

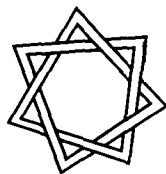
THESA PUBLISHERS  
IN CO-OPERATION WITH  
ST. PETERSBURG BRANCH  
OF THE INSTITUTE OF ORIENTAL STUDIES  
RUSSIAN ACADEMY OF SCIENCES



# **Manuscripta Orientalia**

*International Journal for Oriental Manuscript Research*

Vol. 8 No. 2 June 2002



**THESA**  
**St. Petersburg**

*Val. V. Polosin*

## ‘UNWĀN ILLUMINATIONS IN ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS (PART 1)

Unlike miniatures, which are for well-known reasons unusual in Arabic manuscripts [1], artistic ‘*unwāns* are among those adornments which became an organic part of the Arabic manuscript book. Despite this, however, the number of Arabic manuscripts adorned with ‘*unwāns* is likely not very large. While we lack any broader statistics, we present the results for the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies: among 10,822 descriptions of manuscripts in the published catalogue [2] there are fewer than 200 copies with artistic ‘*unwāns*; no more than 1.8% of the entire collection.

Despite these modest indicators, the amount of study accorded artistic ‘*unwāns* does not at present correspond to their significance in the Arabic manuscript tradition. The only specialized study remains Cl. Huart's entry in the “Encyclopaedia of Islam” [3], which contains but a few lines and is entirely outdated. It is likely thanks to the prestige of the Encyclopedia of Islam that the term “‘*unwān*”, used by Huart to designate this particular phenomenon, has been adopted in the literature [4], despite the inconveniences it causes [5]. In recent decades, however, many authors have taken to avoiding it, replacing it — with some justification — with the term “headpiece” (Russian *zastavka*, German *Kopfstück*) [6].

In general, in works on manuscripts or the art of the manuscript book, artistic ‘*unwāns* are mentioned rather frequently, but these mentions are, unfortunately, usually in passing, and fail to add anything essential or new to this rather interesting topic. The only exceptions I know of are the descriptions of the artistic ‘*unwān* given by A. B. Khalidov [7], L. V. Dmitrieva [8], and O. F. Akimushkin and A. A. Ivanov [9]. They are apparently the first attempts to describe the ‘*unwān* as a type of manuscript book decoration typical of Muslim art; they merit interest not only because they are constructive, but because they are, paradoxically, mutually non-coincident and non-contradictory [10].

As concerns the illustrative material on artistic ‘*unwāns*, it has remained exceptionally thin and infrequent. Moreover, it is spread over many editions. The description of Arab manuscripts is still dominated by a tendency toward palaeographic appendices, and catalogues, which are the main sources of information for manuscript scholars, traditionally present illustrative material in keeping with this *idée fixe*. We provide two examples over a broad chronological spectrum: the catalogue of W. Ahlwardt [11]

and the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies [12], the appendices of which contain, respectively, 63 and 96 photo reproductions, do not give a single artistic ‘*unwān*. The codicological orientation among archaeographers is only beginning to take root, and in G. Schoeler's 1990 catalogue, for example, 7 of 129 photographs reproduce ‘*unwāns* [13]. A notable number of ‘*unwāns* have been published by D. Duda [14], but the explanation there is somewhat different (she has described only illuminated manuscripts). The ‘*unwāns* published outside of catalogues have been few and far between.

The reproduction source material for the study of ‘*unwāns* is still in a state of infancy. While this process continues, and with much of the accumulated material still unstudied, we must apparently deal with the difficult task of treating verbal descriptions of ‘*unwāns* in catalogues and in the scholarly literature. The timely creation of a technical language for this, currently lacking, would lessen authors' dependence on the troublesome and costly inclusion of photo reproductions. This is one of the tasks that the present article aims to perform.

A careful study of reproductions and unpublished originals from the manuscript collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies has shown that the external decorative diversity of artistic ‘*unwāns* conceals a comparatively simple composition common to all or most ‘*unwāns* in Arab, Persian, and Turkic manuscripts.

It is this compositional structure, which displays some variation, that could provide the basis for classifying ‘*unwāns* and for a formal verbal description in catalogues and secondary literature. All of the necessary terminology we currently lack could be developed in the course of studying and describing concrete examples, for we will need such terms as soon as ‘*unwāns* become the object of the greater attention they warrant.

The generalized image of an ‘*unwān* resembles a vertical cross-section of a well. This comparison — only one, of course, of several analogies that come to mind — allows us to develop the necessary terminology for our descriptions. The outline (O), or contour, of the well is a key element in the composition of an artistic ‘*unwān* and the main criterion for the formal classification of ‘*unwāns*. As numerous examples suggest, one can identify three more elements in the well: its cup (C), an indispensable element in ‘*unwān* composition, and its base (B) and foot (F), which are common, but optional (either together or individually). The outline

(O) holds together the elements employed by the artist (C, B, F) and forms a figure that is the compositional structure of the *'unwān*.

