BIBLIOPHILISM IN MEDIÆVAL ISLAM*

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I HAVE used the term "bibliophilism" or love of books in a rather wide sense; for I propose to discuss the various ways in which the Muslims' love of books manifested itself in the Middle Ages,—such as the establishment of public and private libraries throughout the realm of Islam, the feverish activity of book-lovers and book-collectors, the multiplication and circulation of books on an unprecedented scale and, finally, a flourishing book-trade. The enthusiasm of book-lovers of that age is also evidenced by the care which they lavished on the beautiful and tasteful binding of their literary treasures and on their illustration and illumination. Before we go into the subject, it is necessary to characterise, however briefly, the period with which we are here concerned, so as to provide a sort of historical back-ground for the subject under survey.

The Arab conquests of the seventh century are among those military cataclysms, which have changed the course of world-history on the largest scale. Leaving the inmost recesses of their deserts, the Arab invaders smashed in a few years the ancient Sasanian kingdom of Persia; tore Syria, Egypt and Africa from the East-Roman Empire; and even after their first rush was over, they pushed their conquests as far as India on the one flank and Spain on the other. Unlike the Goths and Huns of earlier times, who wrought such a havoc in the European world, and unlike the Tartars of a later age, they did not give everything they encountered to the fire and sword, but left the subject peoples, who came under their sway, in the complete enjoyment of their life, property and religion. Most of the Arab invaders never returned to their home-land, but settled down in the newly-conquered territories side by side with other races with whom they intermarried. The existence of the Muslim State provided an atmosphere which was decidedly favourable for the spread of Islam, so that the faith of Islam as well as the Arabic language began to make headway steadily against other religions and vernaculars.

The early period of Islam was an age of great cultural contacts, which proved of infinite significance for the later history of a large part of the

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civilised world. That age witnessed the surprisingly rapid growth of a composite culture, which has been variously designated as the Arabian Civilisation or Islamic Culture. Various peoples and nations brought in their characteristic contributions towards its development. The Arabs contributed their religion and their incomparable language—incomparable, because of the marvellous success with which it satisfied the heavy demands made by the learned world on its vocabulary for the expression of all kinds of philosophical and scientific ideas. The Persians contributed their keen intellect for speculation of all kinds and their talents for the cultivation of arts and sciences; while the Turks brought in their administrative ability, their aptitude for practical affairs and their military vigour to the service of Islam.

I need not go further into the character and development of Islamic Civilisation. Suffice it to say that the invading Arabs, by sheer force of impact, helped to bring in a new order of things out of the old. Their rule, which extended over many lands and peoples, broke down the barriers of sterile isolation, and the resulting exchange of ideas and ideals weakened the forces of unthinking conservatism. Their influence, on the whole, operated on the side of liberal change, with the result that the minds of most men, of whatever nationality they might be, were set free from their bondage, and were encouraged to strike out fresh lines of thought and action. In the Golden Age of Islam, thus ushered in, material prosperity and a keen and brisk intellectual activity went hand in hand; for the Arabs became heirs not only to the riches of Cæsars, Chosroes and Khaqans, but also to the wisdom of Greece, Persia and India. Enthusiasm for learning was so great and universal that "it seemed as if all the world from the Caliph down to the humblest citizen suddenly became students, or at least patrons of literature. In quest of knowledge, men travelled over three continents and returned home, like bees laden with honey, to impart the precious stores which they had accumulated to crowds of eager disciples, and to compile with incredible industry those works of encyclopædic range and erudition from which modern Science, in the widest sense of the word, has derived far more than is generally supposed."[1]

The accession of the Abbâsids, with their capital at Baghdâd, gave a great impulse to all kinds of studies, literary, scientific and philosophical, which found enlightened patrons in the Caliphs of that illustrious house. The splendid reign of the Caliph al-Ma'mûn marks the full vigour of this Oriental renaissance. He caused the works of the ancients to be sought out, and sent a special deputation to the contemporary Roman

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1. Prof. R. A. Nicholson in his *Literary History of the Arabs*, p. 281. The debt which European civilisation owes to the Arabs as pioneers of learning and bringers of light to Mediaeval Europe is generally ignored or belittled or only grudgingly acknowledged. The most spirited and eloquent presentation of the Arab case, that I have come across in recent literature, is that by the well-known sociologist Briffault in his *Making of Humanity* (London: Allen & Unwin).

Emperor to obtain scientific and philosophical books for translation into Arabic. In addition to their own specifically indigenous literature, the Arabic-reading world was, within a comparatively short space of time, in possession of the translations of the chief philosophical works of Aristotle, of the leading neo-Platonic commentators and most of the medical writings of Galen, as well as of many Persian and Indian literary and scientific works. Al-Ma'mûn founded at Baghdâd the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* or the House of Wisdom, where he installed the men of science and letters, who were associated with his court. The institution comprised an observatory and a well-stocked library. This is the first instance of an organised and comprehensive collection of books in Mediæval Islam. After this there arose in the capital, as well as in other centres, many similar institutions, which gained world-wide fame and of some of which I shall have occasion to speak presently[1].

