

Sean Swanick

# Of making books there is no end<sup>1</sup>

## Islamic manuscripts on the Web

Islamic manuscripts offer researchers a wealth of information on a culture and civilization that is often misunderstood. The study of Islamic manuscripts, often known as Islamic codicology, continues to evolve as a discipline. In the past two decades there has been a blossoming of the digitization of manuscripts. There are a number of valuable resources that scholars and librarians ought to be aware of. Many of the sites detailed below illustrate the breadth and depth of Islamic codicology, as well as the strong developments that have taken place in the scholarship. The following Internet sources are focused on European languages and are by no means exhaustive but rather are considered by the author to be of the foremost quality currently available. The resources are divided between university collections, libraries and museums, and associations and miscellanea.

### University collections

- **The Book of Curiosities, University of Oxford.** In June 2002, the Bodleian Library acquired an illustrated manuscript of a hitherto-unknown Arabic cosmographical treatise, the *Kitāb Gharā'ib al-funūn wa-mulāḥ al-uyūn*, known as the *Book of Curiosities*. The manuscript is a copy, probably made in Egypt in the late 12th or early 13th century, of an anonymous work compiled in the first half of the 11th century in Egypt. The treatise is extraordinarily important for the history of science, especially for astronomy and cartography, and contains an unparalleled series of diagrams of the heavens and maps of the earth. Access: <http://cosmos.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/hms/home.php>.

- **From Pen to Printing Press: Indian University virtual exhibition.** From Pen to Printing Press strives to cover the whole gambit of Islamic print and book arts culture, from parchment to the Islamic incunabula of Ibrāhīm Mūtefferrika in 19th-century Ottoman Turkey. The exhibition was originally on display in the Lily Library, but it was digitized upon its completion. The site offers introductory notes on writing materials, including elegant pieces on *karanama*, paintings and illustrations, calligraphy, and early printed books. Moreover, the site also has a wonderful bibliography for further study and offers links to further resources. Access: [http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online\\_modules/islamic\\_book\\_arts/](http://www.iub.edu/~iuam/online_modules/islamic_book_arts/).

- **Islamic Heritage Project (IHP), Open Collections Harvard University.** Perhaps the most impressive Islamic digital collection in the world, produced by no less than, perhaps, the most popular university in the world. IHP has managed to digitize and upload more than 280 manuscripts. These digital manuscripts vary in terms of subjects and languages: the subjects include anything from literature to Sufi texts to law, theology, and divination/occultism. The languages covered are Arabic, Chagatai, French, Gujarati, Indic, Malay, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish. Access: <http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ihp/manuscripts.html>.

- **Islamic Manuscripts Collection, Princeton University.** Princeton University's

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Islamic Manuscripts Collection maintains 200 manuscripts in Arabic, Persian, and Ottoman Turkish. The subjects included are theology, occultism, Hadith (sayings of the Prophet Muhammad), Sufism, and literature among others. The Web site is put together well and easy to navigate, making for an enjoyable experience. *Access:* <http://www.princeton.edu/~rbsc/department/manuscripts/islamic.html>.

• **Islamic Manuscripts Collection, Princeton University: Shahnama.** This Web site is an archive of book paintings—commonly known as Persian Miniatures—that were created to illustrate scenes from the Persian national epic, the *Shahnama* (the *Book of Kings*). The *Shahnama* is a poem of some 50,000 couplets that was composed by Abu'l Qasim Firdausi over a period of several decades in the late 10th and early 11th centuries. The core of this archive is a fund of 277 illustrations from five illustrated manuscripts of the *Shahnama* that are housed in Princeton University's Firestone Library. These manuscripts date from 1544 to 1674 AD, and vary a good deal both in the number and quality of paintings each contains, and in the scenes chosen for illustration. *Access:* <http://www.princeton.edu/~shahnama/>

• **Islamic Manuscripts Collections, University of Leipzig.** The initial Web site discusses four projects on Islamic manuscripts. The four projects are concerned with different coverage of Islamic manuscripts and the preservation of such vital materials. *Access:* <http://www.wurz.uni-leipzig.de/islamhs.html>

The first project is *Project for the Cataloguing and Digitising of 55 Islamic Manuscripts*. The project will set up a database-supported index and provide digital access to a group of about 55 Arabic, Persian, and Turkish manuscripts. The Leipzig University Library purchased these manuscripts in 1995 and 1996. In this pioneer project, Arabic script will be integrated into a database that will also feature German and American transliteration systems for the first time. This will provide scholars of Oriental Studies worldwide

with access to an unknown pool of Islamic manuscripts. *Access:* <http://www.islamic-manuscripts.net/content/below/index.xml>

The second project is: *Database-Supported Data Collection, Exploration and Digital Presentation of the Damascene Family Library Refaiya at the University Library in Leipzig*. The project focuses on the scholarly exploration, database development and digital presentation of the private Arab-Islamic library of the Damascene Rifāṭ family. *Access:* <http://www.refaiya.uni-leipzig.de/content/below/index.xml>.

