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Refining the Classification of Islamic Manuscript Structures

Abstract

In line with developments in Western book science, literature on Islamic manuscripts has gradually widened its scope from studies about the textual and intellectual content to publications concerning the design and ornamentation of calligraphy and binding decoration. The awareness that a manuscript also carries information beyond its text, that the structures and materials used can reveal valuable data about the historical context of a particular manuscript is rather new. However, contrary to the book archeology of Western binding structure, the archeology of Islamic manuscripts is still in its initial phase.

This paper focuses on that aspect of Islamic manuscripts. First it summarizes how Islamic binding is traditionally described and perceived – as a case binding structure. Then the inappropriateness of that term is considered. The rest of this paper is concerned with the evidence for more variations that has recently come to light during conservation and preservation treatments on Islamic manuscripts in the Leiden University Library (Universiteitsbibliotheek Leiden, UBL). This work offered the opportunity to investigate the structures more closely, and a recently carried out *structure and composition survey* served to substantiate these new insights. Although this paper does not provide detailed results from the survey, suggestions are given for broader classification and the findings are illustrated with examples from the University's collection.

Better knowledge of the distinctive varieties in construction type and materials in relation to the origin of the manuscripts could be of great use to codicology, provenance research and research in the field of manuscript trade or manufacture in general. For conservators working with such manuscripts, a sound knowledge of their production is essential. It is the only way they can assure accurate documentation and well-considered intervention. A thorough understanding of the differences

in structures and the importance of such characteristics is essential for the preservation of binding elements, which may help to classify manuscripts and at least give access to all information they contain, including non-textual.