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### **The World of the Islamic Manuscripts database: a prerequisite for writing the Muslim history of science with emphasis on Abdul Hossein Haeri's viewpoints**

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#### ***Abstract***

*From very early times on the written word has played an important role in Iran. The number of Arabic manuscripts in the world exceeds three million. Scholars and bibliographers have catalogued these manuscript sources and made them accessible to other scholars. However, there are still many uncatalogued or wrongly catalogued manuscripts. In order to write a comprehensive history of science, the written heritage of past generations should be identified and revived. Prof. Abdul Hossein Haeri wrote: "Subtle and true cataloguing of manuscripts is the main element of self-identification and an introduction to the subtle writing of Muslims' Science history." The lack of comprehensive knowledge about Islam science can only be dissolved by exploring and studying all available copies of all manuscripts. This can only be done by establishing a big center for collecting duplicates of all manuscripts of Islamic and Iranian civilization from around the world. The Parliamentary Library, Museum and Documentation Center of Iran tries to pave the way to achieve this important goal.*

#### ***Significance of Inherited Writings for Iranians and Muslims***

The history of man, according to prevalent ideas, starts with writing. Although archeology, dealing with the pre-historical period, has made a lot of headway in discovering important aspects of group development in its primitive stage, still, it is only through written sources that the writer of history is able to decipher the intelligence and internal feelings of past

generations. In spite of the other available sources for evaluating past generations, still, written speech acts as the major source<sup>1</sup>.

There are authentic documents from the days of scientific, cultural and intellectual growth in Iran civilization. These perfect documents indicate creativity and perfectness of Iranian and Muslim scholars with regard to science, religion and ethics during the time that ignorance and superstition had engulfed many other parts of the world<sup>2</sup>. About 5000 BC, when the first public library established in Greece started collecting mythological books, in Fars City in Iran a palace was built for keeping the book “Avesta”, which was written on 16000 cow skins with gold liquid<sup>3</sup>.

Regarding the history of science in Iran, we can use reports of Avesta received found in Iranian national stories and works of authors such as “Herodote”, but the real growth of civilization and culture in Iran was before the Sassanids dynasty (226-652 BC). The results of studies in this period show the Iranians’ development in some fields such as logic, astronomy, medicine, pharmacology, philosophy, the study of nature and speech. “Jondi Sapur” University was one of the landmarks of this period<sup>4</sup>. But Islamic civilization, which was born with the emergence of the holy Quran as a miracle, unlike Greek civilization, which was governed by dialogue and speech, was governed by writing and books. Especially by establishing universities like Beit al-Hekma, transcribing, translating and book making arts prospered rapidly and widely<sup>5</sup>.

Thomas Erpinus, a professor of Arabic language at Leiden University in the 17<sup>th</sup> century in the Netherlands, in one of his speeches stated: “Muslims came to study and learn in those days there were some universities which were more valid and outstanding than the other ones in the world. Muslims would acquire science, would add to it, would interpret and improve it and then assign it to the successors. Accordingly, they translated all the works from ancient age and Europeans into Arab language; not only did they translate works of Egyptians, Persians, and Kaldanains, but they also translated Latin and Greek works. That is why, today, such works still exist in the Arabic language although major manuscripts of some of them, due to time, events, and ignorance of the people have been destroyed. Moreover they created some works and resources in other fields<sup>6</sup>.”

In this way, all over the Islamic world written language has played a crucial role in forming religious, philosophical, and mental attitudes. They always appreciated manuscripts and authors<sup>7</sup>.

It is safe to say that Islamic countries’ written works are unmatched in the world. According to the results of the studies done in this field, the number of Arabic manuscripts in the world exceeds three million<sup>8</sup>.

### ***Transfer of Islamic manuscripts to the West***

For many years it is said that Western people have transferred some major parts of the cultural inheritance of the Islamic world. However we should ask, “ Why, how and for what reason have these manuscripts and printed books been taken to Western Europe and North America?” What has brought about the collection of these great works in different cities like London, Paris, Milan and Los Angeles? Who are the people who have isolated these works from their origin and motherland and taken it to the West? We can find the appropriate answer to the some of the questions mentioned above in Stephen Roman’s book entitled, *The Development of Islamic Library Collections in Western Europe and North America*. This

book covers and reviews some valuable works only in ten countries: Canada, Denmark, France, Germany, Great Britain, Ireland, Italy, the Vatican, the Netherlands, Spain and the United States. It reviews the reasons for the formation of the relation between Islamic and European society<sup>9</sup>.

