

NOTES ON A PRIVATE LIBRARY IN FOURTH/TENTH-CENTURY BAGHDAD

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Studies on medieval Arabic bibliophilia have mainly focussed on public and semi-public institutions, for some of which we have detailed information. Less is known about private libraries and their physical arrangement. This paper looks at the library of Abū Bakr al-Šūlī (d. 335/947), which is described by the sources in unique terms, contextualising it with al-Šūlī's own words on collecting and organizing books.

The importance of bibliophilia and its by-product—the library—for medieval Arabic culture is well documented in the sources and has been studied by scholars since the 1800s.¹ Information has come down to us not only on public and semi-public libraries such as al-Ma'mūn's *ḥizānat al-ḥikma* and institutions connected to *madrasas*, but also on collections held by private individuals. However, while for the former we do have information on the physical spaces containing the books and on their arrangement, descriptions of early private libraries mainly restrict themselves to the amount of books they contained, their value, and the subjects they covered. The fourth/tenth-century bookseller and bibliophile Ibn al-Nadīm, for instance, mentions that the historian al-Wāqidi (d. 207/823) had left at his death six hundred cases full of books, each of which could only be carried by two men.² Accounts such as this are frequent, and modern scholars have been able to collect detailed information on the libraries of specific individuals who lived in late and post-^cAbbāsīd times.³ However, the library as a physical space, and the organization and arrangement of books within it are rarely mentioned.

Ibn al-Nadīm cites eleven individuals as book-collectors (*ḡammā' a li-l-kutub*).⁴ He also mentions actual libraries (*ḥizāna*), two of which belonged to caliphs, saying of one private library, which he had

¹ An early example is É. Quatremère, *Mémoire*. More recent studies are cited below.

² Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 380/990), *Fihrist*, 1, part 2: 308.

³ For instance, U. Haarmann, 'Library'; and E. Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar*. For a sociological profile of the book-collector across centuries and cultures, see H. Touati, *Armoire*, 30–9.

⁴ *Fihrist*, indexes, 2, part 2: 932 and 933 respectively.

personally visited, that it was the largest he had ever seen.⁵ Its owner, Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn b. Abī Ba^crah, kept antique and precious books in a case there, which he took out to show to Ibn al-Nadīm. The case (*qimaṭr*) weighed 300 *raṭl* and contained writings on different materials, heavily annotated by successive owners. Unfortunately, after the owner's death, Ibn al-Nadīm lost track of the case and its contents.⁶

Ibn al-Nadīm does not give any physical details for the other libraries he mentions in the *Fihrist*. However, he says that he had seen a notebook (*daftar*) coming from the library of another individual whom he identifies as a collector: the courtier, litterateur and chess-player Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī (d. 335/947). This notebook is the proof that al-Ṣūlī was a plagiarist:

[...] *A Biography and Selected Poetry* of Sudayf [d. 147/764]. For the composition of this book he relied on the book of al-Marṭadī [d. 286/899], *Poetry and Poets*, or rather he copied it word by word and plagiarized it. I have seen the notebook in the handwriting of the man himself; it came from the library of al-Ṣūlī, so it all became clear.⁷

A more unusual description of the library of al-Ṣūlī is recorded by al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī:

[...] I saw that al-Ṣūlī had an enormous apartment full of books which were arranged into rows. Their bindings were of different colours, each row of books in a colour: one row was red, another green, another yellow, etc. [...] al-Ṣūlī] would say: 'All these books are notes from lectures I have attended'.⁸

Al-Ṣūlī's claim in the last sentence deserves investigation. He says '*ḥaḍīhi l-kutub kulluhā samā^cī*.' Sellheim ties *samā^c* to the establishment of *madrasas* in the late fifth/eleventh century. In that context, it indicates a written attestation that an individual has attended lectures on a certain book.⁹ That the term is used in reference to al-Ṣūlī may indicate that a similar procedure was in practice earlier than the period proposed by Sellheim; this is in fact what Toorawa's translation of this passage

⁵ Al-Mu^ctaḍid (*Fihrist*, 1, part 1: 177) and al-Ma^cmūn (1, part 1: 13 and 15); see footnote 2 on p. 13 for this library and al-Ma^cmūn's *bayt al-ḥikma*).

⁶ *Fihrist*, 1, part 1: 106–8.

⁷ *Fihrist*, 1, part 1: 465. For a physical description of a *daftar* see J. M. Bloom, *Paper before Print*, 140–1.