In the second and third varieties (figs. 2 and 3), the outline (O) gradually expands (in comparison with the first variety) to include the perimeter of B and F.

Now that they have been described, these three compositional elements are easy to identify in the majority of *'unwān* illuminations [18]. But without this preparatory step, it would likely be difficult to see their presence and repetition. This is hindered to some degree by the elaborate adornments that cover the entire *'unwān* with their distracting abundance of colour and variety. The decorations, which usually entwine the outline (O), are, however, a separate component, which camouflages the standard figure. They require special analysis and will receive minimal treatment here.

On the whole, the ornamental-decorative component in *'unwāns* forms a structured adornment in accordance with the basic compositional elements identified here. In other words, each of the three elements receives its share of ornamentation; together they make up either an ornamental ensemble or an composite ornamental composition. Thus, in the cup (C) of the well, which is sometimes left “empty,” one usually finds a domical decorative composition or a “domical triptych” decorative figure with many variants (figs. 4, 6). Such figures often receive additional adornment in the form of stem-like vertical lines equidistant from each other and rising upward from the surface of the domes (figs. 5, 7) [19]. Such decorative stems can be the basic (or even the only) adornment in the hollow of the cup, rising directly from its bottom.

The base of the well (B) and the foot (F) are horizontal extended rectangles decorated — especially the base — with straight lines that form a series of concentric borders of various colours. They are usually imaginatively filled in with ornamental arabesques. The decorative fabric of

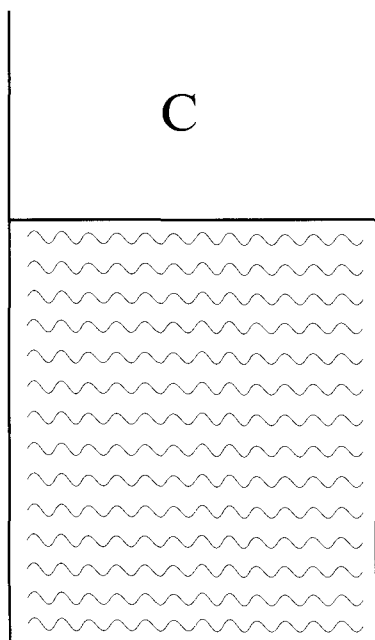
any of the three elements examined here (C, B, F) may contain a cartouche with text (the name of the work or the *basmala*).

This is the principal means of structuring any *'unwān*. Its simplicity — even a certain primitiveness, if one ignores the decorative-ornamental camouflage — suggests that this was, in a fashion, a set pattern that likely did not evolve. As concerns its evolution, it is difficult to judge it because of the paucity of dated material. But the examples known to me are dated across a wide spectrum ranging from the mid-fourteenth to the nineteenth centuries; they display no changes in the basic structural pattern described above (I note that I omit here a discussion of the decorative-ornamental elements).

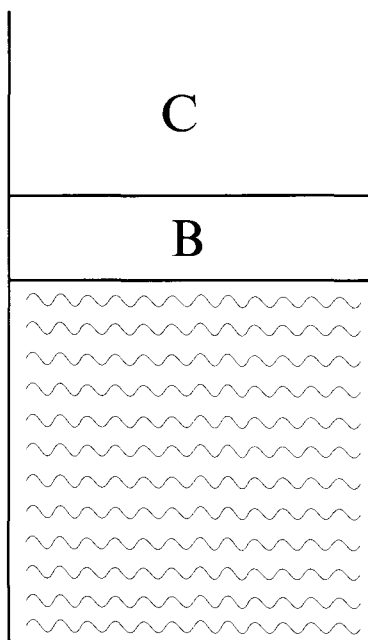
Moreover, an examination of *'unwāns* in actual manuscripts casts unexpected light on the likely reason for this structural conservatism. “Live” manuscripts helped us to reveal the irreproducible physical evidence of limitations with which the copyist (or manuscript itself) may have imposed on the artist, spurring him to use standard rules or means to structure *'unwāns*. The special technique of lining paper for text that was used by the copyists of Arab (and, in general Muslim) manuscripts seems to be such a limitation.

This technique involved the use of a stencil (*mīṣṭara*) for lining. It had a raised rectangular border that set the format and dimensions of the text to come. The area within the border was divided into lines, also upraised, for the desired number of text lines [20]. The stencil was placed beneath the paper, the latter was smoothed out by hand, and an embossed, colourless print resulted. This provided identical lining for the text throughout the manuscript [21].