So far as I know, apart from the Egyptian writer Maqrîzî's description, in his *Khiṭaṭ*, of the libraries that existed in his country and another Arabic work on libraries in Muslim Spain mentioned by Casiri, no systematic or satisfactory treatise on the numerous libraries that arose in the Muslim world has come down to us. It is only from occasional notices in works on biography, history and belle-lettres that we learn of their existence and a few details about them. The sources of our information on this subject are scarce and scattered; and it is often the case that we learn of a library or collection of books only when we come upon a report how it came to a regrettable end, either by dispersion or destruction by accidental fire or through an act of vandalism. We learn, for example, of the fine and extensive library which the ruling family of Banû 'Ammâr had collected in Tripoli in Syria in the course of many generations, from the lament of Ibn al-Furât and other historians over its destruction by the Crusaders, who in their blind zeal consigned it to the flames. Such stray notices, however, make it abundantly clear that the intellectual and literary movement of the palmy days of Islam brought in its train, as a necessary corollary, a veritable passion for books. As repositories of knowledge and a potent means of general culture, books were written, preserved, copied and embellished with a restless industry. There arose a host of skilful scribes, who made it their business to multiply by transcriptions those literary treasures, which are the glory of the age that produced them. Literary history has preserved the names of many remarkable men, who contributed in this way to the progress of letters and whose works were much sought after by connoisseurs as well as rich amateurs.[2] By the side of these brilliant

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1. It is very likely that libraries of this kind gave to Louis XI of France, when he was in Eastern lands, the idea of imitating them and starting at Paris a collection of his own, which under later kings grew in dimensions and ultimately became the National Library of France.

2. The specimens of the penmanship of Ibn al-Bawwâb, Yâqût al-Musta'simî and other celebrated calligraphists of yore can still be seen in the principal libraries of the East and West. On the subject

calligraphists, there were also humbler copyists, who applied themselves to works of a practical utility and produced copies at moderate prices so as to place them within the reach of the modest purse of the average scholar. In this way copies of books were rapidly multiplied and it was possible to form large or small collections of them. The Caliphs and kings set the example, which was followed by cultured nobles, the directors of colleges, founders of academies and other votaries of knowledge. Libraries arose everywhere; and along with mosques, madrasas, hospitals, hospices and other institutions of a similar character, they came to occupy an important place in the cultural life of the Muslim society.[1]

Before giving some details regarding a few celebrated libraries and famous Muslim bibliophiles of the Middle Ages, we must make a digression on the introduction of the art of paper-making in the Muslim East, because it was the availability of a comparatively cheap writing-material such as paper which made that feverish literary activity possible, which has been referred too above. Reference to the history of this useful art is so material and essential to the subject in hand that an apology for this digression is hardly necessary.

The principal writing-material used by the ancients was papyrus, made from the stem of a plant of the same name; and, at a later date, parchment prepared from the skins of sheep and goats. The Muslims made use of both these materials in the earlier period of their history. A considerable number of Arabic papyri have in the last sixty years been unearthed in the dry soil of Egypt, which throw a flood of light on the early Arab administration of that country.[2] Parchment or prepared leather was also used; but its high price limited its use to official documents or copies of the Qur'ân.

Paper—in the form familiar to us—we owe to the genius of the Chinese. The art of making paper from silk and silk-waste was

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in general see Clément Huart, *Les Calligraphes et les Miniaturistes de l'Orient Musulman*, Paris 1908; and B. Moritz's article on "Arabic Writing" in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* I, p. 381, which deals with the artistic growth of the Arabic character also. For the development of the Arabic character through the centuries, see the excellent plates in B. Moritz, *Arabic Palæography* (Cairo 1905).

1. On libraries in the Muslim world, see art. "*Kitâbkhâna*" in the *Encyclopædia of Islam* II. To the bibliographical references given there may be added Olga Pinto. *Le Biblioteche degli Arabi nell'Eta degli Abbasidi* (*Bibliofilia* XXX, Rome 1918), the English translation of which essay appeared in *Islamic Culture*, vol. III.

2. The Arabic word for papyrus is *bardî*. The first Orientalist of note to specialise in the history of paper-making among the Arabs and to study Arabic papyri was J. Karabacek, whose *Das Arabische Papier* appeared in 1887 at Vienna. His writings on the subject of Arabic papyri must, however, be read along with the more critical studies of C.H. Becker The present-day authority on Arabic papyrology is Prof. Adolf Grohmann of the Prague University, who has studied and partly edited the Arabic papyri, preserved in Vienna, Cairo and elsewhere. Particularly valuable are his "Probleme der arabischen Papyrusforschung" in *Archiv Orientalni* (Prague), vols. III, V. & VI.

