Yale-SOAS Islamic Manuscript Gallery

Peter Colvin

When SOAS was approached by Yale University Library early in 2009 to be a partner in an application for joint funding from the American National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the British funding body JISC for cooperative digitisation projects, it jumped at the chance.

Yale is not only one of the best universities in the world in most rankings, but is also generally recognised as the leader in the field of Arabic digitisation and in particular optical character recognition (OCR) ie the conversion of images of text into machine-encoded text.

SOAS on the other hand has only just begun to enter the increasingly important field of digitisation. Malcolm Raggett, the Head of CeDAAME (the SOAS Centre for Digital Asia and Africa) on looking at Yale's website remarked that "Yale are years ahead of us in the planning for digital delivery".

The concept behind this joint project (the brainchild of Elizabeth Beaudin of Yale University) is to create an online digital workshop in which all the items necessary to a scholar of Islamic manuscripts would be available in one place. These would include manuscripts, manuscript catalogues and dictionaries. SOAS was only required to tailor their part of the application to JISC's requirements, and to choose the items to be digitised from their collection. However despite the originality of the Yale-SOAS project, the fact that there were twenty-seven other applications of which only four would succeed, seemed to make long odds against it.

Moreover SOAS Library had taken part in 2006 in a joint application to JISC for funding for digitising Islamic manuscripts called the Diwan project, which had included most of the important university collections in the U.K. but was nevertheless unsuccessful.

However since then the environment in the UK had changed. "Responding to a 2007 decision by the UK government to designate Islamic Studies a strategically important subject, JISC commissioned a report from the University of Exeter: *Review of user requirements for digitised resources in Islamic studies*.[1] The report made various recommendations on how JISC could improve digital infrastructure for researchers and teachers in Islamic Studies. HEFCE awarded JISC funds to follow up two of these recommendations:
1) Digitise recent PhD theses in Islamic Studies via the Ethos service
2) Catalogue and manuscript digitisation"[2]

Shortly before the deadline for the Anglo-American joint projects, JISC invited applications from a fund specifically for the digitisation of Islamic manuscripts. SOAS took a gamble by not applying for this new pot of money and continued with

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[1] Available at http://projects.exeter.ac.uk/digiIslam/
[2] From the JISC website

the Yale-SOAS bid. In the event, the Yale-SOAS project has been funded from the joint US-UK projects fund, as have two other projects from its newer fund: a joint Oxford/Cambridge project for cataloguing their Arabic and Persian manuscripts, and a similar one by the Wellcome Library.

Compared to these other libraries SOAS has a small, but nevertheless important collection of Islamic manuscripts. In 1939, the well known scholar A.J. Arberry who was then working as a librarian in the India Office Library, apparently off his own bat catalogued the Arabic and Persian manuscripts in SOAS. The correspondence preserved in the SOAS Archives shows that the original plan was for the catalogue to be published in the School's Bulletin. However the trustees of the Bulletin rejected the idea and it was decided that the Library would publish it and subsequently recover some of the costs by selling copies. Three printing firms in the Middle East, two in Beirut and one in Cairo, were invited to bid and the American Press of Beirut won the contract. The catalogues were sent in 1939 shortly before the outbreak of the Second World War. After the entry of the United States into the War in 1942, the shortages of paper and difficulties in correspondence between London and Beirut which were hampering the progress of printing and the corrections of proofs were exacerbated. Difficulties continued even after the war. In 1949 and 1950 the firm tried to order missing letters of the special Arabic type that they needed for printing from Britain, sending their letters via the School. The painfully slow process of printing was finally halted in 1950, and regretably all that seems to remain of the catalogue are some galley proofs preserved in the SOAS Archive.
In the 1980's a young Polish scholar of Arabic called Adam Gacek re-catalogued the Arabic manuscripts, and this was published in 1981 with a revised edition in 1985. These had all been microfiched by IDC/Brill and will be digitised in due course. Of particular interest is the fact that the Beirut printers acknowledged the receipt of the Arberry catalogues which included 148 Arabic titles and 300 Persian ones. Gacek's Arabic catalogue includes 394 titles.

With the loss of Arberry's Persian catalogue the obvious choice for digitisation was therefore Persian manuscripts, which have never been properly recatalogued. At the same time the original choice of manuscript catalogues and dictionaries was now altered slightly to fit in with the Oxford and Cambridge JISC project.

The project plan called for six manuscripts of importance for their content. With a close deadline for the application and a lack of a proper catalogue, Peter Colvin consulted Alexander Morton, former Lecturer in Persian at SOAS, and he recommended an important manuscript that he had been working on called Ganj al-Ganj. This is a complete copy of a rare work on *andarz*, advice on conduct, illustrated by anecdotes, composed in the early twelfth century in the reign of the Ghaznavid Mas'ud III. Among numerous verse quotations are the earliest known examples of some quatrains found much later attributed to 'Umar Khayyam.

Another manuscript selected by Peter Colvin was an important source for 17th-19th Century Iranian history known as *Rustam al-tawarikh* by an historian called Rustam al-Hukama. This was judged by Arberry to be the original copy, but it appears to be known neither to Birgitt Hoffmann, who translated the *Rustam al-tawarikh* into German with a study of the author 1986, nor to Muhammad Mushiri, the author of the Persian edition of the *Rustam al-tawarikh* published in Tehran in 1973.

This underlines the importance of making the existence of the Persian manuscripts more widely known and accessible. While the current project will be restricted to six manuscripts, it will supply a template for a full catalogue of the SOAS Persian manuscripts that could be published on the internet in future projects.

The second part of the current project presents a greater technical challenge. It involves the digitisation of a selection of three standard Persian to English and Arabic to French dictionaries by Steingass, Biberstein-Kazimirski and Dozy, as well as seven manuscript catalogues. The challenging part of the project lies in the intention of applying optical character recognition (OCR) to this part of the digitisation, so that the works can be interrogated in a number of ways. The Arabic script presents special difficulties for this, and OCR for Arabic and Persian is much less advanced than for Latin based scripts.
It is hoped that with the help of Yale's considerable experience and expertise in this area these problems will be overcome.

The manuscript catalogues were chosen by SOAS in part to complement the other JISC supported project to supply the metadata of the Arabic and Persian manuscripts in the Oxford Bodleian and the Cambridge University Libraries. For example they also include the catalogue of Arabic manuscripts in the Bodleian Library published in 1787, while Yale includes a later catalogue of the same subject published in 1840.

The Curator of the project is Narguess Farzad who is a senior fellow in SOAS and teaches Persian. She thinks that this is an exciting project which will encourage Persian scholarship at SOAS and will benefit readers, students and researchers both in the School and beyond it.

[Peter Colvin was the Specialist Librarian for the Islamic Middle East in SOAS till 2009.]