

Scientific report of the visit to the workshops of COMSt teams 1 and 5

The Oriental Book.

I. The Shaping of the Page, the Scribe and the Illuminator at Work

II. The Making of Oriental Bookbindings and their Conservation

9-13 October 2012

COMSt Team 1 - 3rd international workshop &
COMSt Team 5 - 5th international workshop

Herre de Vries

Location of the workshop and host institution:
Centre de Conservation du Livre,
L'Enclos Saint-Césaire, Impasse des Mourgues
13200 Arles, France



- Short Visit Grant 5281 -

1. Short introduction

From October 2011 until November 2012 I have been contracted by the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana (Vatican Library), together with an Italian conservator Gaia Petrella, for the conservation of 48 Persian and Turkish manuscripts from its collection. The Heydar Aliyev Foundation is funding the project and has also selected the manuscripts based on their importance for the cultural history and identity of Azerbaijan. We were approached to do the project due to our broad experience in conservation but also because of our prior experience with Islamic material.

2. Description of the project

Being chosen on the basis of their contents, the manuscripts within the current project show a wide variety as regards to their state of conservation, some having hardly any damage and others being very heavily damaged. The treatments thus vary from minor intervention to more interventive conservation treatments, even though the project's fundamental principle is one of minimum intervention. In all cases it includes an extensive documentation not alone of the treatment but also of the structure of the bindings and the materials used, thus allowing for a more archaeological approach.

Generally the manuscripts and their bindings can be called 'mundane' or more 'of every day', since they don't possess the luxury which is often seen in the publications on Islamic manuscripts. They contain poetry by many famous Persian and Turkish poets, scientific treatises and religious texts, and date from the late 12th to the early 20th century. Of the volumes registered under 48 shelf marks 46 are actually bound. Two are miscellaneous unbound folia, bifolia and/or quires which in one case have been inserted into an old Islamic cover, and in the other in a temporary Vatican Library paper wrapping. Eighteen of them have been rebound in Western bookbindings, of which five within the Vatican Library itself. The remaining 28 are still in Islamic bindings. The structure of the Islamic bindings, although showing a great variety in detail, is that of the 'typical' Islamic binding, as described by Karin Scheper in her article 'Refining the Classification of Islamic Manuscript Structures' (pp.357-388 in: *New Approaches to Book and Paper Conservation-Restoration*, edited by P. Engel, J. Schirò, R. Larsen, E. Moussakova and I. Kecskeméti, Wien/Horn, 2011).

The Western rebindings all have prior paper repairs, as do many of the Islamic bindings which in several cases indicate they too have been rebound. A distinction can be made between repairs done in the Middle East and the Caucasus, the region of origin of the manuscripts, and those done in the West. This distinction becomes particularly important in the case of the Islamic bindings. On the one hand some of them have Western style repairs on their binding due to which they have lost some original features. On the other hand there are the repairs on the binding telling the story of the care and preservation of these manuscripts in their region of origin.

During our project we have been working on a wide variety of bindings and we have also seen and worked on many different types of earlier paper repair while in both cases assessing their beneficial or detrimental effects to the original manuscripts. Based on this variety of the original material and later repairs, we have developed a methodology of repair with methods and techniques which can be adapted to individual conservation cases.

3. Purpose of the visit

Our project runs until the end of November 2012. In my grant application I wrote that the main aim of my visit to the COMst workshop would be to "seek to root our [Gaia Petrella's and mine] joint observations during this project in a wider and deeper base of knowledge by sharing our experiences with both conservators and codicologists. I expect it to contribute greatly to my knowledge on the subject, so working on similar material again in the future I'll have build a solid base for my approaching the work and making balanced decisions while carrying out conservation treatments."

It has to be added that as conservators we intervene to varying extents in the original objects, in our case Islamic manuscripts. This means that on the one hand we get access to information that other scholars studying the manuscripts don't have. But it also means that we run the risk of obscuring evidence important to the interpretation of the text and to the knowledge of the providence of the manuscript. It is our task to keep the manuscripts physically accessible, but also to make available by means of careful documentation, any additional information we find during our work and any information which might be compromised by our treatment. Exchanging knowledge with other scholars using the manuscripts, is of great importance for conservators to be able to make well-considered decisions. The joint workshops of Team 1 and 5 of COMSt allowed for exchange between all people studying and working with oriental manuscripts and thus helped to create a better understanding of the needs and desires of the different scholarly directions involved in the study of oriental manuscripts.