discovered and practised by them from early times. About a hundred years after the birth of Christ, a Chinese official, Tsai Lun by name, gave a great impetus to the industry by employing hemp, rags and even China-grass in its manufacture; and thus brought down the cost of production to a very considerable extent. The Chinese paper was imported by the Arab traders engaged in maritime trade with the Far East; but the introduction of the art of paper-making itself into the Muslim world is due to an accident of war. The first town in the Arab empire to be connected with paper-industry was Samarqand, which was conquered by the Arabs in 704 A.C. Two Arabic writers, Tha'âlibi[1] and Qazwînî[2], drawing upon still older sources, tell us that the paper-industry of Samarqand, which ultimately displaced the papyrus and parchment, was planted there by Chinese prisoners of war, who had been captured by the Arab commander Ziyâd b. Ṣâlih. We further learn from Arabic. as well as Chinese, sources that Ziyâd won a signal victory over Turkish princes and their Chinese allies on the banks of the river Ṭarâz in July, 751 A.C. These several reports taken together point to the conclusion that the Chinese captives in question must have been taken on this occasion. Qazwînî relates: "The author of *K. al-Mamâlik wa'l-Masâlik* reports that captives of war were brought from China to Samarqand; and among them there were some who knew the art of paper-making and chose to ply this art"—presumably, in order to make sufficient money to buy their freedom. Their enterprise succeeded, with the result that the paper-industry became a permanent and valuable acquisition for Samarqand.

From Samarqand the industry soon passed to the central provinces of the Arab empire. Faḍl b. Yaḥyâ, the famous Barmecide vizier, who had been governor of the Eastern provinces in 794 A.C. and must have known of the paper-industry of Samarqand, was instrumental in planting the first paper factory in Baghdâd. The new industry flourished so well that a few years later his brother and successor in the vizierate, Ja'far b. Yaḥyâ was able to replace parchment by paper in the government offices. From 'Irâq the industry passed to Syria and Egypt, and from there it made its way to Morocco and Spain, where the town of Shâtibah acquired a great fame for the excellence of its product. The comparative cheapness of paper created such a heavy demand for it that paper factories arose in almost every city of the Muslim world. The Arabs introduced the use of cotton and other vegetable fibres in the manufacture of paper, so that local variations of the raw material gave rise to different kinds and qualities of the stuff. An old Arab bibliographer, Ibn an-Nadim, already knows six kinds of paper.

By importing paper industry into their Empire, the Arabs not only facilitated the rapid development of their own literature and the

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1. *Laṭâ'if al-Ma'ârif*, ed. by De Jong, p. 126.
2. *Âthâr al-Bilâd*, ed. by Wüstenfeld, p. 360.

phenomenal spread of education in their midst on democratic lines; but they also rendered a great service to European civilization in general and the Greek and Roman Classical literature in particular, by first exporting paper to Europe and then introducing paper-manufacture itself through Spain and Sicily. The Europeans of the Middle Ages wrote for a long time on parchment only. Its high price was, however, a serious obstacle to the multiplication of books. It was generally so costly and rare that the Christian monks and clerics in their monastries and cloisters, whose ignorance and religious obscurantism made them insensible to the beauties of Classical literature, were in the habit of erasing the writings of the great authors of antiquity and replacing them with their own hymns and homilies. Thousands of such palimpsests are still preserved in the libraries of Europe. This process of erasing original classical texts went on for centuries; and only Heaven knows what priceless treasures were thus sacrificed at the altar of ignorance. The serious loss, which the classical literature suffered by the ravages of time and the indifference of man, is to some extent indicated by the fact that there is a number of Classical writers, whose works are preserved in Arabic translations only, while their Greek originals have been lost beyond all hope of recovery. I may mention, for example, three books of the *Conics* of Apollonius, the *Spherics* of Menelaus, the *Mechanics* of Hero of Byzantium, a short book on the balance attributed to Euclid, a short work on the clepsydra attributed to Archimedes, a treatise on agriculture by Anatolius of Berytos and a number of the medical writings of Galen. But for the timely introduction of paper by the Arabs, it is certain that a still larger number of the literary and scientific works of the ancients would have been lost.[1]

The introduction of paper and paper-making into Europe at the hands of the Arabs is a well-known historical fact, of which there is a philological reminder in the English word "ream", which is derived through Old French from the Spanish *rezma*, which is nothing else but the Arabic word *rizmah*, meaning a bundle.[2]

As I have already said, the principal material used by the Chinese in the manufacture of paper was silk or silk-waste. Even if this precious

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1. It is a curious and highly interesting phenomenon in the history of human culture how works belonging to one literature are, sometimes, lost in their original language, but are preserved in another. Corresponding to the instance cited above, there are a number of Arabic works, which have been preserved in Latin translations only. Not much of Kindî's work, for instance, has survived in its original language, but a good deal is still extant in Latin translations made by Gerard of Cremona and others. So is the case with the writings ascribed to Jâbir bin Hayyân. India also provides a parallel case. There are some religious books relating to Buddhism, which are lost in their original Indian languages but are still preserved in Chinese translations, which were made at the time when Buddhism was introduced from India into China.

2. On the origin of paper and the spread of paper-industry in the various countries of Europe, see André Blum, *Les Origines du Papier* (Paris 1932).

discovery had come to the knowledge of Europe, it could not have been utilised there, because the culture of silk was as yet unknown in Europe.[1] The Arabs not only brought paper to Europe, but they also introduced in Spain the cultivation of cotton, which made paper-industry possible in the West. The cotton plant was till then unknown in Europe; and an interesting philological side-light is thrown on this historical fact by the Spanish *algodon*, French *coton*, and the English "cotton", which are all variants of one and the same Arabic word, *al-quṭn*.[2]

From the darkness of Medieval Europe let us come back into the light of the Muslim East, where the sun of learning and science was then shining in all its glory and shedding its life-giving rays far and wide. I have already mentioned the *Bayt al-Ḥikmah* or Academy, founded by the Caliph al-Ma'mûn at Baghdâd, which combined a translation bureau, a library and an astronomical observatory all in one. This state library contained books in all branches of knowledge cultivated by the Arabs, and continued to flourish till the city of Baghdâd was taken and sacked by the Mongols in 1258 A.C.

