

International Memory of the World Register

The National Library of Egypt's Collection of Mamluk Qur'an Manuscripts (Egypt)

2012-47

1.0 Summary (max 200 words)

The National Library of Egypt (Dar al-Kutub al-Misriya) possesses a unique and extremely important corpus of one hundred and forty Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts and bindings that can be securely dated to the Mamluk period (1250-1517 CE) by colophons and endowment and dedicatory statements. During this time, Cairo became the cultural, religious, and intellectual centre of the Islamic world. Extensive building activity took place under the patronage of the Mamluk sultans and military and civilian elite, who founded institutions including mosques, mausolea, madrasas, saints' shrines, Sufi lodges, and hospitals, often grouped together to form a single complex including a library. These patrons endowed Qur'an and other manuscripts to these institutions for teaching and study purposes and also commissioned manuscripts for their private libraries. The Mamluk Qur'an manuscript collection of the National Library of Egypt is of national and global importance: it is the largest in the world; the manuscripts are almost unmatched for splendour, opulence, and size in the history of the Islamic arts of the book; and they are key to our understanding of developments in Islamic calligraphy, illumination, and bookbinding not only in Mamluk Egypt but throughout the Islamic world.

2.1 Name of nominator (person or organization)

The Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation is a non-profit academic organisation that was founded to support and advance the protection, preservation, and study of the Islamic intellectual and artistic heritage. It specialises in scholarly publishing, fine book design, and the care and management of manuscript collections. For additional information about the Foundation's projects, please visit its website: www.thesaurus-islamicus.org.

2.2 Relationship to the nominated documentary heritage

In 2005, the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation signed an agreement with the National Library of Egypt (Dar al-Kutub al-Misriya) to assist it with the preservation, conservation, curation, and cataloguing of its manuscript collection, formally establishing the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation and Dar al-Kutub Manuscript Project. The Project is currently cataloguing the National Library's collection of Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts.

2.3 Contact person(s)

Mr R. B. Davidson MacLaren
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2.4 Contact details

Name

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3.0 Identity and description of the documentary heritage

3.1 Name and identification details of the items being nominated

The National Library of Egypt's Collection of Mamluk Qur'an Manuscripts

National Library of Egypt
Corniche El-Nile
Ramlat Boulaq
Cairo
Egypt
Tel. and Fax: +20 (0)2 2574 5135
Website: www.darelkotob.gov.eg

3.2 Catalogue or registration details

There is no catalogue of the National Library of Egypt's collection of Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts; however, the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation and Dar al-Kutub Manuscript Project is currently cataloguing the collection. Its cataloguers have identified one hundred and forty Qur'an manuscripts that can be securely dated to the Mamluk period (1250-1517 CE) by colophons and endowment and dedicatory statements. The earliest Mamluk Qur'an manuscript (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 4) contains an endowment statement in the name of Sultan al-Nasir Nasir al-Din Muhammad (r. 1293-1294, 1299-1309, and 1310-1341 CE), dated 1335 CE. The latest Mamluk Qur'an manuscript (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 73) – which retains its original binding – was copied for Sultan al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri (r. 1501-1516 CE) by Ahmad bin 'Ali al-Fayyumi in 1502 CE.

The collection is extremely important for many reasons. First, it contains sixteen large format single-volume or double-volume Qur'an manuscripts whose measurements range from 50 x 73 cm to 94 x 112 cm. All of these were copied for individual sultans and were endowed to institutions in their names. The largest Qur'an manuscript (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 19) was written for the Mamluk sultan al-Ashraf Qaytbay (r. 1468-1496 CE) in 1468 CE by Janmur al-Sayfi Janibak al-Dawadar al-Kabir. No other collection contains this many Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts of similar size.

Second, the collection contains twenty-nine multi-volume Qur'an manuscripts (*rab'a*) most of which are complete: that is, they comprise thirty volumes each. This stands in contrast to other collections, which often only contain one volume from a series. Several of these multi-volume Qur'an manuscripts are early examples dating from or dateable to the middle of the fourteenth century CE (shelfmarks Masahif Rasid, 62, 70, and 82).

Third, most of the Qur'an manuscripts are lavishly illuminated and form a very important corpus of material documenting the development of Qur'an illumination. Notably, the collection contains many late Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts made for the sultans al-Zahir Sayf al-Din Barquq, al-Ashraf Sayf al-Din Barsbay, al-Ashraf Qaytbay, and al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri. Very few late Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts are found in other collections.

