

Manuscript Center 5th International Conference
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Lost and Embedded Manuscript Texts

(*al-Makhtūtāt al-Mattwiyya*)

Introduction

Our lack of knowledge in the fields of Arabic heritage can be ascribed to a number of reasons. One major reason is the little attention paid to the publishing and dissemination of Arabic heritage, despite its longevity and extensiveness. Besides, what we are aware of concerning manuscripts and manuscript collections is quite trivial to the actual number of Arabic manuscripts scattered all over the world. A swift look at the number of titles mentioned in Ibn al-Nadīm's *al-Fihrist* and Hajjī Khalīfa's *Kaṣf al-Dhunūn* and al-Baghdādī's *Īdah al-Maknūn* can give us an idea about the very little that we actually know about the huge number of titles and manuscript texts that have (been) gradually slid into oblivion. According to this, it would be hard to deny that our current knowledge of Arabic manuscript heritage is deplorably wanting.

Because of that, this conference is an attempt at uncovering lost and embedded manuscript texts (*al-makhtūtāt al-mattwiyya*), and is a further attempt at caulking our fractured awareness. Building and raising awareness of Arabic manuscript heritage have been always the concern of the Manuscript Center of the Bibliotheca Alexandrina since the Center's very first conference – Millenary Manuscripts (2004) through its subsequent conferences: Signed Manuscripts (2005), Commentary Manuscripts (2006) and Translated Manuscripts (2007).

***Al-Makhtūtāt al-Mattwiyya* defined:**

Al-mattwiyya as an adjective literally means “folded”, however its actual semantic connotation in relation to abstract objects refers to disappearance, concealment, fading into oblivion, etc. *Tayy* (literally “folding”) in this sense has a number of shades and, in the context of this conference, it also has contingent terminological significations. This “folding” may result from the arbitrary disappearance of a particular text; the intended concealment or excision of a manuscript text in whole or in part; and the embedding, intended or otherwise, of a particular text, partial or complete, in another text. The process of *tayy* had had such an influence on Arabic manuscript heritage to the extent that the majority of Arabic manuscript texts are, somehow or another, *mattwiyya* – lost, embedded and concealed.

Reflecting on the case of lost and embedded manuscript texts poses a number of questions. Why have certain works been celebrated while others faded silently into oblivion? Where are the early original scientific works that Nasīr al-Dīn al-Tūsī edited in the 7th century of Hegira? Why did the translation of the Holy Bible by Hunayn Ibn Ishāq disappear, despite the fact that it is a translation by the most illustrious and accomplished translator in the history of Islam? Why the written records in *Jāhiliyya* had been wiped out? What are the techniques of excision, exclusion and eradication that resulted in the loss of so huge a number of early and later works?

Nor is that all. A manuscript text can itself result in the loss or concealment of another text. This may take place through the textual process of embedding. Many personal letters, poems, early quotations have been embedded in such grand medieval encyclopedias such as *al-Amālī* by Abū ‘Alī al-Qālī or *Kitāb al-Aghānī* by Abū al-Faraj al-Asfahānī. A text may also result, because of its critical purport, in vehemently banishing another text into oblivion. A stark example on that is the influence of *Kitāb al-Intisār fil Radd ‘ala*

Ibn al-Rāwandī al-Mulhid by al-Khaiyyāt al-Mu'tazalī on the works of Ibn al-Rāwandī. We happen to know nothing of Ibn al-Rāwandī's work except through the quotations and al-Khaiyyāt's scathing criticisms in *Kitāb al-Intisār*.

It is worth mentioning that the fickle disposition of political power and its, often, unhealthy relation to the intelligentsia of its time had similar effects on the loss or concealment of certain works. On the other side, there exists a much more powerful factor represented in the consent of society and its acceptance, or otherwise, of a particular trend of thought. Opposing mainstream ethics or established wisdom meant that the work containing such unorthodox thought, and probably its author, will face a destiny of oblivion and disregard. Al-Hallāj's *al-Twāsīn* is an obvious example. The total disappearance of all the works of Abū al-'Abbās al-Irānšahrī is another. One also should mention as one of the manifestations of *tayy* the writing of a particular text with another alphabet. For instance, writing Hebrew texts using the Arabic alphabet, or using Hebrew to write Arabic. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Rūmī, Mūsa Ibn Maimūn (Maimonides), and Averroes are famous for using that technique of mystification.

Sometimes things get more drastic. Whole sciences and branches of knowledge can face the same destiny. Thanks to restraining ideologies, prohibitive mentalities and scribal inadvertence, branches of knowledge such as alchemy and a whole host of occult sciences, simply, perished. Only three names are dubiously known to be affiliated with work in these fields: Jābir Ibn Hayyān, al-Tughrā'ī, and Ibn Zunbul al-Rammāl. And as we mentioned earlier, authors, too, can face the same fate. For instance, do we have a clue about the real identities of the authors of *Rasā'il Ikhwān al-Safā* and the other hermetic texts? Why should identifying the author of a humdrum work on Arabic morphology *al-Maqsūd fi 'Ilm al-Sarf* be such a riddle? Such questions abound and get more engaging the more we contemplate *mattwiyya* manuscripts.

Recapitulation

The above discussion can be recapitulated into the following conference topics:

- Lost works and unidentified authors.
- Causes of concealing particular works.
- Common features of lost and embedded manuscripts.
- Textual embedding as one of the causes of *tayy*.
- Lost texts that can be extracted from other extant ones.
- Power and its impact on the spreading or disappearance of particular works.
- Writing texts in different alphabets.
- The importance of lost and embedded manuscripts (*al-makhtūtāt al-mattwiyya*) and the role of cataloguing in identifying them.

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