The example set by the Caliph was eagerly followed by many public-spirited nobles and wealthy individuals, who founded academies and libraries at Baghdâd and elsewhere at their private expense. 'Alî bin Yaḥyâ, known as al-Munajjim (d. 275 A.H.) collected a large library in his castle in the neighbourhood of Baghdâd, and called it *Khizânat al-Ḥikmah* or the Treasure-house of Wisdom. Many people travelled from distant countries in order to study various sciences there. The books were completely at the disposal of the visiting students and scholars, who were entertained during their stay at the sole expense of the founder. This library, which was particularly rich in the science of astronomy, attracted men in quest of knowledge from far and near. Abû Ma'shar, the well-known astronomer of Khurâsân, who was on the way to Mecca to perform the pilgrimage, decided to stop for a while and see this library for himself. He was so charmed by its rare treasures that he forgot his pious journey altogether.

Another notable instance is that of the vizier Abû Naṣr Sabûr b. Ardshir, who founded a Dâr al-'Ilm in Baghdâd in 383 A.H., and attached a large library to it for the use of scholars. It has been praised by many writers for its splendour and vast extent, for it is reported to have contained more than 100,000 volumes, some of which were written by the most celebrated calligraphists of the day. Almost every college (madrasa) in Baghdâd had a large or small library of its own. Those attached to the Niẓâmiya College, founded by the famous vizier Niẓâm al-Mulk, and to

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1. Sericulture was not introduced in Europe till the sixteenth century.

2. The Germans have to this day no single word for cotton; they call the cotton plant "baumwolle", which literally means wool-tree, that is the tree that yields wool. This philological curiosity is explained by the fact that down to the Middle Ages the only fibre, with which they were familiar for purposes of cloth-making, was wool.

the Mustanṣiriyyah College founded by the Caliph Mustanṣir, were particularly remarkable for their large size, as well as for the precious character of their books. The number of libraries thus increased, till in the seventh century of the Hijra era, there were at least thirty-six public libraries in Baghdâd alone, quite apart from the private collections of individual scholars, too numerous to mention.

Libraries, public and private, were however not confined to the capital of Baghdâd, but in course of time they made their appearance in almost every important cultural centre of Islam. When the 'Abbâsid empire was split up into many independent and semi-independent kingdoms and principalities, it undoubtedly meant a weakening of the central power of the Muslim state; but the cultural life of the people as a whole did not slow down as a result of political dismemberment. On the contrary, it received a fresh impulse at the hands of different rulers, who each vied with another in the patronage of learning and the promotion of arts and sciences. We thus find that the Umayyads of Spain, the Fâṭimids of Egypt, the Ḥamdânids of Aleppo, the Buwayhids of Persia, the Sâmânids of Bukhârâ, and the Ghaznavid rulers, all collected and established libraries in their respective seats of government. I have no time to make a survey of them all; but I will just mention a few of them, which would show that libraries occupied as important a place in the intellectual life of those times as they do now.

Almost equal in importance and fame to the Academy of al-Ma'mûn, was that of the Fâṭimid rulers of Egypt, who collected priceless literary treasures in their newly-founded capital of Cairo. In 1005 A.C., the Caliph al-Ḥâkim founded an academy, called *Dâr al-'Ilm,* primarily for the propagation of their characteristic Shî'ite doctrines. The building of the academy was connected with the royal palace, and contained a well-stocked library and rooms for meetings. The founder had made provision for the yearly expenditure of 257 *dînârs* on the copying and repair of books and the general maintenance of the library. This was apart from the royal private library, which was housed in the interior of the palace. At one time, the latter is said to have contained two million volumes.[1] However incredibly fabulous this number may appear, it is certain that the vast resources of the Fâṭimids had enabled them to amass prodigious number of books, some of which were available in scores of copies. The Qur'ân alone accounted for 2,400 illuminated copies. While there was a number of rare manuscripts in the hand of Ibn Muqlah and other famous calligraphers, the library also contained autograph copies of the works of some of the most renowned figures in Arabic literature, *e.g., Kitâb al-*

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1. The Western libraries of this period appear extremely insignificant in comparison. In the ninth century, the cathedral library of Constance (in Baden, Germany) possessed only 356 volumes, the Benedictbeuren library (in Bavaria) in 1032 a little over 100, and the Cathedral library of Bamberg in 1130 only 96 volumes. Adam Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams,* p. 165. For a further comparison with the western libraries, comp. Milkau, *Die Bibliotheken in Kultur der Gegenwart* I/i.