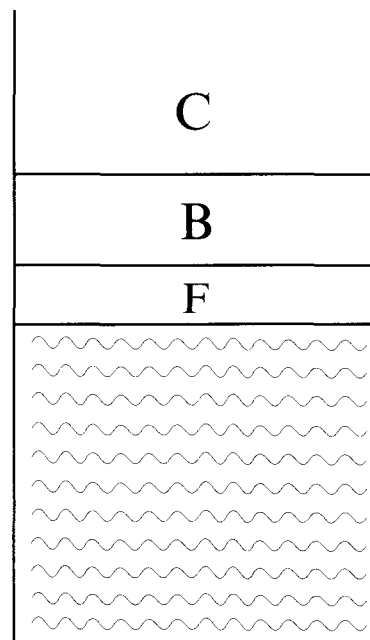
As it turns out, the structure of the *'unwān* illumination above the text was closely connected with this stenciled lining of the paper. Perhaps this connection can clarify the origins of *'unwān* illuminations in Arab manuscripts. We base this supposition on the existence of a special category of manuscripts that is known, but practically unstudied —



**Fig. 1** The well as such together with the cup (C). The outline here coincides with the perimeter of the well [15].



**Fig. 2** The cup of the well and its base (C+B) (see figs. 4–6) [16].



**Fig. 3** Cup, base and foot (C+B+F) (see fig. 7) [17].

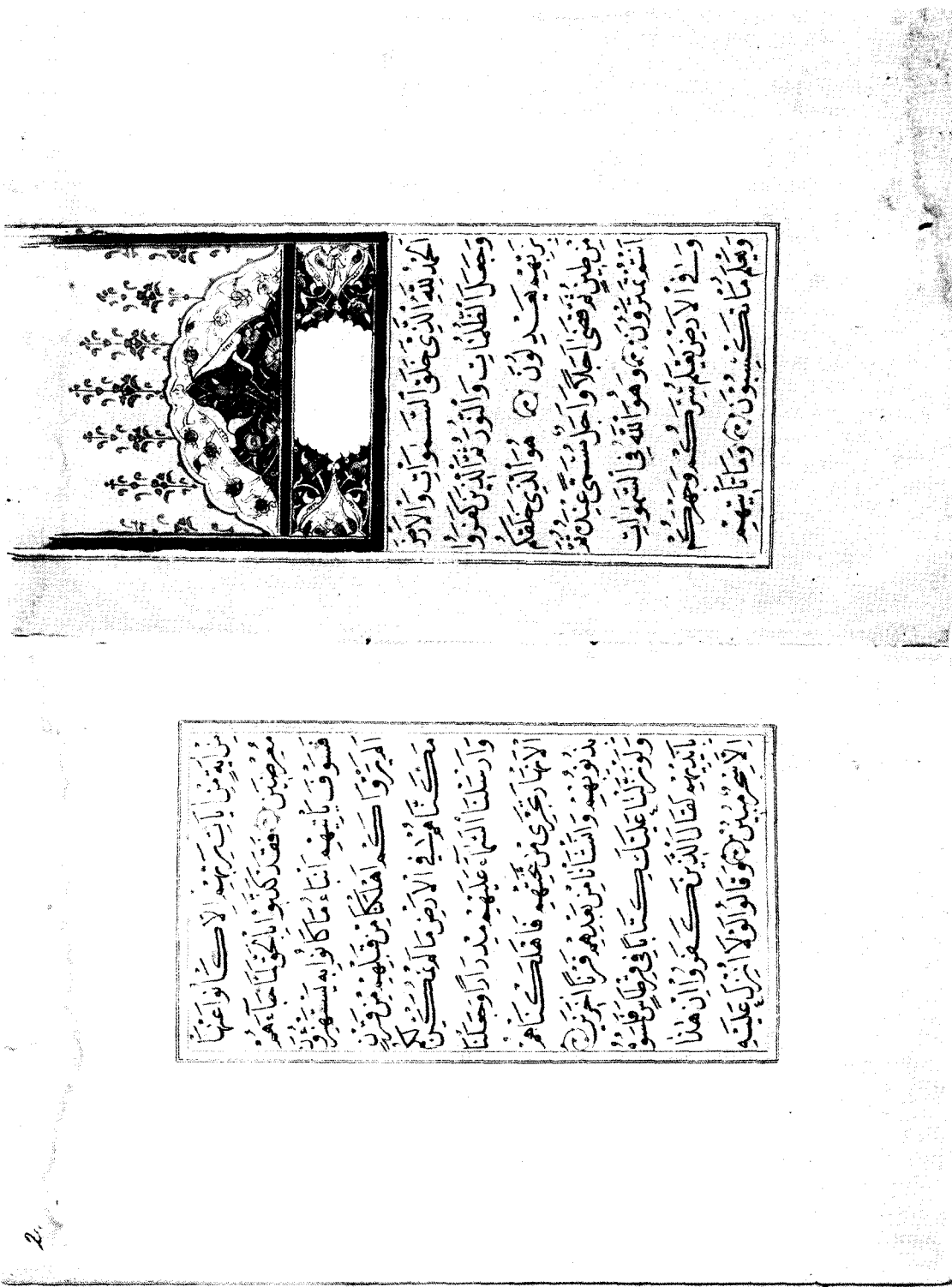


Fig. 4

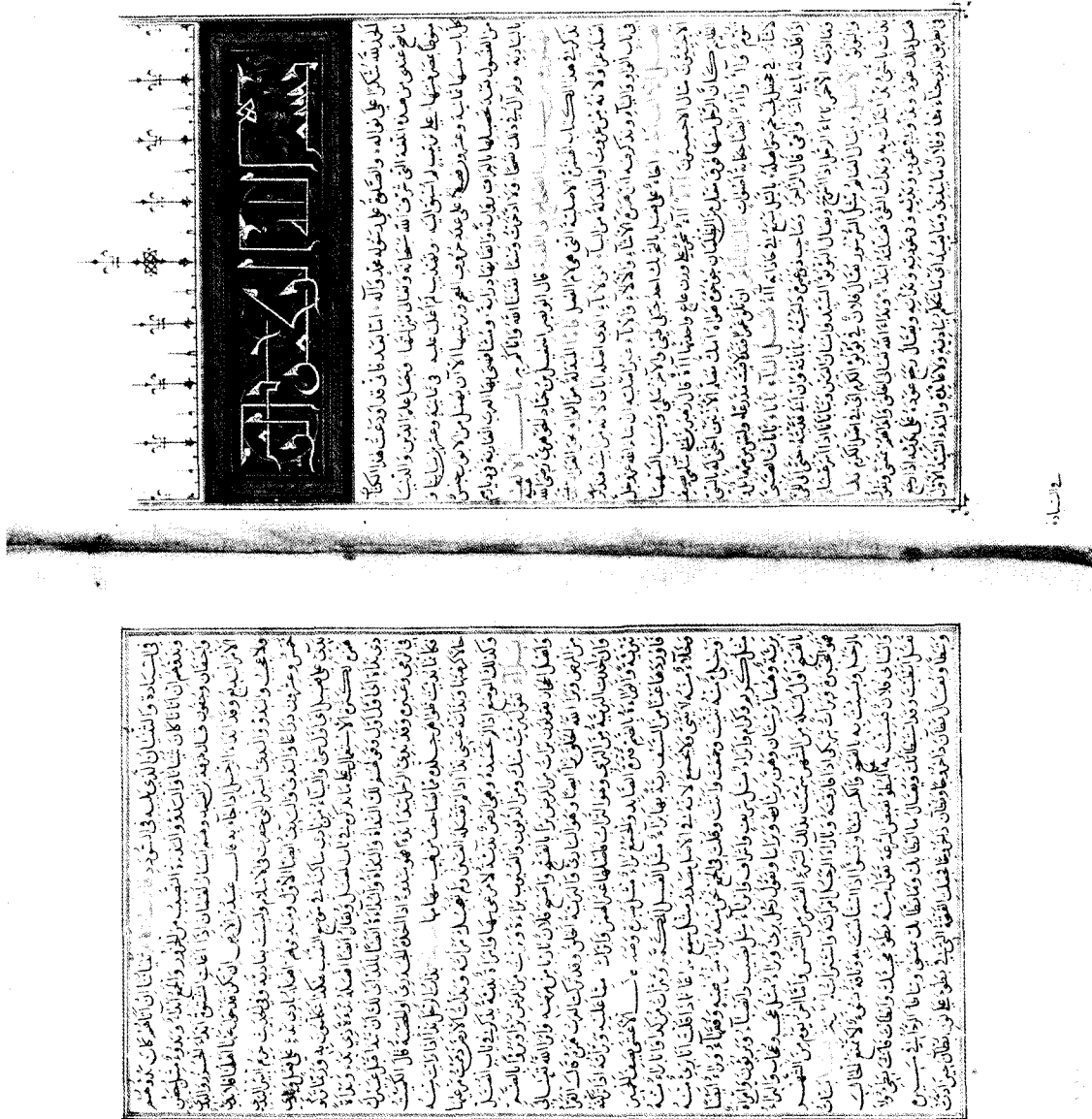
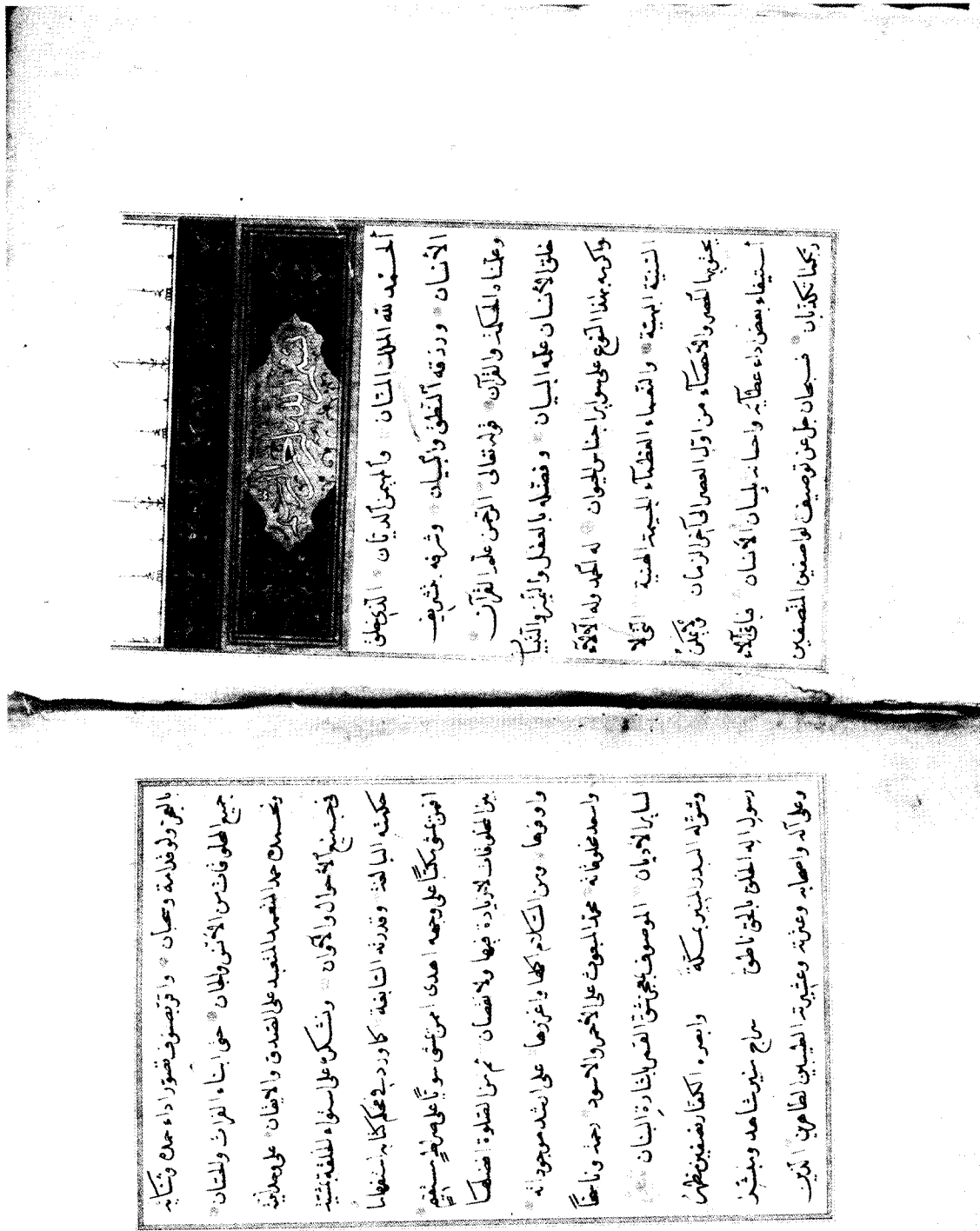


