

# Digital collections of early printed materials in the Arabic script

What follows is a survey of some online collections, summarising the presentation given at the 35th MELCom International Conference in Moscow, May 2013.

## Definitions:-

“Digital” here means digitised images (facsimiles) , not digitised texts

“Collections” here means libraries, large and small, and groups of libraries, national and international, holding any relevant materials

“Early” here means before 1923 (end of the Ottoman period)

“Printed” here means mechanically produced in multiple copies

“Materials” here means books, newspapers and other serials, and documents, including mediæval block-prints

Early printed texts in the Arabic script fall essentially into three categories:-

### **1. Mediaeval block-printed documents, 10<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> centuries**

These long pre-date Gutenberg, and are mainly Arabic religious texts used as amulets.

### **2. Books printed in Europe, 16<sup>th</sup> – 19<sup>th</sup> centuries**

These reflect the development of Orientalist scholarship, but some were also exported to the Middle East

### **3. Books and newspapers printed in the Middle East and Muslim world, 18<sup>th</sup> – early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries**

These include lithographed texts imitating MSS, but produced in large numbers

Facsimile images of original printed editions enable us to study their historical physical attributes: typography, *mise-en-page*, illustrations, decorations, etc. They can also provide evidence of readership and ownership: annotations, inscriptions, signatures, book-plates, etc.

Here are some sites where they may be found:-

#### **WORLD DIGITAL LIBRARY (UNESCO)**

<http://www.wdl.org>

Contributed by a wide range of national and academic libraries across 6 continents, these images are mostly of MSS, documents, maps, photographs and modern books in various languages. But there are a few early Arabic-script printed books among them, notably from libraries in Kazakhstan, Pakistan, Qatar, Iraq and Iran (incl. the very first Persian book printed there).

#### **The EUROPEAN LIBRARY**

<http://www.theeuropeanlibrary.org/tel4/>

This is primarily a portal to the collections of European National and academic libraries, both their catalogue records and their digital collections. These do include a significant number of Arabic-script items. As we might expect, a high proportion of these are European publications. But some books published in Muslim countries are included.

## **E-CORPUS**

<http://www.e-corpus.org/>

This is another joint venture, based in France, but incorporating some holdings of other libraries in the Mediterranean area, which is its focus. Its digital content consists mainly of manuscripts, pictorial images and European-language texts, but there are some Arabic printed items.

## **GALLICA**

<http://gallica.bnf.fr/>

This is the main French digital library, hosted by the Bibliothèque nationale de France. It boasts a very large number of digitised texts and images. The main emphasis is naturally on French materials, but there are some printed Arabic texts, including those from the press of Napoléon in Egypt, as well as later Egyptian, French and other presses.

## **The HATHI TRUST**

<http://www.hathitrust.org/>

This offers a large multilateral digital collection, based in North America. It provides images of the contents of many academic libraries. “Hathi” ہاتھی is the Urdu word for “elephant”, chosen because elephants are supposed to have large memories. Some of these libraries contain early Arabic-script books, which can be accessed through this portal.

## **INTERNET ARCHIVE**

<http://archive.org/details/texts>

This is another multilateral portal which gives access to images of a wide range of printed books in US and Canadian libraries. A significant number of these are early Arabic-script items, but it has not been possible to quantify them without extensive research in the database.

## **ÖSTERREICHISCHE NATIONALBIBLIOTHEK (ÖNB)**

<http://www.onb.ac.at/kataloge/index.htm>

The Austrian National Library in Vienna has a very good collection of digital materials, which can be accessed via their

OPAC. These include early and rare books in the Arabic script. They are particularly strong on Ottoman imprints, as well as rare books from the Habsburg empire, including some in Arabic script.

But the most important collection in this library from our point of view is probably the papyrus collection (Papyrussammlung). Many of its documents are on paper, not papyrus, and they include more than 20 mediæval Arabic printed items. All of them have been digitised and put online, and they provide a first-rate means for scholars worldwide to study and assess them.

## **DET KONGELIGE BIBLIOTEK**

<http://www.kb.dk/en/nb/samling/os/naeroest/arabdigi.html>

Another national library that has been digitally active in our field is the Royal Library in Denmark. Although most of the images are of MSS, there is a handful of early Middle Eastern printed books.

## **BIBLIOTECA NACIONAL DE ESPAÑA (BNE)**

<http://www.bne.es/es/Catalogos/BibliotecaDigitalHispanica/Inicio/index.html>

The national library of Spain offers a *Biblioteca Digital Hispánica* where we can find many interesting items,

including rare examples of Arabic typography in 18<sup>th</sup>-century Spain.