'Ayn by Khalîl b. Aḥmad and the *History* of aṭ-Ṭabarî. Of the latter work, there were altogether thirty copies.[1] In the troublous times of the feeble Caliph al-Mustanṣir, the royal library sustained serious losses. The vizier Abu'l-Faraj al-Maghribî alone is reported to have carried off twenty-five camel-loads of books, in lieu of certain sums of money due to him, which the depleted State treasury could not pay. New collections were evidently built up by the successors of al-Mustanṣir; for, when a century later, Sultan Ṣalâḥ ad-Dîn put an end to the Fâṭimid dynasty, the library in the royal palace still contained about a million volumes. Most of these were sold by auction,[2] so that they passed into private hands. The vizier Qâḍi al-Fâḍil managed to appropriate a good number of them, which he deposited in the library of the Fâḍiliyyah college, which he founded at Cairo.[3]

The third great royal library of Mediæval Islam was that collected by the Umayyad Caliph al-Ḥakam II (961—976) at his capital, the far-famed Cordova. This Caliph was an enthusiastic bibliophile; his agents ransacked the book-shops of Alexandria, Cairo and Baghdâd for rare volumes for their master's library. When the book was not to be bought at any price, he would have it copied; and sometimes he would even hear of a book, which was yet only in the author's brain and would send him a handsome present with the request to send the first copy to Cordova. In order to secure the first copy of *Kitâb al-Aghânî*, which Abu'l-Faraj al-Iṣfahâni was then composing in 'Irâq, the Caliph sent him the gift of a thousand *dînârs*. By such means, he is said to have collected no fewer than 400,000 books, and this at a time, when printing was unknown and every copy had to be laboriously transcribed by hand. The catalogue of his extensive library ran into forty-four volumes. Not only did he possess all these books, but unlike many collectors he is said to have read many of them and even to have annotated them. Al-Ḥakam was probably the most learned among the Caliphs; and his marginal notes were highly prized by scholars of later times.[4]

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1. Some idea of the losses, which the Fâṭimid and other libraries of Islam suffered through destruction or dispersion, may be gained from the fact that when in the latter half of the nineteenth century the Dutch Arabist De Goeje and his collaborators prepared a critical edition of the *History* of aṭ-Ṭabarî, no complete copy of this celebrated work could be found in any of libraries accessible to them.

2. A contemporary historian, Imâd ad-Dîn al-Iṣfahâni, a secretary of Sultan Ṣalâḥ ad-Dîn, has left us circumstantial details regarding this auction. The unscrupulous dealings of the callous officials concerned with the affair make a disgusting reading.

3. Interesting details about the public and private libraries of the Fâṭimids have been collected by Quatremère in his works, *e.g.*, in his *Memoire sur le gout des livres chez les orientaux*, originally published in Journal Asiatique (1838), and reprinted in the same scholar's *Melanges d'histoire et de philologie orientale*, Paris.

4. "Where once seventy public libraries had fed the minds of scholars, and half a million books had been gathered together at Cordova for the benefit of the world, such indifference to learning after-

Coming nearer home, we find that the taste for books was also cultivated by the Muslim kings of India. Leaving aside Maḥmûd of Ghazna, whose court was in his age the chief resort of poets and men of letters, Sultan Nâṣîr ad-Dîn of the slave dynasty was the first notable scholar, bibliophile and patron of learning among the indigenous Muslim kings of India. During the twenty years of his reign, he found ample opportunities for advancing the cause of education and scholarship. Even as a sovereign, he lived the life of a student and a saint—a rare combination of traits in a king—and was in the habit of living on the proceeds of his penmanship. Ibn Baṭûṭah, the Maroccan traveller, who visited India about a century later, mentions having seen a copy of the Qur'ân, transcribed by this sovereign in a beautiful hand.

The literary taste of the Mughal Emperors of India and their patronage of learning are better known to us. Bâbar's charming autobiographical memoirs are not only a valuable source of historical information, but also constitute a document of deep human interest. His son Humâyûn, too, was a man of scientific tastes, being interested in astronomy in particular. He loved his books so well that he carried them with him even in his wanderings, when he was leading the unsettled life of an exile. Abu'l-Faḍl, speaking in his *Akbar-Nâmah* of an encounter in which the baggage of this ill-starred monarch was plundered by the soldiers of Gujrât, says: "In these circumstances, the king lost the greater part of his books, which were his veritable companions and which he always carried with him. Among these was a copy of the Taymûr-Nâmah, transcribed by Sultan 'Alî and adorned with paintings by the celebrated Bihzâd." His son Akbar too, though illiterate, had a well-stocked library; and he had books read out to him in the evenings. By his special command, many books were translated from Sanskrit and other Indian languages into Persian. Jahângîr, Shâhjahân and Aurangzêb, besides many other princes of house of Taymûr, were all well-educated men and great lovers of books. Hundreds of volumes, bearing their seals and autographs, can still be seen in the public and private libraries of India and Europe.

From these royal book-lovers and patrons of learning, let us turn our attention to their subjects, among whom we find many who treasured their books above everything else and found their greatest delight in their serene company. The literary sources at our disposal are all strewn over with notices and instances of innumerable cultivated persons, who had a passion for books and who in the course of their literary pursuits had made fine collections of them. In the annals of Islam, there is no age, however decadent, and no country, however unpromising, which was entirely without this class of people. Even the little-known Sudan

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wards prevailed, that the new capital, Madrid, possessed no public library in the eighteenth century, and even the manuscripts of the Escurial were denied in our own days to the first scholarly historian of the Moors, though himself a Spaniard." S. Lane-Poole in his *Moors of Spain*, (London, 1890), p. ix.

and Senegal have preserved to this day their libraries and their attendant book-worms.