The third project is: *Historical Manuscripts of Aceh*. Aceh has a rich handwriting culture which, however, had to accept several losses due to the 2004 tsunami. In this way, for example, the manuscript collection of Dokumentasi Pusat Informasi dan Aceh disappeared completely. The remaining ancient manuscripts belong to the last remaining original written testimonies of the history and culture of Aceh, whose scientific, not to mention emotional, value is priceless. *Access:* <http://www.manuscripts-aceh.org/content/below/index.xml>.

The fourth project is: *Java Manuscripts Portal*. The island of Java is rich in valuable historical manuscripts. Unfortunately, the storage conditions are often not optimal or may even jeopardize the continued physical existence of these precious manuscripts. This applies both to the manuscripts that are privately owned, as well as larger, well-known collections in museums and libraries. Most of these collections are internationally known, and may also have published catalogs. At many national and international projects, the manuscripts have been researched locally, and, to some extent, microform backup copies have been made. *Access:* <http://www.manuscripts-java.org/content/below/index.xml>.

• **Shahnama Digital Index, Cambridge University.** This site brings you a comprehensive collection of manuscripts of the *Shahnama*, the Persian epic *Book of Kings*, completed by the poet Firdausi in AD 1010, together with a display of the miniature paint-

ings in each one. There are currently about 1,500 manuscripts and single pages recorded, 18,000 records of paintings, and 12,000 images from all over the world, now accessible with a few clicks of a mouse.

Site visitors can see and compare all the different depictions of a particular scene in the story, produced over a period of almost 600 years, and look through the manuscripts held in different collections from around the world. *Access:* <http://shahnama.caret.cam.ac.uk/new/jnama/page/>.

## Libraries and museums

- **Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München.** The Staatsbibliothek offers both German and English languages for searching and collection overview. The library has digitized roughly 500 manuscripts so far, and is a very rich collection. Moreover, the digital copies are of great quality, having used some of the best technology available for reproducing images in particular. One fine example is Muhammad Qazwini's *Marvels of creatures and strange things existing* (BSB Cod. arab. 464). *Access:* [http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/ausgaben/gesamt\\_ausgabe.html?projekt=1237542282&recherche=ja&ordnung=sig](http://daten.digitale-sammlungen.de/~db/ausgaben/gesamt_ausgabe.html?projekt=1237542282&recherche=ja&ordnung=sig).

- **Bibliothèque Nationale de France (BNF), Manuscrits en Arabe.** BNF has digitized and made freely available 79 Arabic manuscripts varying in subjects. There are also a few manuscripts in Ottoman Turkish and Persian that have been digitized and are freely searchable by author, century, and language. Moreover, after having opened a preferred text, the researcher has the option of e-mailing the permanent link to the manuscript. *Access:* [http://gallica.bnf.fr/Search?ArianeWireIndex=index&p=1&lang=EN&f\\_typedoc=manuscrits&q=arabe](http://gallica.bnf.fr/Search?ArianeWireIndex=index&p=1&lang=EN&f_typedoc=manuscrits&q=arabe).

- **The David Collection, Copenhagen.** This collection spans from the 8th century to the 18th of the Gregorian calendar. The Islamic works of art are elucidated from three different perspectives: Islamic art organized chronologically and geographically, Islamic art grouped according to material, and Islamic art presented in its cultural context. *Access:*

<http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic>.

- **Islamic Medical Manuscripts at the National Library of Medicine.** This collection maintains approximately 300 digitized Arabic and Persian manuscripts on a variety of medical and related subjects, including alchemy, magic, astrology, natural history, and pharmaceuticals. The Web site is very easy to navigate as a subject index is provided. Moreover, the site excels in providing additional information on medieval Islam, short biographies of the authors or works, glossary of terms, and an excellent bibliography. *Access:* <http://www.nlm.nih.gov/hmd/arabic/arabichome.html>.