Fig. 5



Fig. 6



بالبحر ولوفدامة وسمان \* واقرصوف تصور اداء حمد وتكابه  
 جميع الملوقات من الخش والمان \* حتى ابناء الفرات والمانان  
 ونحسد حده النعم ما المنعبد على الصدق والايمان \* على عبادته  
 فضيغ الاخوان والكرمان \* وشكرك على سرفاء اللطف بتبنيته  
 حكمت البالعة وقدرته السابعة \* كما ورد في حكم كتابه سنظنهما  
 افنق شوقا على وجه اهدى امين شوقا على من لم يستقيم  
 بينا لملونات لدرية فيها ولا نقصان \* ثم من التلوة افضلكا  
 واوفوها \* من التكرم كلها واغزرها على اشد مسجوداته  
 واسعد غلظاته \* عمدا ليعرف على الخير والاسود \* حمدنا وناسحا  
 لساير الاديان \* الموصوف بجيش القصر باشارة البان  
 وشوقه البدر بغير بكفة \* وابصره اكنافا نصفيين ظهرا  
 رسورا له الملق بالحق اطوع \* سراج سير شاهد وبشير  
 وعلى له واصحابه وعزته وعشيرته الطيبين لظاهرين اديب

الحمد لله الملك الشان \* والمبين كديان \* الذي خلق  
 الانسان \* ورزقه الطقن والكيان \* وشرفه بشريف  
 وعلناه بالحكمة والقرآن \* فله تعالى الفضل عدا القرآن  
 خلق الانسان عليه البيان \* فضله بالفعل والغير والنيان  
 وكرمه بهذا النوع على براجناس الحيوان \* له الحمد وله الآلاء  
 الشنية الهيبة \* والشقاء العظماء البيهية الهيبة \* القلا  
 عجبها الكسر والاصكاء من اوليا العصر لآمر الزمان \* فيكون  
 استيفاء بعض اداء عطايا واحسان لبيان الانسان \* فائقه  
 يكما كذبان \* سبحان على من توصف لاصفيين النصفين

Fig. 7

manuscripts exclusively for scholars that observe certain rules for the written transmission of knowledge. A characteristic of such manuscripts was the enumeration of people who transmitted the text of the work from the author to the copyist of the manuscript. The copyist did not always know in advance what chain of names would emerge; the results usually came to light in the course of a collaboration with the transmitter. But the text itself was frequently prepared in advance, and space was left for the chain of transmitters before the text. Plans to “join” one’s prepared text to one of the recognized transmitters did not always work out, producing a somewhat disorderly manuscript: the blank ruled lines stood out, making the manuscript book a less attractive commodity. At some point someone thought to remove this defect by adding a picture, a practice that eventually caught on, finally becoming a conscious device in manuscript decoration. I shall examine this issue in greater detail elsewhere.

At a certain point, the creation of the *‘unwān* illumination was apparently conceived by the copyist himself. In accordance with his conception, he (either upon agreement with the illuminator, or at his own risk) left several ruled lines blank, an operation identical to imposition book-printing [22].

The set width of the embossed ruling (*mīstara*) and the depth of the imposition (from 1 to 17 lines in the examples I reviewed) likely predetermined the simplicity of the well-like figure chosen for *‘unwān* illuminations. Examples of unfinished *‘unwāns* in manuscripts ground this natural assumption. The same reasons — the depth of the imposition and the embossed horizontals of *mīstara* — must have predetermined the simple means of filling that space: horizontally extended rectangles (one or two, depending on the depth of the imposition). They followed (sometimes entirely, sometimes partially) the embossed lines of the ruling, forming the figures of the *‘unwān*: B (base) and F (foot).

Everything else in the *‘unwān* sprang from the individual artist’s imagination, which may have reflected local artistic schools and the tastes of the era [23].

Of course, the embossed traces of the *mīstara* that formed the outline are no longer visible amid the complex, intertwined lines and paints. But their place and actual role in the structure of each *‘unwān* can be revealed with the aid of various measurements based on the distance between lines in the manuscript [24]. This method allows us to find among the numerous lines of the illumination the main lines that form the *‘unwān* figure. Each manuscript has its own colour and line scheme, both of which can be described verbally.

The presence of line schemes in *‘unwān* illuminations makes them part of a group of manuscript illuminations that we have recently proposed for studying quantitatively.

As always, the measurements used for such study are useful for the subsequent numerical description of various elements in the *‘unwān*. It is only with the help of these measurements that we can establish in *‘unwān* illuminations geometric harmonization zones. The discovery of these zones (we plan to publish several articles on them in this series) points to the existence of numeric plots based on an already known group of proportions [25]. They can now be studied. Measurements are useful for yet another reason (returning to a theme I have touched on in my earlier work [26]): the stem-like decorations that we noted above as frequent additions to domical decorative compositions in the cup of the well (C) are possibly more than just decorative.

At least in several manuscripts they provide measurements of width that correlate with historical Arab units of length (cubits). The possibility of identifying cubit units as a new element for the localization of a manuscript (or, at least, an *‘unwān* illumination) seems quite likely. For where in human affairs one finds set (and especially canonical) proportions, concrete metrological evidence is inevitable.

## Notes

1. A. B. Khalidov, *Arabskie rukopisi i arabskaia rukopisnaia traditsiia* (Arabic Manuscripts and the Arabic Manuscript Tradition) (Moscow, 1985), pp. 174–5.

2. *Arabskie rukopisi Instituta vostokovedeniia Akademii nauk SSSR. Kratkii katalog* (Arabic Manuscripts of the USSR Academy of Sciences Institute of Oriental Studies. A Brief Catalogue), ed. A. B. Khalidov, pt. 1 (Moscow, 1986), pp. 38–522.

3. Cl. Huart, “*‘Unwān*”, *Et*, Bd. 4 (Leiden—Leipzig, 1924), p. 1109.

4. Khalidov, *Arabskie rukopisi i arabskaia rukopisnaia traditsiia*, p. 174; J. J. Witkam, *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in the Library of the University of Leiden and Other Collections in the Netherlands*, fasc. 4 (Leiden, 1986), p. 424 (Ms. Or. 14.276); *Catalogue of Arabic Manuscripts in SS Cyril and Methodius National Library, Sofia, Bulgaria. Hadith Sciences*. Comp. by Stoyanka Kenderova. Ed. by Muhammad Isa Waley (London, 1995), pp. 88–9, 96–7, 200–1, 288–9.