Among the book-lovers of the third century of the Hijra era, we may mention the polygraph al-Jâhiẓ, Fatḥ b. Khâqân who was a courtier of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil, and the Judge Ismâ'îl b. Ishâq.[1]

Al-Jâhiẓ, one of the most prominent literary figures of the third century, was a most voracious reader. Never did a book, whatever its subject-matter, ever fall into his hands, but he read it from cover to cover. In addition to the books which he could buy and assimilate, he borrowed books from book-dealers on hire and devoured them as fast as he could. There is ample evidence of his vast and multifarious reading in the numerous writings that have come down to us from his facile pen. A later authority even reports that he met a true bibliophile's death, because the books, that he loved so well, are said to have brought his life to a tragic end. One day, while he was sitting surrounded by high piles of books in his study, a heap of books fell down upon him and killed him, since he was already suffering from partial paralysis in his advanced age.

Al-Fatḥ b. Khâqân, a favourite of the Caliph al-Mutawakkil, also had made a magnificent collection, which was famous for the large number and rare beauty of its books, and was open to the scholars, who desired to benefit by it. He always had a book with him, which he carried tucked up in his sleeve; and whenever he found a spare moment, he would take it out and begin to read it. (I may mention, *en passant*, that the Arabs wear long sleeves as a protection against heat and dust; and since their garments are deficient in pockets, they carry their purses and other small articles in their wrapped-up sleeves, which thus serve them as wallets).

Another book-lover, who too was in the habit of carrying a book in the sleeve, was Abû Dâ'ûd al-Sijistânî, the author of the well-known *Kitâb as-Sunan*, a collection of Traditions. In order to be able to carry books of bigger size, he used to order garments with extra-large sleeves.

Abu'l-Faḍl, the vizier of the Buwayhids, was another distinguished lover of books. In 355 A.H., his house in ar-Rayy was so thoroughly plundered by a horde of undisciplined Khurâsânians that it was almost completely denuded of everything that it contained. The historian Ibn Miskawayh, who was then his librarian, thus proceeds in his narrative: The Alide Ibn Hamzah sent him carpets and utensils; but his heart was troubled about his books, which were dearer to him than everything else in the world. He had plenty of them, dealing with all the sciences and all branches of philosophy and literature—more than a hundred camel-loads. When he saw me, he inquired about them; and when I informed him that they were safe as before and that no hand had touched them, he was delighted and said, 'You are a lucky chap! Everything else can be replaced, but not these books'. And I saw how his face lit up with

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1. A. Mez, *Die Renaissance des Islams* (Heidelberg, 1922), p. 165.

joy and he said: 'Bring them to me tomorrow at such and such a place'. I did so and of all his possessions the books alone were saved.

To take the last example from Muslim Spain. The Qâḍî Abu'l-Muṭrif of Cordova (d. 420 A.H.) was a great book-collector. He had six copyists in his employ, who were constantly working for him. Wherever he heard of a beautiful book, he sought to purchase it, making extravagant offers for it. He never lent a book; but he would gladly get it copied and make a present of it, without being concerned about it any longer. After his death his books were sold for a whole year in his mosque, fetching 40,000 *dînârs* for the collection.

It will be tedious to follow the interminable succession of book-lovers, whose names and favourite pursuits receive mention all over our literary sources. Suffice it to say that the vogue of the library became so universal that no self-respecting man of means or person of rank could afford to be without a collection of his own. The spirit of the times is clearly reflected in the amusing and instructive anecdote of the scholar al-Ḥaḍramî, who tells of his experience in Cordova in the following words.

"When living in Cordova, I frequented its book market looking for a book, in which I was especially interested. At last a copy of good calligraphy and handsome binding fell into my hands. Full of joy, I began to bid for it; but was time after time outbid by another, until the price offered far exceeded the proper limit. I then said to the auctioneer: 'Show me this rival bidder, who has raised the price beyond the worth of the book.' Accordingly, he took me to a man attired in distinguished garb. Approaching him I said: 'May Allah keep our lord the *faqih* strong! If you have a special object in acquiring this book, I will let it go, for the bidding has already exceeded the limit.' His answer was: 'I am not a *faqih* (scholar), nor am I aware of the contents of the book. But I have just established a library and made much of it in order to pride myself among the notables of my town. There is still an empty space there which this book will just fill up. Seeing that it was in elegant hand and good cover, I liked it and cared not how much I paid for it, for, thanks to Allah, I am a man of means.'"[1]

That book-lovers of this type have by no means become extinct in the world, is well illustrated by the anecdote of an American millionaire, told by Mr. Bernard Quaritch, the well-known antiquarian book-seller of London. Mr. Quaritch once received an order for books from a rich American, who had recently furnished a house in a fashionable quarter of New York. The order contained minute details regarding the style of binding, the size of volumes and the space they would occupy when placed on shelves; but as for the titles of books there was no mention, their subject-matter being left entirely to the choice of the book-seller.