4. Description of the work carried out during the visit

The first three days the attendants included mostly scholars studying Aramaic Christian-Palestinian, Armenian, Greek, Byzantine, Arabic, Hebrew, Ethiopic, Coptic, Syriac and Slavonic manuscripts. Most of the team 5 members joined the workshop at the third day although several of them had been present also the first two days. Team 5 included conservators working on several of the different types of manuscripts, with an emphasis on Byzantine/Greek and Islamic manuscripts.

The Shaping of the Page, the Scribe and the Illuminator at Work - Team 1, 3rd workshop

Day 1, Tuesday 9 October

Scholars representing the different manuscript studies gave presentations related to their particular area of study in which attention was paid to:
dimension of the page; page lay out; spatial organisation; the ratio between page and text area; the number of columns on the page; various traces indicating how scribes marked the lay out on the blank page prior to writing the actual text; the presence and positioning of images in the text and the particular characteristics of the use of palimpsests.

Something that was stressed during the first presentation of the day, but was underlined later on as well, is the importance of statistical data to be able to draw real conclusions on this subject.

It became clear that some traditions seem to have been more conservative in their conception of page lay out than others, thus the manuscripts retain similar characteristics throughout the centuries. Particular lay out features were linked to the contents of the texts or specific local regions, but to various extents for the different directions though as this needs a lot of study.

The starting point of the manuscript culture for the various scripts is set in different periods in history. Many of those manuscript cultures can be considered to have finished at a certain moment whereas there are some which continue up until today. Ethiopic being the most prominent of the latter type.

The Byzantine and Arabic/Persian manuscript cultures seem to have had the biggest influence on other manuscript cultures around them.

Day 2, Wednesday 10 October

The sessions of the second day were dedicated to the structuring of the contents of the manuscripts, the scribe and illuminator at work and to colophons. The different speakers dealt with the meaning and function of the titles in their respective field; the design of the titles; the purpose of decoration as a navigation system; the cultural significance of particular decorations; the presence of indexes; the presence of figurative and non-figurative decoration; specifics in religious as opposed to secular texts and general developments in the scripts.

The colophons are a particularly important source of contextual information which can put the manuscript in a wider social context. Unfortunately there are many cases where manuscripts don't have a colophon, the colophon is taken out or as pointed out for Slavonic manuscripts might actually be the copy of the manuscript having been copied. And in certain cultures it contains more extensive information than in others. Data that can commonly be found in colophons are: name of the scribe, titles of the scribe, book and act of copying, patrons and clients, religious and/or civil authority, date and place of copying. But also other information can be found, like: reasons for copying, prices, mention of an emperor or historical events. Sometimes they also contain refrains and formulae like prayers and invocations or requests to prayer. It was said that a structural (quantitative) typology of the colophon is still missing. But the presentations make clear how hard it is to do this as in most traditions the colophons seemed to be unruly and therefore not easy to standardize or classify.

We have finished the day with a visit to the host institution, the Centre de Conservation du Livre, and a dinner with all participants of Teams 1 and 5.

Generally the two days made clear that there's a few very important criteria for codicological manuscript research:

1. The use of exactly dated and preferably localised manuscripts
2. The use of manuscripts which have not been impaired too much by previous rebindings and repairs.
3. Look at the rule and not the exception, because it does not prove the rule! So it does not say anything about general practices and visual 'appearance' of the manuscripts.

The History & Archaeology of Oriental Bookbindings - Teams 1 & 5 common day

Day 3, Thursday 11 October

The day started with discussing ways of cross-cooperation and methodology between the different scholarly directions. Particular attention was paid to the necessity of having a common terminology and to which extent current terminologies from the different fields could already serve this purpose. It was very clear there is still a gap to bridge between the terminology of codicologists and that of conservators.

The major part of the day was spent presenting the different structural features of Oriental bookbindings. Going through the boards, the sewing, the headbands, the cover and its

decoration, it became clear how different cultures have influenced each other to sometimes big extents. Notwithstanding this influence clear distinction can be made between bookbindings from one script culture to the other.

Besides the structural elements that distinguish each type of bookbinding, it was explained what information the bindings might carry. Besides manuscript waste being used in lining the book block spine or the making of boards, which carries information which often is not directly accessible, the endpapers might reveal information on previous owners of the books and indications to prior bindings and repair. It seems that the decoration in particular can be very important in dating the bindings. The presentation on Byzantine bindings showed a clearly more advanced stage of research on this field. Even though for the Armenian bindings too there seems to be plenty of conclusive information to aid the dating of bindings.