⁸ Al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baḡdādī (d. 463/1071), *Ta^rrīḥ Baḡdād*, 5: 202.

⁹ R. Sellheim, 'samā^c'.

implies.¹⁰ However, al-Ṣūlī may intend with *samāʿ* not a written document but simply the act of auditing the lectures and taking notes. Therefore, it is possible to interpret the statement as saying not that his books are his lectures, but that he has attended lectures on the contents of all of them. Many of al-Ṣūlī's books would indeed have been *dafātīr*, notebooks from lectures which he then might use to compose his own works.¹¹ However, if Ibn al-Nadīm's testimony above is to be believed, not all of these were his own work.

Al-Ṣūlī's claim is important because it introduces the next two accounts in his biography: when asked a scholarly question, we are told, al-Ṣūlī would not answer immediately from his memory, but would call a servant and have a book brought to him. 'Al-Ṣūlī is indeed a scholar', says a short satire, 'but only to the extent that he can look things up in a book'.¹² Once again, as in the *Fihrist*, the implications of being a book collector are not wholly positive.

Let us return to the material details: al-Ṣūlī's books were not, or not all, stored in a *qimaṭr*, a case made of woven reeds, but filled a large apartment (*bayt*), where they were arranged in rows (*maṣfūfa*), each of which had leather bindings (*ḡulūd*) of a different colour. The first part of the statement appears to be illustrated precisely by a miniature on a Baghdadi manuscript copied in 634/1237: books would be stacked in little piles on shelves divided into sections.¹³ On the other hand, the

¹⁰ S.M. Toorawa, *Ibn Abī Ṭāhir Ṭayfūr*, 23: 'all these books are my certificates of audition.'

¹¹ See also the first two chapters of G. Schoeler, *The Oral and the Written*, 28–86; *idem* and S. M. Toorawa, *The Genesis of Literature*, 128. According to Schoeler's definition, these would be *hypomnema*. More information and further bibliography on this topic can be found in Konrad Hirschler's contribution to this volume.

¹² *Ibid.* Later sources merge these three successive accounts. However, in al-Ḥaṭīb's biography, which is the earliest, these are juxtaposed but distinct. The question is discussed in more detailed in my 'Tailors of Stories'.

¹³ BnF Arabe 5847, 5v. The entire manuscript is available for download from the website of the Bibliothèque nationale de France <http://gallica.bnf.fr/>. The miniature is described by Pinto, 'The Libraries of the Arabs', 229. A black and white image of it was first published by E. Blochet, *Les Enluminures des manuscrits orientaux*, table X. Versions in colour can be found in J. Bloom, *Paper before Print*, 119; and in H. Touati, *Armoire*, fig. 23b. Although the miniature was painted much later than al-Ṣūlī's lifetime, it seems to be the earliest extant representation of a library. See also Quatremère, *Mémoire*, especially 27–30, where the sale of a Fāṭimid library is described: in order to disguise the price of the books and being able to buy them for a very low price,

arrangement in different colours is, as far as I could ascertain, unique. While the description does not necessarily imply that the books were colour-coded, it does suggest that their arrangement followed a precise criterion. If the books were already bound when al-Ṣūlī acquired them, this criterion might have been exclusively aesthetic. If, however, he had them bound himself – and this must have been the case at least for his own notebooks – a different rationale may be considered.¹⁴ Another biographer, Yāqūt (d. 626/1229), comments on the arrangement of al-Ṣūlī's books:

Abū Bakr al-Ṣūlī had a library which he had devoted to the different books he had collected. He had arranged them in it in the best of orders.¹⁵

Yāqūt does not specify which order might be the best. It seems well-established that in public libraries books were placed on shelves in the same order in which they appeared in the catalogue, which in turn was arranged by subject.¹⁶ However, within this broad principle there is still much room for manoeuvre and for doubt. For instance: how to organise single books within the same subjects? Should lecture notes be separate from copied manuscripts? In the *Fihrist* Ibn al-Nadīm employs different criteria (alphabetical, chronological, etc.), not always explicitly, within each of the ten subjects in which he organises his catalogue.¹⁷ In his

the courtiers in charge of the sale took them out of their cases and mixed up their arrangement by subject (this story is retold by Touati, *Armoire*, 294). A brief overview is also found in W. Heffening [J.D. Pearson], 'Maktaba.' All these studies deal mainly with public or semi-public libraries.