Stephan Roman remarks in this book: “These manuscripts offered significant insights to the Europeans about the Muslims’ rational experiences and, approximately for the first time the western highbrows had the opportunity to learn about Islam and, the Muslims’ discoveries in the fields of medicine, philosophy, historiography, sciences and literature. Therefore the collections which have been provided in Western Europe and Northern America, are the basis for relation between east and west<sup>10</sup>.”

“These collections consist of manuscripts and printed texts, however, they also make us know that: they are the outcomes of the lives which have been devoted to work, journey, and, study in Islamic countries. In western libraries, there are manuscripts, which are provided by scholars, soldiers, trades-people, evangelists, managers, mass traders and tourists. These individuals have had done it for variant motivations and reasons<sup>11</sup>.”

### ***Revising the Catalogs of Manuscripts***

Islamic bibliographers, text scholars, and scientists have attempted too much to enlist the latent manuscript sources in the libraries, and to make them accessible. Pioneers like Ibn Nadim, Kateb Chalabi, and Safadi on the one hand, and some of the orientalist like Bluche, Rio, Pierson, Arbri, Story, Sezgin, and Brokelmann, on the other hand, and in Iran some contemporary bibliographers like Sheick Agha Bozorg Tehrani, Mohammad taghi Danesh Pajoo, Iraj Afshar, Ahmad Monzavi, and Abdu Hossein Haeri have devoted many years of their lives in the libraries for introducing and cataloging of the books, and have made accessible the outcome of lives in the framework of manuscripts catalogues and variant bibliographies for other scholars.

However, it is a pity that there are still Iranian and Islamic manuscripts in the variants libraries, which the scholars and the ones who are interested in them have no access to their catalogues, and for the catalogued manuscripts, probably, there are errors, because the western bibliographers have not been acquainted with the context of the texts which have no titles, authors’ names, or date<sup>13</sup>.

On the other hand, inspecting the appearance of the manuscripts (Codicology) is among the sciences in which westerns have more skill than Muslims<sup>14</sup>. Nevertheless, Professor Haeri believes that the bibliography, which comprises “identifying the title, the subject of the work, the author’s name and his period”, are the most important elements of manuscript cataloguing. This is an emphasis on the truthfulness of the main identifying manuscript. However, investigating other aspects of this field was not ignored by most of Iranian cataloguers and to some extent they have proved it both theoretically and practically<sup>15</sup>.

That is to mention, all the printed catalogues in Iran are supposed to be computer based through a comprehensive project. This project has partly been done for the libraries of Tehran by the Index Maker Institute, and it is going to be applied to the other libraries.

### ***Compilation of the Science History and the Bases of Manuscript Catalogues***

Apart from the cataloguing process itself, professor Haeri believes that the ultimate goal of cataloguing is not merely identification of the manuscripts, but according to a theory registered under his name in Iran “subtle and true cataloguing of manuscripts is the main element of self-identification and an introduction to the subtle writing of Muslims’ Science history”. In the foreword of the second volume of the *Catalogue of the Senate Library of Iran* which was written by Professor Haeri and printed in 1980, he states: “I have always felt most regretfully that cataloguing, bibliography of manuscripts which are the largest sources and documents of culture heritage of Islamic civilization, have fallen behind their main goals and far from their real intentions and main outcomes, have changed into a job framework for earning life. If we pay attention to this point that the main element of Muslims’ backwardness and feeling of urgent need to the advanced west countries, we can see that self-ignorance has engaged them and its main reason lies in their unawareness about huge and unique ideological heritage, advanced ideas, and brilliant endeavors of Muslims during last centuries which have created unconscious and sometimes conscious belief in Muslim’s minds, both educated and uneducated that “all to happen is in west and there is nothing in Muslim east”.

Professor Haeri, concludes, “All the devoted and Muslim expert in scientist should start a new effort to identify and investigate works and ideas of Islamic scientists and should educate some talented and devoted people for learning about this field. In accordance, obliged to reconsider history of science and arrange it based on the real and truly investigated documents and distribute it throughout the world especially among groups of young people<sup>16</sup> .

Professor Haeri’s theory about “rewriting the science history on the basis of re-identifying manuscripts,” shows this minute point that whatever has been written about science history in Islamic civilization is composed of foreigners’ works of uninvestigative imitation of some Muslims, and we should know that factors like lack of a comprehensive knowledge about Islamic science and most often prejudices have caused the deficiency of those books, so that many of Muslims’ honors for the inventions and discoveries have been ignored in science history books or even unfairly attributed to others<sup>17</sup> .

