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### Front cover:

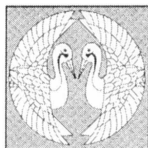
The depiction of Nāgeśvara-rāja, the “king of *nāgas*”, the central figure in the miniature from the first volume of the collection *Sungdui*. Manuscript K 6 in the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies, 17th century, lower cover, 63.0×21.5 cm.

### Back cover:

**Plate 1.** The depiction of *bodhisattva* Mañjuśrī, an embodiment of wisdom, on the left, and of Prajñāpāramitā as a *Yum*- “Mother”, on the right. Miniature from the second volume of the collection *Sungdui*, manuscript K 6, upper cover, 63.0×21.5 cm.

**Plate 2.** The depiction of the formidable deity Śrī Maqakala, the central figure, and of Guru Ganbo (Skt. Pañjara Mahākāla), on the left and right, the second volume of the collection *Sungdui*, manuscript K 6, lower cover, 63.0×21.5 cm.

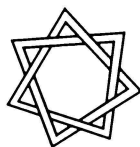
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M.-G. Guesdon

## THE BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE AND THE UNESCO'S MEDLIB PROJECT: A SEMINAR ON ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS COMPUTERISED CATALOGUING

In December 1998, The Bibliothèque nationale de France and UNESCO conducted a three-day seminar on the computerised cataloguing of Arabic manuscripts in the framework of a project of a Virtual Mediterranean Library (*MEDLIB*). This UNESCO-initiated project aims to create a virtual information network for the Mediterranean region and to promote co-operation among scholars, researchers, teachers, and other information users and providers. The use of information resources by setting up co-operative mechanisms between information sources and users is also meant, so as to contribute to the scientific and cultural development of the region. UNESCO is now developing other projects in the field of information and books, like *Memory of the World*, to preserve and promote a universal documentary heritage. The other projects are the UNESCO *Network of Associated Libraries (UNAL)* to encourage public libraries to undertake activities related to UNESCO's missions, *Info-Ethics*, *Learning Without Frontiers*, and *Rural Multipurpose Community Telecentres*.

The specific aim of the *MEDLIB* is to collect on the Internet the documentary heritage of the Mediterranean, either produced by institutions in the region or elsewhere, as well as to establish a domain of co-operation of the North with South for the promotion of a virtual Mediterranean library. The main axes are:

— Access to works in the public domain: the facilitation of access to documents by ways of their digitisation, availability on the Internet and their multilingual indexing.

— Utilisation of the Internet, considered as ideal for the development of information in the public domain, but at present without any standardised rules of access or classification.

— Multilinguism and multialphabetism: facing the great diversity of languages and writing, multilingual thesauri allow a documentary search in one language and retrieval in the same or other languages.

— Norms and standards: the adoption and utilisation of norms and standards is crucial for the library interoperability, the provision and the access of services within an heterogeneous context including different data structures, library and communication systems.

— Human resources and training of both information professionals and information and communication special-

ists for the design, development and operation of library and information applications and services.

The Bibliothèque nationale de France was invited to participate in this project. In June 1998, a group of experts from eight Mediterranean countries was set up. The first result was the creation of an e-mail discussion list ([medlib@unesco.org](mailto:medlib@unesco.org)) dedicated in priority to news concerning multilinguism, standards and software allowing access to databases on the Internet. Different projects have been launched in Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia, and Palestine, not all of them about manuscripts.

Among those related to manuscripts, we can mention digitisation of four manuscripts kept in the National Library in Tunisia and a plan for digitisation of manuscripts kept in al-Ḥasaniyya, the Royal library in Morocco. The Bibliothèque nationale de France proposed setting up a seminar on the computerised cataloguing of Arabic manuscripts. France, like many other Mediterranean countries, possesses numerous Arabic manuscripts. It is especially true with regard to the Bibliothèque nationale de France, which holds 7,265 manuscripts. A new catalogue is now in progress, and we are working on its computerisation.

