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Report on participation to the Workshop:
“Multiplicity of Oriental Bookmaking Traditions and Conservation”
Zakynthos (Greece), 9-10 October, 2013

Purpose of the visit.

My purpose in attending the Workshop was to gain a better understanding of Islamic bindings, specifically of the bindings of loose folios (as opposed to quire structures). I specifically concentrated on gaining as much information as possible on the bindings of interest to my research on Mughal and Indo-Persian album covers – a territory hitherto virtually unexplored. As mentioned in my Travel Grant Application (Nr 6127), I was approached by Washington D.C.’s Freer Gallery of Art in 2012 to work on two still unpublished Mughal album covers (two lacquered pasteboard panels that were once part of a large, sumptuous binding structure), which they acquired in 1994. These are a rare, indeed unique, example of high court album covers, and the Gallery would be interested in a comprehensive art-historical and structural, “archaeological”, so-to-say, study. The reason I was contacted is I am the only person who has extensively worked on the archaeology of Mughal album pages, using a combination of scientific inquiry and art-historical methods. I am not a binding expert, though. Among the problems still unsolved is the as yet completely unclear relationship between the Freer covers and the album they once sheltered: clearly there had to be a leather spine, and most probably a protective flap on the opposite side (as is typical of all Islamic bindings), but the precise appearance and functionality of the missing parts is as yet unknown. Through this workshop, I was trying to gain a sense of how they may have looked and worked.

Description of the work carried out during the visit.

I attended the Workshop, chairing one session and the ensuing discussion and participating to the latter. One paper in particular attracted my attention: this was a last-minute replacement for a paper that had to be cancelled due to the speaker’s unavailability. In substitution, Karin Scheper of Leiden University Library kindly agreed to present some of unusual and little-known binding structures in her institution’s collection, on which she has been working extensively in preparation for her forthcoming Ph.D. thesis discussion. This was a most fortunate occurrence, as one of the types presented by Scheper has allowed me to figure out a possible structure for the Freer materials I am working on.

Description of the main results obtained.

Among the materials presented by Scheper were some bindings of single-leaf Koran manuscripts from subsaharan Africa. These manuscripts originally consisted of single, unbound sheets encased in (rather than sewed onto) a binding that was then inserted into a leather satchel – the latter being typical also of other African manuscript cultures (including most notably the Ethiopian tradition, covered by COMSt and further discussed by Nikolas Sarris at this same Workshop). But at some later stage, as yet undetermined, the loose sheets were stitched onto the binding in Islamic fashion – only the individual sheets could not be stitched in the same way as quires. Accordingly, the leaves were pierced at two stations, about an inch into the width of the margin, and stitched tightly, so that the manuscripts are consulted with some difficulty because they open at a very narrow angle, unlike “regular” Islamic manuscripts made up of quires, that are stitched in the middle of bifolia.

It was formerly thought that such stitching was the product of late, Western intervention, but Scheper’s extensive research has clarified this is undoubtedly an Islamic type of sewing and binding structure, although the dating is still uncertain (my feeling is it might possibly date from the period of Ottoman control of North Africa, but this hypothesis, we agreed, requires further substantiation).

Scheper’s description of these bindings was of extreme interest to me, as it allows me to formulate a plausible hypothesis on how the binding of the Freer album might have once looked and worked. In fact, many scholars have noted how Mughal albums consistently have a very narrow inner margin, but

have never considered why this might be the case. In Mughal albums, margins were specially created at the time when the individual paintings or calligraphy specimens were assembled in order to turn these heterogeneous materials into a collection whose eventual appearance would be that of a codex. The decoration in Mughal albums is specifically designed to be much narrower in the inner margin than in all the remaining margins, but no scholar to the best of my knowledge has ever wondered why. My current hypothesis after participating in this Workshop is that the individual sheets of Mughal (and Indo-Persian) albums were stitched in the way Scheper illustrated for the case of African manuscripts, resulting in the inner border's being mostly hidden behind the two sewing stations, with the space left to be decorated reduced to a narrow strip. The sheets thus stitched were then sewn onto the binding in the customary "Islamic" way – although there may be regional specificities that I will need to investigate by studying other "regular", quire-based Mughal manuscripts (again this is virtually virgin territory, but Scheper and Paul Hepworth, who both presented papers at this Workshop, may assist in analysing these structures). When the albums were dismembered in the 19th century during British rule (unfortunately not a single Indo-Persian album is known to survive within its binding), the undecorated part with holes pierced through it was excised (it was not appealing to the Western collectors who put the paintings in frames and often destroyed the calligraphy), and only the narrow decorated strip remained. This is a working hypothesis for the moment, but it is absolutely clear that the decoration was never meant to extend beyond that narrow strip – showing that, unlike "regular" manuscripts made of quires, these single-leaf manuscripts were assembled and sewn in a different way. The manner described by Scheper appears the most plausible; and who knows, perhaps some traces of the original holes of the sewing stations might survive in certain pages. Now I know what to look for! This is a real move forward in my project for the Freer Gallery, and will significantly enhance my chances of coming up with a good reconstruction of their album covers.

Future collaboration with host institution and projected publications.

Cambridge Scholarly Publishing has invited the Workshop organisers to publish the proceedings of this Workshop. As the co-convenor of the Workshop, together with Nikolas Sarris (the local host at the TEI of the Ionian Islands), I have agreed to edit them and we are currently negotiating the conditions. We plan to commission some additional papers to further flesh out the publication and raise its academic profile, and if I gather enough material on Mughal covers by then, I might add a contribution discussing my hypotheses on the structure of Mughal album bindings.

I also plan to publish my research on the Freer covers more extensively in peer-reviewed journals at a more developed stage. I have also been invited to contribute to a volume to accompany an exhibition on the Mughal album; the host institution for the exhibition – which involves materials currently hosted in Iran and therefore requires sensitive negotiation – is currently being negotiated, so I am currently unable to further detail the proposal, other than the distinguished scholar Milo C. Beach will be the volume's editor.