The Arabs have always spoken of books with affection and respect

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1. Maqqârî, vol. I, p. 302. The translation is that of Prof. Philip Hitti in his *History of the Arabs* (London, 1937), p. 563.

and looked upon them as faithful friends. They did not regard them merely as repositories of useful information and means of instruction, but as something endowed with human personality and pulsating with the warmth of life. There is hardly an anthology in the Arabic language, which does not contain pieces of poetry in praise and appreciation of books. A book-lover refers to his books in the following words:

لنا جلساء ما نملُّ حديثهم النّاء مامونون غياباً ومشهدا
يفيدُوننا من علمهم علم مامضى وعقلاً وتأديبا ورأيا مسدّدا
فلا فتنة نخشى ولا سوء عشرة ولا نتّقى منهم لساناً ولايدا
فإنْ قلتَ اموات فما انت كاذب وان قلت احياء فلست مفنّدا

"We have companions, of whose conversation we are never tired. They are intelligent and trustworthy, whether they be present or absent.

"They give us the benefit of their knowledge—the knowledge of past times—and the benefit of their wisdom, their instruction and their sound judgement.

"We do not fear any disorder or ill treatment on their part; nor have we to guard ourselves against their tongue or hand.

"If you said that they were dead, you would not be wrong; and if you were to say that they are alive, even then you could not be contradicted."

Another book-lover has said:

"What a good companion a book is, when you happen to be alone with it! You can find consolation in its company, even if those whom you loved, have betrayed you."

Another says: "The book is a companion, who does not betray, does not annoy, nor make reproaches, when treated with indifference."

Al-Mutanabbî, according to some, the greatest Arabic poet of the Islamic times, has said:

اعزُّ مكان فى الدُّنى سرج سابح وخير جليس فى الزمان كتاب

"The most honourable place in the world is the saddle of a fleet horse; and the best companion in life is a book."

Al-Muhallabî, the vizier of the Buwayhid Mu'izz al-Dawlah, gave a piece of advice to his sons, which is worthy of record here. "My sons!" he said, "When you are in the market place, stop only before such a shop, where either weapons are sold or books".

The book-trade of a country is also a good index to the intellectual life of its people. The historian Ya'qûbî tells us that in his time, that is to say in the third century, there were at least one hundred book-sellers in Baghdâd alone. Their shops were congregated in a particular street, called *Sûq al-Warrâqîn*. The book-selling gentry often included remarkable calligraphers and literary men of no mean standing. Their shops

were not merely book-stores, but also literary centres, being the rendezvous of students and scholars, who examined and discussed the value of books, offered for sale.

The book-lovers' greatest joy consisted in possessing manuscripts, written by famous calligraphists. The brisk literary activity of the early centuries of Islam was attended by the artistic development of the Arabic script; so that the art of calligraphy, which contributed towards the preservation of the Word of God, became one of the most highly prized and characteristic arts of Islam. In fact, it was a channel through which the Muslims' æsthetic sense found an outlet. The calligrapher held an honourable position in Muslim society; and even sovereigns, sometimes, occupied their time with preparing copies of the Qur'ân with their own hand, which was regarded as a pious and meritorious religious exercise.

Our literary sources have preserved the names of many calligraphists, who from time to time either reformed, improved or beautified the Arabic script. I must rest content with mentioning just a few of them. 'Alî b. 'Ubaydah ar-Rayḥânî, who flourished in the reign of al-Ma'mûn, may be mentioned as a founder of Arabic calligraphy. At a later period, the vizier Ibn Muqlah and his brother Abû 'Abd Allâh al-Ḥasan achieved great fame in this art. The last notable calligraphist of the 'Abbâsid period was Yâqût al-Musta'ṣimî, the court calligraphist of al-Musta'ṣim, the last 'Abbâsid Caliph, genuine specimens of whose penmanship are still preserved in the shape of two copies of the Qur'ân. The round and well-proportioned type of writing later reached its highest point of development in Egypt, which after the fall of the 'Abbâsids, became the centre of Muslim civilisation. The Ottoman Turks also paid great attention to calligraphy, which enjoyed high esteem and generous patronage among them.

The other arts associated with book-production are colour decoration, illumination, illustration, and the craft of book-binding. The earliest Arabic manuscripts illustrated with miniature paintings, that have so far been studied, date from the thirteenth century. These manuscripts are those of the well-known classics, *Kalîlah wa Dimnah* and the *Maqâmât* of Harîrî. Other illustrated books include works on medicine, astronomy and mechanical science. It is, however, Persia with its ancient traditions of the pictorial art, that produced many painters of great distinction. Since the representation of living objects was forbidden by legists, the Qur'ân could not be illustrated like profane literature.[1] Infinite pains were, however, taken in illuminating the sacred text, and much skill was displayed in the arrangement of colours and the elabo-

1. There is only one solitary instance of an illustrated copy of the Qur'ân that has come to our knowledge. Prof. Gottheil of the Columbia University made such a copy the subject of his communication to the Eighteenth International Congress of Orientalists, held at Leiden in September, 1931. For a summary of his paper, see the Proceedings of the said Congress (Leiden, Brill et Cie).

ration of decorative designs. Qur'ân—illumination reached its highest development under the Egyptian Mamlûk Sultans, whose fine collection of illuminated Qur'âns can now be seen in the National Library at Cairo.