- **Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.** The Met's Islamic art collection totals 12,000 items, among which are 712 digitized Islamic manuscripts, many of which are beautiful Qurans. This collection is considered to be one of the finest in the world. The collection is diverse and offers the virtual visitor plenty of opportunities to examine, read, and study a deep and illustrious collection. *Access:* [http://www.metmuseum.org/works\\_of\\_art/collection\\_database/islamic\\_art/listview.aspx?page=1&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=manuscript&fp=1&dd1=14&dd2=0&vw=0](http://www.metmuseum.org/works_of_art/collection_database/islamic_art/listview.aspx?page=1&sort=6&sortdir=asc&keyword=manuscript&fp=1&dd1=14&dd2=0&vw=0).

- **Oriental Digital Collection at the Royal Library in Copenhagen.** The Oriental Digital Collection maintains a nice variety of manuscripts in Arabic and Persian, along with a number of Eastern languages such as Hindi, Tibetan, and Mongolian. The Islamic manuscripts themselves cover a wide variety of subjects, such as the Quran, Islamic jurisprudence, medicine, and natural science. Moreover, there are a few early printed books or lithographs, a rare digital feature, covering similar topics. *Access:* <http://www.kb.dk/en/nb/samling/os/osdigit.html>.

- **The Walters Museum, Baltimore.** The Walters Museum began scanning and digitizing its manuscript collection in 2008. To date there are 58 fully scanned manuscripts. The digital copies are delightful to read and search, as the digital interface is clean and clear to use. One is also able to download

the digitized manuscripts PDF, a wonderful feature that is becoming more common. Moreover, no watermark is attached to the scans, making for a pristine personal copy for those interested. *Access:* <http://art.thewalters.org/viewgallery.aspx?id=1254>.

Finally, one should also peruse the *Poetry and Prayer* virtual exhibition. This exhibition highlights some of the different aspects of a Muslim's life from prayer, recitation, and calligraphy to poetry as well as having digitized many beautiful copies of the Quran. *Access:* <http://poetryprayer.thewalters.org/books/>.

### Associations and miscellanea

- **Archivalia.** Archivalia is a German-language blog that disseminates knowledge on and about (European) print culture and a variety of different digital projects. Although not exclusive to Islamic/Arabic/Persian manuscript studies, it remains an important Web site for the plethora of ongoing digital projects. *Access:* <http://archiv.twoday.net/>.

- **Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies (Comst).** The program, scheduled for the years 2009–14, aims at facilitating crosscultural academic dialogue and active exchange in the field of Oriental manuscript studies with a focus on the Mediterranean and North African cultural areas. So far no such exchange has been conducted systematically on a European level. Standards in all subfields of manuscript studies differ from one study area to another and from one national scholarly tradition to another. Oriental studies are considerably behind Occidental manuscript studies, where, for example, Greek and Latin philology have reached a high standard. *Access:* <http://www1.uni-hamburg.de/COMST/>

- **E-Corpus.** e-corpus is a collective digital library that catalogs and disseminates numerous documents: manuscripts, archives, books, journals, prints, audio recordings,

video, etc. This diverse platform presents cultural diversity worldwide, specifically in the Euro-Mediterranean region. e-corpus proposes a variety of themes and a large quantity of digital documents presented by numerous organizations and countries. Based on cutting-edge technologies, e-corpus offers a simple and direct public access to a rich collection of resources. *Access:* <http://www.e-corpus.org/>.

- **Islamic Calligraphy Qalam: An Introduction to Arabic, Ottoman and Persian Calligraphy.** This wonderful Web site provides the visitor with an immense amount of material in a concise and precise manner. It provides introductory videos on the tools and utensils of this beautiful trade, including how to properly configure the nib of a calligrapher's qalam (calamus), often a reed pen. Furthermore, the Web site provides updates on events and newly digitized Islamic materials from around the world. It is an indispensable resource for both the practitioner and the novice. *Access:* <http://calligraphyqalam.com/index.html>.

- **The Islamic Manuscripts Association (TIMA).** TIMA remains a premiere source for information concerning all aspects of Islamic manuscripts. Their newsletter is published monthly and contains important information on grants, workshops, digital projects, and general information related to the study of Islamic manuscripts. One is also able to search or browse the directory of members, which can be a nice way of getting to know the community. *Access:* <http://www.islamic-manuscript.org/>

In conclusion, the digitization of manuscripts with the advanced technology available is allowing scholars in this field more access than ever before.

### Note

1. Book of Ecclesiastics, 12:12. ❧

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*("Is the library...", cont. from page 411)*

3. Duke University Libraries (2010), Check out what the library offers students writing honors theses, retrieved from <http://library.duke.edu/research/undergraduate/index.html>.

4. Interview questions are available online at <http://library.duke.edu/services/instruction/honors-researchers-study.html> ❧