Fourth, the collection also includes superb examples of Arabic calligraphy. The Mamluk era was especially important for the development of the *muhawraq* and *rayhani* scripts. The names of several well-known calligraphers from this period appear in the Qur'an manuscripts. Among these are Ahmad ibn Kamal ibn Yahya al-Ansari al-Mutabbib (shelfmarks Masahif Rasid 81, 184, and 714); Ya'qub ibn Khalid ibn Muhammad ibn 'Abd al-Rahman al-Hanafi (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 8), Khattab bin 'Amr al-Danjawi (shelfmarks Masahif Rasid 126 and 55), Muhammad al-Mukattib al-Shihabi (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 15), 'Ali ibn Muhammad al-Mukattib al-Ashrafi (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 10), and Ibn Sa'igh (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 11).

Fifth, twenty-five of the Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts retain their original bindings and, in some cases, their original sewing. The collection demonstrates the development of Mamluk bookbinding methods and decoration, including both the possible influence of Coptic bookbinding techniques and the use of blue pigments in addition to gold in the decoration of covers. Among the rare bindings in the collection is a multi-volume Qur'an manuscript with filigree leatherwork on a textile background (shelfmark Masahif Rasid 104).

3.4 History/provenance

The National Library of Egypt was founded in 1870 CE as the Khedival Library by decree of Khedive Isma'il. The same decree authorised 'Ali Pasha Mubarak, the minister of public works and education, to incorporate into the Library the manuscripts that the Mamluk sultans and military and civilian elite had endowed to institutions including mosques, mausolea, madrasas, saints' shrines, Sufi lodges, and hospitals. These included Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts.

4.0 Legal information

4.1 Owner of the documentary heritage (name and contact details)

Name

National Library of Egypt

Address

Corniche El-Nilee, Ramlat Boulaq,
Cairo, Egypt

Telephone

+20 (0)2 2574 5135

Facsimile

+20 (0)2 2574 5135

Email

www.darelkotob.gov.eg

4.2 Custodian of the documentary heritage (name and contact details if different from the owner)

Name

Address

Telephone

Facsimile

Email

4.3 Legal status

Provide details of legal and administrative responsibility for the preservation of the documentary heritage

The National Library of Egypt is legally and administratively responsible for the nominated documentary heritage.

4.4 Accessibility

Describe how the item(s) / collection may be accessed

Access to the manuscripts is restricted for conservation reasons; however, the majority of the Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts have been microfilmed (on black-and-white film), and these microfilms have

recently been converted to digital images that may be viewed at the National Library or purchased on CD-ROM. Readers who wish to consult the actual manuscripts must apply for permission in writing, demonstrate a genuine need to examine the manuscripts, and provide a written letter of recommendation from an academic colleague, tutor, or other appropriate person.

Currently, a new 'object-centred' imaging laboratory for manuscripts is being built at the National Library with the assistance of the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation and the Centre of Digital Excellence/Centre for Heritage Imaging and Collection Care at the John Rylands University Library, University of Manchester. This laboratory will be supplied with the highest specification equipment and work towards best practice in digitisation in collaboration with the National Library's conservation department. The Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts will be among the first manuscripts digitised in this new laboratory; and the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation's conservators, in cooperation with conservators from the National Library, have already completed a pre-digitisation conservation assessment form for every Mamluk Qur'an manuscript.

Lastly, selected Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts are on exhibition at the National Library's Bab al-Khalq premises.

4.5 Copyright status

Describe the copyright status of the item(s) / collection

The National Library of Egypt holds the copyright for the nominated documentary heritage.

5.0 Assessment against the selection criteria

5.1 Authenticity.

The identity and provenance of the documentary heritage has been reliably established. The National Library of Egypt was founded in 1870 CE as the Khedival Library by decree of Khedive Isma'il. The same decree authorised 'Ali Pasha Mubarak, the minister of public works and education, to incorporate into the Library the manuscripts that the Mamluk sultans and military and civilian elite had endowed to institutions including mosques, mausolea, madrasas, saints' shrines, Sufi lodges, and hospitals. The majority of the Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts contain inscriptions that indicate the provenance of the manuscript, the name of the patron, and often the names of the calligrapher and illuminator, and the date of copying. They also include owners' and library seals. Scholars that have studied the collection have not raised any doubts about its provenance or authenticity.

5.2 World significance

The National Library of Egypt's collection of Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts is of world significance, unique, and irreplaceable. Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts are almost unmatched for splendour, opulence, and size in the history of the Islamic arts of the book; and they are key to our understanding of developments in Islamic calligraphy, illumination, and bookbinding not only in Mamluk Egypt but throughout the Islamic world. They have also inspired artists and designers around the globe including Owen Jones and Prisse d'Avennes.

