



The Centre for the Study of Manuscript Cultures (CSMC)

announces a Lecture

by

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Practice Precedes Theory. The Example of the Mamluk Qur'an Manuscripts.

It is a wide-spread mistake that if you wish to research a certain subject, the only way is to start with reading what others have written about it, then start writing yourself. There also is, on the other hand, the open mind, unfettered by any theoretical approach and uninfluenced by any set of experiences formulated by others, that brings us new perspectives. This is especially valid in a field that still needs pioneering research of many crucial aspects. Of course, earlier secondary literature plays a role in the final result, but not necessarily from the beginning. One cannot begin from scratch.

I had to think of this mindset, that since a long time I have developed for myself by trial and error, when I was asked, now some seven years ago, to write a book about the Qur'anic manuscripts of the Mamluk period (1250-1517), taking the hardly explored collection in the Egyptian National Library as a point of departure. That collection was brought together in the early 1880's when mosque libraries were transferred to the newly founded National Library. It is probably the largest such collection in existence, and paradoxically, the least researched.

At the time, I had no idea what I was beginning. Yet, I had no intention to create a theoretical framework on the basis of what others had written about the subject, nor to fit into such a framework the data that I would collect from the manuscripts. I just started looking at the manuscripts themselves, and wrote down what I was observing. Theory could wait. I have been making such notes now for several years, and my many hundreds of pages of observations are far from homogeneous. In the years of my work on the Mamluk Qur'ans I have, of course, learned a lot, even if from the beginning of my work I was far from unexperienced. The continuous growth of my knowledge of my study material reflects this lack of homogeneity in my working notes.

The Mamluk Qur'ans that I have intimately seen in the past few years are an interesting cross-section of Mamluk book production. There are a few extra-ordinary copies, the rest is run of the Mamluk mill. These Qur'ans show numerous features that also can be discovered in non-Qur'anic manuscripts. In addition to that, the production of Masahif has had its own requirements, which made it different from the production of the rest of books. One of these differences is caused by the mass production of the same text, for which the workshops of Qur'anic manuscripts in the Mamluk period have been developing special techniques. My lecture focusses on a number of these newly developed techniques of manufacture, that were all empirically observed in actual manuscripts. In the end I may even come up with a theory or two.

Thursday, 14 December 2017 at 6 pm

Room 0001, CSMC