Since no standard exists for the content of manuscript bibliographical notices, Arabic or otherwise, except local traditions and habits, the Bibliothèque nationale de France prepared a unique InterMarc format of description for all documents, books and non-book materials. The specialists on the Arabic manuscripts worked on the inclusion of this type of document in the catalogue based on this format. The format developed makes it possible to take manuscripts' particularities into consideration, first, due to the fact that these materials are manuscripts, secondly to the fact that they are Arabic manuscripts.

The work is now practically completed. In ancient manuscript will be considered as a "type of document", a category noted by a special code in the Guide zone, inducing a particular coded information zone (009) mentioning, for example, the presence of ornaments or paintings. Four types of notice exist: collections, monographs, analytical notices and local data notices. For example, a manuscript containing four texts will be treated in one collection notice for the common elements, four monographs describing the particular elements of each part which, contrary to

the case of the printed book, cannot figure in an analytical notice, since each one has its own date of copy transcribed in the bibliographical address zone (260), and a local data notice describing the transmission of the volume, its binding and localisation. If somebody decided to write an ink recipe on a guard page or whatever, there would be an analytical notice.

We had to define some specific zones for manuscripts, such as for transcribing the incipit or describing the paper, and to give a new interpretation to zones common to manuscripts and printed books. For example, the bibliographical address will contain the place of copy, the date and the name of the copyist. The bibliographical notices will be linked to authority notices for the names of persons, organisations, titles and sometimes subjects. After the completion of the format, we will face another problem the problem of language and alphabet. Describing an Arabic manuscript requires the use of the Arabic alphabet, at least for names of persons, titles and transcriptions of texts which could be several lines long, like incipits and colophons. Although the international standardised transliteration of Arabic characters to Latin characters (ISO 233—2:1993) is quickly memorised by librarians, it difficult for users not familiar with it, be they those who live in an Arabic country but never employed transliteration, or those who are from non-Arab countries but are used to other traditional systems. Those used by the Library of Congress, the Encyclopaedia of Islam, or in Spanish academic papers are more widespread than ISO 233—2, which is relatively better known in France, because one of its variants used in the paper *Arabica* became a standard for scholars. One of the most important reasons, apart from the reader's comfort, is that transliteration is always an interpretation as one is forced to write vowels which generally are lacking in the manuscript.

However, an entirely Arabic description is not conceivable in a French catalogue. It is not only a question of national language: users sometimes consult a description of an Arabic manuscript without knowing Arabic for research related to the history of libraries, the history of paper, the art of binding, illumination, or other subjects non-related to language. Many people have also to consult a catalogue for professional purposes, such as photographers or restorers who are not expected to know all languages written in the library's documents. Therefore, some information in the catalogue will be given twice, in the ISO 233—2 transliteration system and in Arabic characters. As well our present system is unable to provide this possibility, and at least two years are required to develop a system which is able to working with Unicode and to read bibliographical notices representing different types of characters. Bearing in mind that in other libraries, other Arabic-only systems were developed with different items for description, without taking Marc formats into consideration, it was important to think of compatibility between the contents of descriptions, the formats in which they are structured, and the systems, in view of a possible collective catalogue of Arabic manuscripts. It then would be possible to group those interested in cataloguing Arabic manuscripts, in databases, printed or on cards catalogues to discuss the issue of harmonisation with different practices.

As the participants in the expert group were interested in a union catalogue, we proposed to set up a seminar to discuss these issues. One of the aspects related to manuscripts was digitisation. The Bibliothèque nationale de

France has had an experience in this field, even if Arabic manuscripts were not really concerned at that time. So, one day of the seminar had to be set aside for this subject. We called for a participation from libraries in the Mediterranean area, because significant collections of Arabic manuscripts were held there, but first of all from those who took part at the first expert group and showed interest in this question. As the meeting was held in France with participation of Bibliothèque nationale de France's staff, it would be held in French and candidates had to speak French. Finally, the seminar was held in December 1998 with participants from Albania (National Library), Bosnia—Herzegovina (National Library), Egypt (Dār al-Kutub and Bibliothèque Alexandrina), France, Lebanon (CNRS Lebanon), Mauritania (one person representing FNSVA: National Foundation for the Safeguard of the Ancient Cities in Mauritania, Unesco and Rhône-Poulenc Foundation), Morocco (General Library and Archives and Hasaniyya Library), Spain (Biblioteca Islamica "Felix Maria Pareja") and Tunisia (National Library). A participation of Algeria (National Library) was expected, but for administrative reasons was not possible. Mr René Cluzel, in charge of the *MEDLIB* project at UNESCO, and members of the Bibliothèque nationale de France in the International Relations Direction, Computer and Bibliographical Co-ordination departments were also participants. Some of these institutions were more involved in cataloguing, others in digitisation projects. Three had developed databases for their catalogues of Arabic manuscripts: Dār al-Kutub in Cairo, National Library and Archives in Rabat and Bibliothèque nationale de France in Paris, but Cairo's database in the only one working non experimentally at present.