## **BAYERISCHE STAATSBIBLIOTHEK (BSB)**

<https://opacplus.bsb-muenchen.de>

One of the best and most important digital collections is offered by the Bavarian State Library in Munich. It includes over 100 printed books using Arabic characters, which are freely available online. Most of them are of the 19<sup>th</sup> century or earlier, and are from the rich collections of European scholars such as the French orientalist Etienne Quatremère.

## **BODLEIAN LIBRARIES, UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD**

<http://solo.bodleian.ox.ac.uk>

This major academic library has undertaken an extensive digitisation project, which includes many early Arabic-script books, from both Europe and the Muslim lands. The images are also available via the European Library (see above).

## **UNIVERSITEIT LEIDEN: BIBLIOTHEEKEN**

<https://socrates.leidenuniv.nl>

Leiden University Library in the Netherlands has put some of its early Arabic printed books online, as part of its **Digital Special Collections**. These include items from the collections of celebrated Dutch Orientalists, such as Snouck Hurgronje.

## **UNIVERSITY OF UTAH: MARRIOTT DIGITAL LIBRARY**

<http://www.lib.utah.edu/collections/digital-library.php>

This American university has included some interesting items in its digitisation programme, including a number of Ottoman imprints. But the most important images are probably those of their small collection of mediæval Arabic block-prints.

Unfortunately the site is difficult to navigate. The page entitled “Middle East Collections” offers only 9 items: to find the many others, including the block-prints, it is necessary to “Search the Digital Library” from the opening page.

Two US museums have also digitised some mediæval Arabic printed material:-

## **METROPOLITAN MUSEUM OF ART, NEW YORK**

<http://www.metmuseum.org/collections/search-the-collections?&ft=block-print&where=Egypt&pg=1>

A few Arabic block-prints can be found among the online images here.

## **LOS ANGELES COUNTY MUSEUM OF ART**

[http://collections.lacma.org/search/site/amulet%2520paper?f\[0\]=bm field has image%3Atrue&retain-filters=1](http://collections.lacma.org/search/site/amulet%2520paper?f[0]=bm field has image%3Atrue&retain-filters=1)

Images of two Arabic block-prints, in the Madina collection, are available here.

In most of the collections mentioned so far, the Arabic-script and Middle Eastern material is not grouped as such, and there is no programme to digitise it specifically. You have to know what you are looking for, and search for it, although subject and language keywords and qualifiers can help.

But there are a few collections that are specific to our field, which now follow:-

### **UNIVERSITÄT HALLE-WITTENBERG: UNIVERSITÄTS- UND LANDESBIBLIOTHEK (ULB): SONDERSAMMELGEBIET VORDERER ORIENT**

<http://menadoc.bibliothek.uni-halle.de/ssg/nav/history>

The digitisation project was initiated here by the late and much lamented Lutz Wiederhold. It is still ongoing, but is already a most valuable resource, with over 3000 titles available. They started with the holdings of the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft in Halle, which includes much 19<sup>th</sup>-century material, both European publications and Middle Eastern ones.



At Halle they have also digitised the important Turkish research library of Jacob Landau, which contains many Ottoman publications.

## **HARVARD UNIVERSITY: ISLAMIC HERITAGE PROJECT**

<http://ocp.hul.harvard.edu/ihp/pubmaterials.html>

This has so far digitised not only important MSS, as elsewhere, but also, unlike elsewhere, a nearly equal number of printed texts (over 275). These date almost entirely from before 1923, and cover a wide range of subjects, languages and places of publication.

## **BIBLIOTHECA ALEXANDRINA: DIGITAL ASSETS REPOSITORY**

<http://dar.bibalex.org/webpages/dar.jsf>

This consists mainly of Arabic printed books. Some of them are early ones, of which the Alexandria Library has a significant collection.

## **UNIVERSITÄTS- UND LANDESBIBLIOTHEK BONN: BIBLIOTHEK GOUSSEN**

<http://www.ulb.uni-bonn.de/die-ulb/profil/sammlungen/historische-bibliotheken/bibliothek-goussen>

This is a specialised collection of Oriental Christian texts, including 226 in Arabic. It comprises both European and Middle Eastern editions, most of them fully digitised and available online. This is a valuable resource, in view of the important part played by Christian Arabic books, produced both by missionaries and by Arab Christians, in the early development of Arabic printing.

### **SAINT JOHN'S UNIVERSITY: HILL MUSEUM & MANUSCRIPT LIBRARY**

<http://www.hmml.org/research2010/vivarium.htm>

Another collection of digitised Christian books is maintained at this American university, and made available through their *Vivarium* database. Most of them are manuscripts, but there are some printed Arabic editions, mainly European.

