

Islamic Books

A Research Blog about Manuscripts, Printed Books, and Ephemera in Arabic Script

Limited Storage

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As a historian of pre-modern Muslim societies, I am reading not only the written sources of the Islamic civilization but also the materiality of the media through which these written sources were preserved. Their materiality comprises the writing surface itself – marble, slate, clay, papyrus, textiles, palm leaf, paper, bits and pixels – and its “packaging” (e.g., binding), as well as the visual arrangement of the text (i.e., *mise-en-page*) and its illumination and illustration.

In the eastern Mediterranean, parchment and papyrus were commonly used writing surfaces in late antiquity, when the codex had replaced the scroll as the dominant format of books. Islam emerged in the early seventh century on the Arabian Peninsula, and the earliest extant Islamic manuscripts in Arabic script are parchment codices and documents written on papyrus. Since the ninth century, paper has been the most important writing surface in Muslim-ruled societies

Paper-making technology entered the Islamic civilization as a Chinese invention. In Central Asia, around 700, Muslim governors were the first to use paper documents in their written administration of recently conquered territories. In the 750s the first paper mill was established in Abbasid Baghdad in Mesopotamia, the new capital of the Sunni caliphate which was going to dominate the Islamic East until the Mongol conquests of the thirteenth century. The Islamic adaptation of paper-making technology is considered an important factor for the intellectual and creative flourishing of the Arab-Islamic civilization between the late eighth and the eleventh century, since as a writing surface, paper was more durable than papyrus and less costly than parchment. These practical advantages of paper, taken together with its low-complexity manufacture and relative affordability, spurred the increased uses of literacy and writing in all aspects of life in Muslim-ruled communities in Eurasia and Africa.

It is against this backdrop that the topos of the abundance of books in medieval Muslim-ruled societies emerged. The wealth of premodern Islamic book cultures across Eurasia and Africa is usually contrasted with the scarcity of books in Christian Europe during the Middle Ages, on the one hand, and on the other hand, with the absence of printing technology from the commercial manufacture of books by Muslim workshops before the nineteenth century. Since the late 1970s, the topos of the abundance of books has given way to the celebration, if not fetishization, of Islamic manuscript culture as one of the most important achievements of the Islamic civilization.

In my lecture, I will investigate this topos of abundance, which is both triumphalist and defensive. The historical record of the premodern Islamic civilization is much more fragmentary than commonly acknowledged, because our own obsession with wealth and ownership loses sight of absences and gaps, loss and destruction. Despite our own daily experience of limited storage capacities so that we need to regularly discard old things in order to have space for new things (see “fast fashion”), we are reluctant to acknowledge that each book is also a utilitarian, commercial commodity. Nonetheless, I will argue that the practical advantages of paper make it feasible to replace damaged books with new copies. In the twenty-first century, paper, as the formerly dominant writing surface, competes with the bits and pixels of computer screens, because books, as media for written contents, are not defined by the materiality of their writing surface.



Madrid, Calle Albasanz 26-28 – 4 April 2017



Madrid, Calle Mayor/Plaza de la Villa – 15 April 2017

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