

Chantry Library Bibliographies:

No 4: Survey of Islamic Slipcases: A Preliminary Study by David Plummer



University of Leiden Library, Or.14.204.A. An Islamic slipcase covered with block-printed paper.

David Plummer graduated with a Post Graduate Diploma in Conservation of Books and Library Materials from West Dean College in 2019, thanks to the support of the Anna Plowden Trust and the Worshipful Company of Arts Scholars West Dean Conservation Award. In 2018, he was awarded the Zibby Garnett Fellowship, for a placement in the conservation workshop of the University of Leiden Library. During his placement, Plummer worked on the 'Digitisation Project of Yemini Manuscripts', a joint project by the Institute for Advanced Study in partnership with the Hill Museum & Manuscript Library in Minnesota under the tutelage of Dr Karin Scheper. In 2019, Plummer was awarded the Icon Book and Paper Group's Frederick Bearman Research Grant, for his study on the characteristics and conservation issues of Islamic slipcasses. He is currently working at the Archdiocese of Malta as a book conservator.

Introduction

Islamic slipcasses have not received as much attention as the manuscripts they protect. This is partly due to the fact that existing hand lists and catalogues for Islamic bindings in the Middle Eastern collections in Europe would not be of much assistance in identifying manuscripts with slipcasses. Most of them contain brief entries that do not cover all material aspects of the objects, and slipcasses are often not mentioned. Nonetheless, there are a few important late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century engravings which illustrate the physical characteristics and making of these objects. Aside from these early illustrations, much of the available literature only reiterates the same basic description of a protective box-like system for storage of manuscripts. More recent research has

provided some important insight into the modes of covering and the historic relation of a slipcase with a specific manuscript. This information is important for the preservation of these artefacts, which is why it merits further investigation. The bibliography below was crucial to conducting a survey on the characteristics and conservation issues of Islamic slipcases in the Middle Eastern collections at the University of Leiden Library, John Rylands Library, Berlin State Library, Cambridge University Library, and the Gazi Husrez-beg Library.

Books

Déroche, F. *Islamic Codicology: An Introduction to the Study of Manuscripts in Arabic Script*. London: Al-Furqan Publications, 2005.

Déroche provides an in-depth study of the codicology of Islamic manuscripts, as well as a brief introduction to the various materials used for Islamic slipcases. Although he does not explain the actual construction of these components, his work provides the most systematic introduction to protective enclosures in the Islamic tradition, as well as providing a better understanding of which type of books these protective enclosures were made for. Déroche's work is well-referenced and is an indispensable research aide to art historians, historians and book and paper conservators of Islamic materials.

Gacek, A. *Arabic Manuscripts: A Vademecum for Readers*. Leiden: Brill, 2009.

This reference book includes information from both historic sources and contemporary research. Gacek describes three types of slipcases: first with a flap tucked inside, second with a flap on the outside and tied with a strap, and third with two flaps. It is an interesting approach, however, there are difficulties with this classification system as it only distinguishes between slipcases based on the position of the flap and does not take into consideration materials and manufacture specific to a slipcase. With respect to terminology, Gacek's research is noteworthy because it gives the different Arabic terms for protective enclosures, which is essential for future research and identifying protective items made for books.

Lane, E. W. *An Account of the Manners and Customs of the Modern Egyptians*. Vol. 2. London: C. Knight and Co, 1836.

In his work, Lane includes an illustration of writing materials which shows Islamic slipcases. Lane's engraving is interesting as it is the earliest illustration that I have found which shows a piece of leather attached to the insert flap of the enclosure. This assisted in pulling the insert flap out of the slipcase before removing the manuscript. Clearly, this method was a quick and cheap technique to attach a lifting strap. Lane's work highlights that we lack an overview of what types exist, whether they can be related to times or regional practices, and what their precise material characteristics are.

Michaud, J. F. *Correspondance d'Orient 1830-1831*. Vol. 2. Paris: Ducollet, 1833.