5. Arabic dictionaries do not establish a tie between the word *‘unwān* and the book adornment we are discussing. See E. W. Lane, *Madd al-Qāmūs. An Arabic-English Lexicon*. Book 1, vol. V (London—Edinburgh, 1874), p. 2179; R. Dozy, *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes* (Leiden, 1881), ii, p. 183. One can assume, however, that the terms *‘unwān* and *dībāja*, customarily linked by Arabic philologists with standard descriptions of the text at the beginning of manuscripts (so-called “introductions” or *muqaddimas* that include the *basmala*, *ḥamdala*, *amma ba’d*, and what follows them), apply also to illuminations if they are contained on the same pages of the manuscript (fols. 1b–2a). The nearest to this understanding of the issue is found in O. F. Akimushkin’s commentary on a Persian text: see O. F. Akimushkin, “Bāisongur-mirza i ego rol’ v kul’turnoi i politicheskoi zhizni Khorasanskogo sultanata Timuridov pervoi treti XV v.” (“Bāisunghur-mīrzā and his role in the cultural and political life of the Tīmūrid Khorasan sultanate in the first third of the fifteenth century”), *Peterburgskoe vostokovedenie*, issue 5 (St. Petersburg, 1994), pp. 158–9 and notes 82 and 84. One step that Akimushkin for some reason failed to take remains: juxtaposing the terms of the Persian source with the illuminations in those manuscripts named in the source; according to Akimushkin, they have come down to us.

6. See, for example, *Mawarannah Book Painting*, compiled and introduced by O. Galerikina (Leningrad, 1980); D. Duda, *Islamische Handschriften II. Teil 1: Die Handschriften in Arabischer Sprache. Tafelband* (Wien, 1992). — *Die illuminierten Handschriften und Inkunabeln der österreichischen Nationalbibliothek*, 5; *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*. Bd 17: *Arabische Handschriften*. Reihe B. Teil 2. Beschrieben von G. Schoeler (Stuttgart, 1990) (Kopfstück; verzierte Anfangsseite). These selective examples can now be augmented with two comments made by M. I. Waley and F. Déroche in the book *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe* (Paris, 2000): “Selon certains, le *sarlowh/sarlawh* serait un panneau enluminé d’assez grandes dimensions, qui précéderait le début du texte principal.”



moins d'un quart de la surface de la page. Ici, le mot *sarlowh* est appliqué à un bandeau de titre" (p. 246, n. 4) and "... il faut souligner derechef que tous les termes qui seront employés ne sont pas universellement admis, tant en ce qui concerne leur sens que leur application. Le mot *'unwān*, par exemple, désigne souvent un bandeau de titre enluminé, mais des historiens de l'art et des auteurs de catalogues l'emploient, eux, pour un décor en pleine page, avec ou sans l'incipit; d'autres préfèrent, dans ce cas, parler de *sarlowh*" (p. 259).

7. A. B. Khalidov, "Knizhnaia kul'tura" ("Book culture"), in *Ocherki istorii arabskoï kul'tury V–XV vv.* (Moscow, 1982), p. 292; *idem*, *Arabskie rukopisi i arabskaia rukopisnaia traditsiia*, p. 174; *idem*, "Rukopisnaia kniga v arabskoï kul'ture" ("The manuscript book in Arab culture"), in *Rukopisnaia kniga v kul'ture narodov Vostoka. Ocherki*. Book one (Moscow, 1987), p. 293.

8. L. V. Dmitrieva, "Turetskaia arabopis'mennaia rukopisnaia kniga" ("The Turkish Arabic-script manuscript book"), *ibid.*, pp. 468–9.

9. O. F. Akimushkin and A. A. Ivanov, "The art of illumination", in *The Art of the Book in Central Asia: 14th–16th centuries*. Gen. ed. B. Gray (Paris–London, 1979), pp. 35–57, especially pp. 38–46.

10. Cf. *Islamische Buchkunst aus 1000 Jahren...* (Berlin, 1980), pp. 18–9.

11. W. Ahlwardt, *Verzeichniss der arabischen Handschriften*, Bd. 1–10 (Berlin, 1887–1899). — *Die Handschriften-Verzeichnisse der Königlichen Bibliothek zu Berlin*, Bd VII–IX, XVI–XXII.

12. *Arabskie rukopisi Instituta vostokovedeniia. Kratkii katalog*, pp. 237–335.

13. *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*. Bd 17: *Arabische Handschriften*. Teil 2.