Dār al-Kutub's database has been developed by the ISDC (Information and Decision Support Center) which in Egypt provides technical support to governmental and regional organisations for library automation. It is operating since May 1992 and now contains more than 50,000 references with 7,000 names of authors. The description is quite detailed, with a lot of indexing criteria and some text zones allow a free text description. Author, title, subject, or other criteria are search criteria. These other criteria contain items like material description (paper, ink, dimensions ...), binding, copy (date, name of copyist, style of the script ...), incipit and end of the text, ex-libris, *samā'*, *ijāzat*, *waqfs*, and call number. The bibliographical notices are linked to authors' notices, containing a lot of references to biographical works. The Moroccan database has been conceived with the University of Tübingen, with a common commercial software, Access Arabic/English. No entries are now in the complete database, but a simplified version has been established for the manuscripts of the Qarawiyyin in Fes. The manuscript descriptions were taken from the printed catalogue, with some corrections and additions. A CD-Rom containing the Qarawiyyin manuscripts catalogue and some of its digitised images will be soon published.

These two databases are in Arabic characters only. Another common point is that they are not intended for including in a global library catalogue which contains other types of documents as well. In France, a different choice has been made. The Arabic manuscripts catalogue will be included in the one comprising all documents, although it will be possible to extract this type of document or edition of printed catalogues for consultation. The content-descriptions in the three projects are very different:

in Egypt, the most detailed information is given about authors, in France the codicological aspect is particularly developed. However, none of the three systems is conceived for a network of Arabic manuscript catalogues: one is part of the catalogue of a library and two are special databases. After discussing issues related to content of the catalogues, the existing formats and databases, we should bear in mind this diversity of approach.

The participants in the seminar defined the objective as a unique computerised catalogue available on the Internet. This catalogue has to be compatible with existing systems. UNESCO would produce interfaces between the different local systems and this unique multialphabetic catalogue will help to equip the libraries which need it. The first step is to define the project: to compare the present catalogues of all participants, computerised or otherwise, select the elements of a minimal satisfactory description, dispatch these elements to different zones and structure them in a compatible format. The exchange format Unimarc, in use for printed books, would require some content modifications to give a satisfactory description of manuscripts. The second step is to set up an experimental model.

Another result of the seminar concerns the access to information about collections of Arabic manuscripts and the utilisation of the Internet site *MEDLIB*

([http://www.unesco.org/webworld/build\\_info/medlib.html](http://www.unesco.org/webworld/build_info/medlib.html)) to publicise information about the libraries and collections of the participants, and share knowledge about Arabic manuscripts. Short descriptions of collections, bibliographies will be also put on-line, beginning with a bibliography of publications related to codicology since 1985. Following that, earlier periods will be put on-line, probably with other themes like palaeography or preservation.

A Moroccan colleague proposed a multilingual vocabulary related to manuscripts. The site now contains a presentation of *MEDLIB*, information concerning the discussion list and links: *Websites of archives and libraries in the Mediterranean region, On line libraries with full texts related to the Mediterranean and UNESCO Mediterranean links.*

The development of this project will depend on participants' commitment. It is open to Mediterranean public or research libraries which did not take part in the seminar for different reasons but contain important collections of Arabic manuscripts. Probably, those which are at the beginning of the process of computerisation of their manuscript catalogue will find this work of interest and those which have not yet begun this computerisation will be able to join a group of institutions which have experienced the same problems. The result could be a fruitful partnership for researchers concerned with Arabic manuscripts.

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