Of course, compilation and rewriting of catalogues will not only help to complete science history of Muslims but also will improve science history of the world. Thomas Erpenius whose name was mentioned earlier says, “I possess some subtle and reliable history books of Muslims with which, if time allows, we can make clear some dark aspects of history of holy book, Greek history, and history of Latin countries<sup>18</sup> .

When I asked Dr. Rushdi Rashed, the chairman of the west philosophy and science history centre and assistant of the international academy of history of science, about Professor Haeri’s theory he answered: “the role of identifying of manuscripts in compilation of science history is fundamental because without consulting the manuscripts, compilation of science history is impossible. Something that really matters today is exploration and investigation about manuscripts, that is scientific, ideological and subtle investigation to achieve to this moment goal. Investigation should be done on all available copies of any title and not one unique copy<sup>19</sup> .

By the way, how it is possible to achieve this goal?

To do this task is impossible unless we possess the original or duplicate copy of all the scattered copies of every work in the libraries of the world. How can we edit catalogues without seeing the original or duplicate of the introduced copies of manuscripts? How can we

make sure about the identity of the work or unknown author without access to the other work(s) of that writer?

In this case, Wilfred Madlong writes, “for every aspects of Islamic civilization, historian often understands his position with a feeling of deep inability, because he is aware of the rich, huge and potential sources of manuscripts, but this sources are scattered and often not in his access... . Therefore Islamic historians should start organized continuous efforts collecting and measuring scattered wealth of Islamic handwrittens, so that the sources would be available for the investigators and editors and publish invaluable texts with critical editions<sup>20</sup> .

### ***Organizing a Comprehensive Database of Manuscripts***

It seems that having access to these sources is possible only through rational interaction among libraries possessing these copies. Meanwhile, to whatever extent that libraries cooperate with each other to offer duplicates, slow service makes it difficult to identify the written heritage of the last generations, and postpones compiling of a comprehensive science history. Professor Haeri’s ideal solution of this problem is to establish a big center for collecting duplicates of all the manuscripts of Islamic and Iranian civilization from around the world, and to organize the information about these sources by using the latest techniques. This would be a center like but more complete than the center of manuscripts duplicates (Ma’had al-Makhtutat), which was established with the assistance of UNESCO in Egypt<sup>21</sup> .

The benefits of such a center are to compile science history, to carry out critical editing, and to prevent destruction of a part of global memory which is exposed to many events like the Istanbul earthquake in August 1999<sup>22</sup>, the recent earthquakes in Iran, twenty years of war in Afghanistan, and the plundering of the Iraq National Museum after the annihilation of the Saddam government<sup>23</sup> .

### ***Iran’s Effort to Collect Duplicates of Manuscripts***

In Iran some invaluable actions have been taken for collecting duplicates of scattered manuscripts in the world. Some examples are collecting the duplicates of important Islamic manuscripts of the world at the University of Tehran by the late Mojtaba Minavi, the Noor Microfilm Center effort for collecting duplicate manuscripts available in the libraries of India, the effort of centers such as the Ayatollah Mar’ashi Library in Qum, the Publishing Center of Written Heritage (Mirath Maktub) in Tehran, the Institute for Studying for Medical History and Islamic Medicine, and the Center of Islamic Heritage Revival (Markaz Ehya Mitrath Maktub) in Qum for collecting duplicates of manuscripts in paper form, microfilms and CD Rom’s.

But all of these seem trivial in comparison with Professor Haeri’s proposal for providing duplicates of manuscripts related to Islamic and Iranian civilization available in libraries throughout the world and in personal collections in all languages and subjects. Even in the national programs that have been organized in Iran, this project has not been paid attention to up until now. In the first project of comprehensive databases for Iran which was proposed by the Scientific Documents and Information Center of Iran in 1994, only providing a database of available manuscripts in Iran was paid attention to<sup>24</sup> . This partly improved the national program of information and “providing duplicates or microfilms of Iran’s manuscripts”, that

are kept in libraries in foreign countries was also taken into account<sup>25</sup>. This was another step closer to Professor Haeri's ideal, but it is not enough.

The Parliamentary Library, Museum and Documentation Center of Iran, by holding and participating in specialized conferences about manuscripts and by publishing the only journal in Iran for Islamic manuscript research (Name-ye Baharestan), tries to pave the way for authorities and those interested in this field, especially Professor Haeri, who has been engaged here in this library for more than half a century in identifying and cataloguing manuscripts.

Finally, let me conclude my paper with a statement by Professor Haeri which I suggest could be the theme for the next or other coming years of Rare Books and Manuscripts Section sessions, that is: “ **In order to compile the history of Science, the written heritage of past generations should be identified and revived**<sup>26</sup> ”.

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