Finally there were the presentations of the E-corpus and E-ktobe databases of which the last one is specifically dedicated to Syriac manuscripts.

***The Conservation of Oriental Bookbindings - Team 5, 5th workshop
Day 4, Friday 12 October***

This was a very diverse day in which several aspects of the archaeology of bookbinding of the previous day were dealt with again. Several conservation cases, both on the level of individual objects and that of collection care were presented.

My colleague Gaia Petrella and I had the opportunity to open the day with a presentation of the conservation project we have been working on at the Vatican Library over the past year. Drawing from the regular documentation of the Vatican Library and our own additional survey, the main focus of our presentation was on the Islamic rebindings and bindings, since the Western rebindings often have been altered so much they have lost nearly all clues to their previous Islamic structures. We have left aside most of the damage that we have seen and the treatments that we have executed. We mainly focused on the structural, material and visual elements of the books in the previous day's order, to illustrate the wide variety of bindings, the many traces of their handling and of the care taken of them in history. We also presented some of the issues we have had to deal with deciding on proper conservation treatments for the manuscripts: rendering them accessible to the scholars, but saving these historical traces and their original features to the far greatest extent and documenting them as well. The aim of our presentation was to get feedback on the observations we have made during our project.

The detailed presentation on the study of 15th and 16th century Byzantine bindings dealt with problems common in the study of other manuscripts and their bindings as well. The knowledge of past restoration and rebinding practices is limited and fragmented. Some old practices continued for many centuries. So careful and well documented study of the bindings is necessary to deduct whether or not they are contemporary to the manuscript and if so which parts might have been compromised by prior restoration.

This awareness of the problems conservation might cause for the study of the bindings, was reflected in presentations on the care of collections. For instance in the case of the Monastery of Charfet it was decided to first acquire good knowledge of the collection before making any decisions on conservation. The project undertaken there over the past years started with cataloguing the manuscripts, making sure they are stored in a good environment which meant also providing protective housing for single items, to do a conservation treatment limited to

cleaning and putting in order the objects and trying to spread and promote the knowledge of this collection.

Conservation of Oriental Bookbinding - Session organized in cooperation with the STUDITE project
Day 5, Saturday 13 October

Dedicated fully to the study of Byzantine manuscripts and bindings, the last day's session confirmed the earlier impression that this particular direction is very advanced compared to some of the others. Several initiatives part of the STUDITE project were presented. An overview of the past twenty years of research on Byzantine bindings used to define the perspectives for future studies, mainly based on the dating and localising of bindings. Another aspect brought into discussion was the likely relationship between the text inside the binding and its decoration, which should be another field of research.

5. Description of the main results obtained

The workshop was a great opportunity to get informed of the various stages of research for the different script cultures. Some are clearly more advanced than others. It also provided a moment of dialogue between different scholarly directions. This has contributed to my understanding of the different aspects of the manuscripts and their bindings which are studied by them. I have been very happy to engage in and contribute to the moments of discussion. The possibility of getting acquainted with several of the speakers and attendants outside the workshop, created another valuable moment of exchange.

Our own presentation met its purpose to get feedback from scholars and other conservators in the field on the issues raised. Several questions were asked that created discussions, which I have continued with a few people also outside the official programme.

A particular issue raised by us during our presentation, which attracted attention was the repairs to the binding done in the region of origin of the manuscript. We have found a large amount of repairs of which we think they were done in the region of origin of the manuscripts. And quite often they have a high quality. These two aspects combined with the amount of rebinding, have led us to conclude that the Middle East and the Caucasus region have had a rich culture repairing and rebinding their treasured manuscripts. This history should be seen as part of the individual life cycles of each manuscript but also as a testimony to the cultural and social importance of the manuscripts collectively. And this history of care and preservation of manuscripts there deserves to be valued at its own right. Several of the attendants confirmed these observations and conclusions and encouraged us afterwards that this would be something to do additional research on or at least to promote this awareness by further publications and presentations on our project.

6. Projected publications/articles resulting or to result from the grant

My colleague, Gaia Petrella, and I will be contributing an article to the next COMSt Newsletter.

Attending the COMSt workshop has confirmed my idea that it could be interesting to present our project to a wider audience. Therefore I have submitted an abstract for the 2013

conference of The Islamic Manuscript Association in the hope I will be invited to give a presentation there. The aspect I would like to focus on is the meaning of the repairs and rebindings on Islamic manuscripts and their implications for conservation. Although my direct involvement with Islamic manuscripts will finish with the end of the project in the Vatican Library, I hope to turn back to it in the future.