it is no longer difficult to identify this 'unidentified' text. The first hit revealed by a Google search for the lines of the quatrain at the end of this text is the *Tafsīr-i Mawāhib-i 'Aliyya* by Ḥusayn Kāšifī (d. 910/1504–1505), a well-known text of which numerous manuscripts exist and which has been in print since 1839. Several other volumes of it are even in the Copenhagen Library.<sup>12</sup> This 'unidentified' text is, in fact, the fourth and final volume of that *Tafsīr*.<sup>13</sup>

If I were to list all the misreadings, omissions and plain misunderstandings in this catalogue I would far exceed the space allotted to me here. It would also make for a dull read. It is for that reason alone that I refrain from doing so. However, I am appalled by the ubiquitous sloppiness in the details of this catalogue. It should never have passed the editorial phase in this shape, let alone be printed. Both the author of the catalogue and the editor of the series must have been working in almost total isolation from feedback from peers. To the superficial onlooker, the book is appealing (size, learned text, excellent illustrations), but scratch the thin veneer and one tumbles from amazement into exasperation. The identification of the *Mawāhib-i 'Aliyya* in the previous paragraph is atypical because it has, quite unexpectedly, a good

11 Perho 2014, II, 186–189.

12 Cod. Sim. Pers. 2 (volume 1, Perho 2014, II, 7–10); Pers. II and Pers. III (volumes 1 and 2, respectively, Mehren 1857, 3–4).

13 See Āghā Buzurg-i Tehrānī n.d., where it is said that the quatrain at the end reads 2 Šawwāl 899/1494, the date of completion of the text:

با خامه که این نامه اقبال نوشت . و انجم سخن با یمن الفال نوشت .  
گفتم مه و روز و سال تاریخ نویس . فی الحال دوم ز شهر شوال نوشت .

In the meantime, the text of the Copenhagen manuscript had apparently become corrupt in more than one place so that the chronogram is no longer valid.

ending. Is there nothing good, then, in these two volumes? Fortunately, there are, the countless faults aside, even more good readings and excellent ideas. These are to the author's credit. However, as the Dutch proverb says, 'Trust arrives on foot but leaves on horseback'. It is the persistent unevenness of quality of the book that is so troubling, as it undermines the trust that a reader should put in the author. That goes for a catalogue even more than for an article or a monograph.

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