The National Library possesses the world's largest collection of Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts and many, arguably most, of the world's finest examples. Additionally, the cataloguing completed thus far by the Thesaurus Islamicus Foundation and Dar al-Kutub Manuscript Project shows that many of the National Library's Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts preserve their original bindings and structures, unlike most Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts in European and Turkish collections. Consequently, their study will make an invaluable contribution to scholarship on Islamic manuscript production. The proper conservation of this unique collection is enormously important, and the loss or damage of this collection would be a catastrophe.

5.3 Comparative criteria:

Does the heritage meet any of the following tests? (It must meet at least one of them.)

1 Time

The collection spans the entire Mamluk period: from the fourteenth to the sixteenth centuries CE. During this period, Cairo became the cultural, religious, and intellectual centre of the Islamic world; and the Mamluks were great patrons of the Islamic arts of the book. The collection provides important – and unpublished – documentary evidence that is key to our understanding of developments in Islamic calligraphy, illumination, and bookbinding not only in Mamluk Egypt but throughout the Islamic world.

2 Place

Most of these Qur'an manuscripts were produced in Cairo for named patrons and were endowed to important institutions of the period, many of which have survived until today as world-class architectural monuments. Accordingly, these manuscripts are part of the urban history of Cairo.

3 People

The collection contains a large number of Qur'an manuscripts that were copied for Mamluk sultans and members of the Mamluk military and civilian elite. The production of these manuscripts involved persons from all strata of society, including tanners, papermakers, calligraphers, illuminators, religious scholars, and, of course, royal patrons. A select list of these patrons and the shelfmarks of the Qur'an manuscripts that they commissioned is given below.

Mamluk Sultans

1. al-Nasir Nasir al-Din Muhammad (r. 1293-1294, 1299-1309, and 1310-1341 CE): Masahif Rasid 4
2. al-Nasir Nasir al-Din Hasan (r. 1347-1351 and 1354-1361 CE): Masahif Rasid 82
3. al-Ashraf Zayn al-Din Sha'ban (r. 1363-1377 CE): Masahif Rasid, 6, 7, 8, 10, and 80
4. al-Zahir Sayf al-Din Barquq (r. 1382-1389 and 1390-1399): Masahif Rasid 11, 12, 13, 75, 76, 77, 78, 120, 121, 122, 123, 124, 125, and 133
5. al-Nasir Zayn al-Din Faraj (r. 1399-Sep. 1405 and Nov. 1405-1412 CE): Masahif Rasid 74, 152, and 153
6. al-Mu'ayyad Sayf al-Din Shaykh (r. 1412-1421 CE): Masahif Rasid 16 and 17
7. al-Ashraf Sayf al-Din Barsbay (r. 1422-1438 CE): Masahif Rasid 18, 89, 92, 93, 94, 95, 98, 99, 105, 107, and 108
8. al-Zahir Sayf al-Din Khushqadam (r. 1461-1467 CE): Masahif Rasid 90 and 104
9. al-Ashraf Qaytbay (r. 1468-1496 CE): Masahif Rasid 19, 86, 87, 88, 126, and 425
10. al-Ashraf Qansuh al-Ghawri (r. 1501-1516 CE): Masahif Rasid 73, 151, and 249

Mamluk Amirs

1. Amir al-Sayfi Sarghitmish (d. 1358 CE): Masahif Rasid 15, 60, 147, 148, 149, and 150
2. Amir Uljay al-Yusufi (d. 1373 CE): Masahif!Rasid 14
3. Amir Qijmas al-Ishaqi (d. 1487 CE): Masahif!Rasid 70 and 71

4 Subject and theme

All the manuscripts under consideration are Qur'ans copied during the Mamluk period. As such, the written content is well-established.

5 Form and style

As mentioned previously, Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts are almost unmatched for splendour, opulence, and size in the history of the Islamic arts of the book. The manuscripts contain full-page illuminations along with illuminated chapter (*sura*) headings, and verse (*aya*) markers. These are composed of complex geometric designs and intricate arabesques including flowers and palmettes in a varied palette of gold and pigments such as lapis lazuli, malachite, and minium. The text is usually written with black ink; additionally, gold, blue, green, and red pigments were used.

6 Social/ spiritual/ community significance:

Writing and illuminating a Qur'an manuscript was, and still is, considered a devotional act, and the Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts in the National Library are a testament to the peaks that this tradition has reached. Muslims must treat the written text of the Qur'an with reverence, and the Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts on exhibit at the National Library are the gallery's main attraction.

6.0 Contextual information

6.1

Rarity

Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts are extremely rare. There are only a small number located in collections other than the National Library of Egypt's. Furthermore, each manuscript is an individual handmade object and is unique and irreplaceable.

6.2

Integrity

Most of the Mamluk Qur'an manuscripts in the National Library's collection are complete and in stable condition, but are in need of various amounts of conservation.