A French author, Joseph François Michaud writing in 1833, published his observations on the libraries of Istanbul. His work did not, unfortunately, include remarks on the structure and materials of Islamic slipcases. Nevertheless, Michaud notes the utilitarian function of Islamic slipcases which 'preserve [the books] from dust and from worms which make more damage in this country than from anywhere else'. This remark is important and reflects the fact that slipcases act as a protective box-like system for storage of Islamic manuscripts.

d' Ohsson, I. M. *Tableau Général de l'Empire Othoman*. Vol. 1. Paris: De l'imprimerie de Monsieur, 1790. Plate 39.

The earliest illustration of an Islamic slipcase I have found is in a magnificent Western engraving which shows Islamic books and slipcases in an Ottoman library interior. This is found at Plate 39 of this late-eighteenth century work by Ignatius Mouradgea d'Ohsson, an Armenian dragoman in the services of Sweden, 1740-1807. Given the non-professional interest of d'Ohsson in bookbinding, it is not surprising that Islamic slipcases are not discussed within the text. However, the engraving illustrates the flaps that roughly correspond in shape to the fore-edge flap and envelope flap on the manuscript binding, the pull-up tape for removing the manuscripts from the slipcase, and the folds in the edges of the slipcase. Although it is difficult to judge the reliability of this engraving, the number of slipcases in this illustration is certainly above average in current collections.

Scheper, K. *The Technique of Islamic Bookbinding: Methods, Materials and Regional Varieties*. Islamic Manuscripts and Books, Vol. 8. Leiden: Brill, 2015.

This seminal text provides an in-depth study of Islamic binding techniques, based on an extensive survey of the Middle Eastern Collections in the Leiden University Library. Although Dr Scheper does not cover Islamic slipcases in any detail, the importance of this publication cannot be underestimated. It has informed and shaped the direction of my subsequent survey for the Frederick Bearman Research Grant and acted as an important resource as regards materials and provides a useful literature review on the making of Islamic manuscripts.

Articles

Benson, J., 'Satisfying an Appetite for Books: Innovation, Production, and Modernization in Later Islamic Bookbinding' in Kamran Talattof, ed., *Persian Language, Literature, and Culture: New Leaves, Fresh Looks*, 367-370. London: Routledge, 2015.

A study on the techniques used in later Islamic bookbinding. When slipcases are discussed, Benson describes the various modes of covering, as well as their construction, in relation to leather-edged bindings. As a result, Benson provides new insights and deals with factors such as material cost and material strength. Like Benson, Dr Scheper explains that the essence of craftsmanship is that the individual is making exactly what is needed. More would be too much and not cost-efficient, and less would certainly be short of quality or purpose. This recognition between costly materials and craftsmanship is a refreshing approach and the inclusion of various decorative papers adapted as covering materials makes this an essential research aide for scholars.

Rogers, M. E., 'Books and Bookbinding in Syria and Palestine', *The Art Journal* (1868) 7, 113-115.

Rogers' fascinating account of nineteenth-century bookbinding in the Levant includes a useful illustration of an Islamic slipcase with pull-up tape. Rogers notes that slipcases that feature a pull-up tape inside were reserved for more valuable volumes. This is important because their relation to the manuscript that they protect is often not clear. Nevertheless, from a material perspective, Rogers' account is brief and does not go beyond the observation that slipcases are made of leather and pasteboard.

Russo, M. L., 'Islamic Bookbindings in the University of Turin. Some Particular Features and Preservation Issues', *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* (2015) 6.1: 47-65.

The conservator Maria Luisa Russo discusses the characteristics and conservation issues of Islamic bindings in the University of Turin Library. When slipcases are discussed, her observations provide important material information lacking in the history of Islamic bindings. As an example, Russo notes the modes of covering and the historic relation of a slipcase with a specific manuscript. Russo also provides some insight into the different lifting straps but offers no technical details. From a material perspective, her work is an important resource and her paper is well-referenced.