### **TÜRKİYE BÜYÜK MİLLET MECLİSİ: KÜTÜPHANE VE DOKÜMANTASYON MÜDÜRLÜĞÜ**

[http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/e\\_yayin.liste\\_q?ptip=EHT](http://www.tbmm.gov.tr/develop/owa/e_yayin.liste_q?ptip=EHT)

The Library & Documentation Directorate of the Turkish Grand National Assembly provides this database of what they

call “E-sources” (*E-Kaynaklar*), which includes a wide range of Ottoman Turkish printed books. These have to be selected from a long list of romanised titles, which is not in alphabetical order.

## İSLÂM ARAŞTIRMALARI MERKEZİ

<http://www.isam.org.tr/>

The Islamic Studies Centre in Üsküdar offers three significant online collections of Ottoman printed materials in facsimile images:-

- 1) *Salnâmeler*: the official yearbooks which are very important sources of statistical and other information on all the Ottoman provinces. Over 520 are available here.
- 2) *Osmanlıca Risaleler*: over 2400 pamphlets or “treatises” in Ottoman Turkish, mainly on political, religious and educational subjects.
- 3) *Osmanlıca Makaleler*: articles from 20 Ottoman Turkish periodicals.

The facsimiles are provided as PDF files.

## DUKE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

<http://archive.org/details/dulturk>

This American academic library is another source of digitised Ottoman texts. They have a collection of 126 such books, which they have made available via the Internet Archive platform (see above). These include not only classical literature but also works of popular fiction.

## **AFGHANISTAN DIGITAL LIBRARY**

<http://afghanistandl.nyu.edu/index.html>

This digital corpus was initiated at New York University Libraries, partly in response to the serious losses sustained by libraries and private collections caused by the many years of conflict in Afghanistan, which has threatened the total destruction of the Afghan textual heritage. The aim is to reconstitute digitally as much as possible of what was published there in the first 30 years of Afghan printing, 1870-1930. This has been done from copies surviving in America, Britain and in Afghanistan itself. Significant holdings in other countries, notably Russia, have not so far been included.

## **ҚАЗАҚСТАН РЕСПУБЛИКАСЫНЫҢ ҰЛТТЫҚ КІТАПХАНАСЫ**

[http://www.nlrk.kz/page.php?page\\_id=1184&lang=3](http://www.nlrk.kz/page.php?page_id=1184&lang=3)

The National Library of Kazakhstan provides low-resolution images of 12 Kazakh books in Arabic script, published between 1897 and 1926. Some additional ones are provided through the World Digital Library (see above).

Users can choose between Kazakh, Russian and English interfaces.

## **BIBLIOTHÈQUE VIRTUELLE DE L'UNIVERSITÉ D'ALGER**

<http://biblio.univ-alger.dz/jspui/handle/1635/2>

The University of Algiers Library has digitised a large number of books of the 19th century and earlier, as part of its *Jazairiates* database. The great majority of these are in French or other European languages, but a few do contain Arabic texts.

## **LA BIBLIOTHÈQUE NUMÉRIQUE MAROCAINE**

المكتبة الرقمية المغربية

<http://bnm.bnrm.ma:86/ListeLithographies.aspx?IDC=2>

The Moroccan Digital Library, created by the Bibliothèque Nationale du Royaume du Maroc (BNRM), has a special section devoted to lithographed books, containing digital images of over 30 of them. Almost all printing in Morocco

was lithographic until well into the 20C, so these are of particular historic importance.

Users can choose between Arabic and French interfaces.

## LITHOGRAPHED EDITIONS OF FIRDAWSĪ'S SHĀHNĀMAH ONLINE

<http://www.brill.com/publications/online-resources/lithographed-editions-firdawsis-shahnamah-online>

This database offers the complete text of thirteen 19<sup>th</sup>-century illustrated lithographed editions of the Shāhnāmah. It is published commercially by Brill: access is available at an outright purchase price of €2910.

## MİLLİ KÜTÜPHANE: SÜRELİ YAYINLAR BİLGİ SİSTEMİ

<http://sureli.mkutup.gov.tr/>

This database of Ottoman newspapers and periodicals is maintained by the Turkish National Library in Ankara. It contains full-text images of a wide range of serials from 1840 (*Ceride-i Havadis*) to 1928.

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The foregoing list is far from comprehensive. There are certainly many images of early printed Arabic-script materials

available elsewhere online, and it is to be hoped that more collections will be digitised in the near future. It is also likely that some of the links given here will be changed or taken down in course of time.

I should therefore be very grateful for any information which will enable me to update this list. Please send it to me at the E-mail address below.

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