14. Duda, *op. cit.*

15. The following published examples fall into this category: S. Dahan, *Le Diwan d'Abu Firas al-Hamdani*. No. 1 (Damas, 1944), pp. 40 ff.; O. F. Akimushkin, "Persidskaia rukopisnaia kniga" ("The Persian manuscript book"), in *Rukopisnaia kniga v kul'ture narodov Vostoka. Ocherki*. Book one (Moscow, 1987), ill. 47; R. Sellheim, *Materialien zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*. Teil 2 (Stuttgart, 1987), Taf. 18, Abb. 26; *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, Abb. 110 and 123; Duda, *op. cit.*, Abb. 167, 175, 176, 194, 205; U. N. al-Naqshbandī and Z. M. 'Abbās, *Makhṭūṭāt al-adab fi-l-maṭhaf al-'Irāqī* (*Adab Manuscripts in the Iraqi Museum*) (Kuwait, 1406/1985), ill. 12.

16. Examples: *Mawarannahr Book Painting*, p. 27 and ill. 2; R. Sellheim, *Materialien zur arabischen Literaturgeschichte*, Teil 1 (Stuttgart, 1976), Taf. 48, Abb. 58; *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, Abb. 96, 99, 121; al-Naqshbandī and 'Abbās, *op. cit.*, ill. 9.

17. *Verzeichnis der orientalischen Handschriften in Deutschland*, Abb. 111.

18. It is possible that in some cases the individual characteristics of illuminations will require the addition of some terms, and some illuminations may go by a different name. With the extension of quantitative analysis to *'unwān* illuminations we will need new terms. Whatever they may be, they are indispensable, if only to distinguish between the quantifiable and unquantifiable elements of illuminations.

19. A special album published in Turkey treats this type of decoration in *'unwān* illuminations: see *Tezhip sanatında tğ* (Ankara, 1991).

20. On the *mistara*, see Val. V. Polosin, "Arabic manuscripts: text density and its convertibility in copies of the same work", *Manuscripta Orientalia*, III/2 (1997), pp. 4 ff.; *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe*, p. 117, n. 20; also pp. 118, 175–8, 185.

21. For a page ruled in this fashion, see *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe*, p. 174, ill. 63.

22. In this regard I would like to draw attention to the rather large number of manuscripts where we find space left for an *'unwān* illumination but no illumination. Unfortunately, such details are not noted in manuscript descriptions. But this evidence of a plan that was conceived but never executed provides us with essential information on the history of manuscripts production. For example, these cases suggest that the copyist, in leaving space for the *'unwān*, "infringed" on cooperation with the artist. Was the intent to raise the sale price of the manuscript? Why did the illumination fail to appear? Perhaps the aim was to sell the manuscript initially to an illuminator who would then provide the illuminations and sell it himself? In order to answer the question of whether there was a union between copyists and illuminators, we need to investigate those manuscripts where space was left for illuminations that never appeared. Given the existence of a proportional canon, did copyists and illuminators agree beforehand on the textual imposition? What does this "imposition" mean in the context of a proportional canon?

23. In general, *'unwān* illuminations are, in the context of codicology, a part of the "organization of text on the page". This type of illumination does not, for all practical purposes, exist outside of this context. This is why it makes sense to show *'unwān* illuminations as part of an entire page; ideal would be a two-page display. Even art historians, I believe, would be dissatisfied with a "cut-out" of an illuminated page, especially in a black-and-white reproduction: both the composition on the page and colour scheme are lost. What remains to study?

24. For more on this unit of measurement, see *Manuel de codicologie des manuscrits en écriture arabe*, pp. 172–3.

25. See, for example, Val. V. Polosin, "'All is numbers'? An unknown numerical component in the design of medieval Arabic manuscripts", *Manuscripta Orientalia*, V/1 (1999), pp. 7–11; *idem*, "Unknown numerical aesthetics in the design of Turkish manuscripts", *Manuscripta Orientalia*, VII/4 (2001), pp. 30–6.

26. *Idem*, "Frontispieces on the scale canvas in Arabic manuscripts", *ibid.*, II/1 (1996), pp. 5–19.

## Illustrations

Fig. 1. See p. 13 of the present article.

Fig. 2. See p. 13 of the present article.

Fig. 3. See p. 13 of the present article.

Fig. 4. *Qur'ān, sūra 6*, manuscript A 133 in the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, 16th century, fols. 1b–2a.

Fig. 5. *Tāj al-lughā wa ṣiḥāḥ al-'arabiya* by Ismā'īl al-Jawhārī (d. 393/1002–03), manuscript C 735 in the same collection, 887/1482–83, fols. 1b–2a.

Fig. 6. *Mi'at kalimāt*, manuscript B 900 in the same collection, 956/1549, fols. 1b–2a.

Fig. 7. *Laṭā'if al-inshā'*, manuscript B 584 in the same collection, 925/1519, fols. 1b–2a.