The exterior of the book did not receive less attention. Books were tastefully bound in leather. The earliest known Islamic book-bindings are the work of Egyptian craftsmen, and may be assigned to the eighth or ninth century. When the art of book-binding developed, stamping and tooling (both blind and gold tooling), became the most common techniques of the Muslim book-binder. The use of the gold leaf in the decoration of bindings—technically known as gold tooling—was introduced into Venice from the Muslim East about the end of the fifteenth century. Morocco leather was also introduced into Europe about the same time.[1]

After hearing so much of Arabs' love of books and book-learning, one might well ask: How about the library of Alexandria, which the Arabs are said to have burned by command of the Caliph 'Umar, when they conquered Egypt? In clearing this point, I must say in brief that reference to the contemporary historical sources as well as a critical examination of later works, containing the allegation, has almost conclusively shown that the report is without any foundation in fact. The story that for six long months the numerous bath-furnaces of the city were fed with the volumes of the library is one of those picturesque tales that make good fiction but bad history. The great library, founded by the Ptolemies, had for the most part been burned as early as 48 B.C. during the wars waged by Julius Cæsar in Egypt. A later one, referred to as the "Daughter Library", was destroyed by order of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius I about 389 A.C., when he converted the Serapeum (where the library was housed) into a Christian church. At the time of

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1. On the art and history of book-production and book-decoration in Islam in general, see T.W. Arnold and A. Grohmann, *The Islamic Book* (Paris, The Pegasus Press, 1929). In part I, which embraces the early period from the twelfth to the thirteenth century, Prof. Grohmann deals with miniatures, pen-drawings, book-ornamentation and bindings. In part II, the late Dr. Arnold has dealt with the later period, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century, and traced the history of book-illumination, beginning with the remnants of Persian Painting through the Mughal and Taymurid period up to the work of Bihzâd and his school and to Riḍa Abbâsi and the decay of Persian painting. The last three chapters of this excellent work deal with Islâmic painting in India and Turkey, as well as with the craft of book making in recent times. In this connection, the reader's attention is also invited to Fr. Sarre, *Islâmic Book-bindings* (London, 1924), in which that eminent German historian of art has described the national and technical characteristics of Egyptian, Persian and Turkish bindings from the ninth to the nineteenth century, and detailed the methods of tooling, varieties of decorative motifs, groundwork and the use of polychrome painting. This handsome volume contains about forty exquisite facsimiles of Arabic and Persian bindings, which have been reproduced in colour and gold with such a remarkable exactness and verisimilitude that one is almost obliged to finger the plate to convince oneself if it is not real.

the Arab conquest, therefore, no library of importance existed in Alexandria, and no contemporary writer ever brought the charge against them. Neither John, the Christian bishop of Nikious (in Egypt), who is a contemporary authority on the Arab conquest of Egypt,[1] nor the Arab writer Ibn 'Abd al-Ḥakam, who gives us the earliest surviving account in Arabic of the conquest of that country, makes any mention of it.

'Abd al-Laṭîf, a physician of Baghdâd (d. 629 A.H.), who in the seventh century, visited Egypt and later wrote a description of the country, was so far as we know the first writer to make a brief and casual reference (which is anomalous on other counts as well) to the alleged burning of the library, about six hundred years after the Arab conquest of Alexandria. Why and on what authority he did it, we do not exactly know. It may be that he relied upon the folk memory and local tradition of the destruction of the library in ancient times, which was very likely confused as to the real authors of the incident, and that he erroneously ascribed it to the Arabs, who had no doubt taken rather drastic retaliatory measures after the second capture of the city. The first Oriental author to relate the tale *in extenso* is Abu'l-Faraj Ibn al-'Ibrî, otherwise known as Barhebræus (1226—86 A.C.), a Christian writer and ecclesiastic of considerable renown, who gives it in its current form in the Arabic version of his Universal History, entitled *Mukhtaṣar Târîkh ad-Duwal*. It was through the publication and Latin translation of this History by Pococke at Oxford in 1663 that the tale came to the knowledge of Europe, and was eagerly seized upon by Western writers, who repeated it again and again and gave it wide publicity as a well-ascertained historical fact—some, no doubt, did so for propagandist purposes. Edward Gibbon, the great English historian and author of the monumental and immortal *Decline and Fall*, (d. 1794), was the first notable writer who refused to give credence to the tale and held it to be insufficiently substantiated by evidence and extremely improbable for other reasons. Since the time of Gibbon, a long succession of orientalists and historians, such as Draper, Krehl, Le Bon, Butler, Caetani, Casanova and others, have all shown in their own way the unhistorical character of the tale and relegated it to the scrap-heap of legends.

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1. The Chronicle of John of Nikious (Yûhanna Naqyûsî) is lost in its original form, but has been preserved in an Aethiopic version, which was edited and translated into French by Zotenberg. There is also an English translation by the Rev. Dr. R. H. Charles.