¹⁴ Ibn al-Nadīm lists the names of nine famous book binders (*muğallid*), the first of whom worked for al-Ma'mūn's *bayt al-ḥikma*; he also briefly discusses the quality of leather used for bindings (*Fihrist*, 1, part 1: 24 and 48–9 respectively). Different binding techniques are illustrated by R. Selleim, 'Kitāb.' J. Bloom, *Paper before Print*, 111–13 provides a drawing detailing different part elements of the book. Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, 101–12, devotes a chapter to bookbinding.

¹⁵ Yāqūt b. °Abd Allāh al-Ḥamawī, *Muġam al-udabā*, 2677 (biography no. 1134).

¹⁶ Y. Eche, *Bibliothèques*, 338. Eche does not mention differences in colour and indeed mentions bindings only tangentially. See also H. Touati, *Armoire*, 291–317 and note 13 above on the Fāṭimid library. These studies also discuss the subjects making up library collections.

¹⁷ The most thorough investigation of this topic, referring also to earlier studies, is S.M. Toorawa, 'Proximity'. A late sample of the practical problems faced by a cataloguer is illustrated in Konrad Hirschler's contribution to this volume.

Muʿjam al-udabāʾ, where al-Ṣūlī's biography is found, Yāqūt arranges his entries in strict alphabetical order, one of the earliest compilers to do so consistently. Whether this is 'the best of orders' to which he refers, it is impossible to know.

In fact, this attention to the physical arrangement of books mirrors a skill displayed by al-Ṣūlī in his own writings: according to his student al-Marzubānī (d. 384/994), he had 'ability in composing books and collocating their elements in the proper place'.¹⁸ This is a skill al-Ṣūlī has in common with an earlier and more famous fellow-book collector, al-Ġāhiz (d. 255/868–9); it is the skill of the author who writes for a readership.¹⁹

Al-Ṣūlī's love for books transpires in his own work, and especially in his chronicles of the caliphate, where he often gives information about himself, such as the *Aḥbār al-Muqtadir* and *Aḥbār al-Rāḍī bi-llāh wa-l-Muttaqī li-llāh*. For instance, he is proud to have transmitted his passion to younger generations. In 312/924–925 he relates that he was appointed tutor of the princes Abū l-ʿAbbās and Abū ʿAbd Allāh, sons of the caliph al-Muqtadir (r. 295/908–320/932). Al-Ṣūlī taught them to use notebooks and had them learn traditions. The two boys were so enthusiastic that 'the price of notebooks went as high as it had ever been in a long time,' and 'paper and book merchants [*warrāqīn*] became rich'.²⁰ In addition, the princes also became collectors.²¹

I instilled in them the love of knowledge and bought them a good deal of books on jurisprudence, poetry, lexicography and chronicles. They competed, each putting together his own library.

What is interesting in this passage is that the boys take acquisitions in their own hands at such a young age. This can be compared with the education of their father, the caliph al-Muqtadir, for whom *dafātir* and other educational tools were selected by his father al-Muʿtaḍid (r. 279/892–289/902) with the help of Sinān b. Tābit (d. 331/943), the court

¹⁸ Al-Marzubānī, *Kitāb muʿġam fī asmāʾ al-shuʿarāʾ*, 431. See also al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī, *Taʾrīḥ Baġdād*, 5: 198: 'wa-waḍaʿa l-ašyāʾ minhā mawāḍiʿahā.' For an evaluation of al-Ṣūlī as an historian see also Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī (d. 345/956), *Les Prairies d'or - Murūġ al-ḍaḥab*, 1: 15 (§11).

¹⁹ Ibid., 5: 104 (§ 3146): '[...] *naẓẓamahā aḥsan naẓm wa-raṣṣafahā aḥsan raṣf*.' See Schoeler and Toorawa, *The Genesis of Literature*, 59, 68–84, 111–21.

²⁰ Al-Ṣūlī, *Mā lam yunšar min awrāq al-Ṣūlī*, 144.

²¹ Al-Ṣūlī, *Aḥbār al-Rāḍī bi-llāh*, 25.

physician. This material came from ‘the old caliphal repositories’ (*al-ḥazāʾin al-qadīma li-l-sultān*).²²

Later, after Abū l-ʿAbbās has become the caliph al-Rādī, al-Ṣūlī discusses with his former pupil the contents of the library which he had ‘put together like the previous caliphs.’ Al-Ṣūlī is surprised that it should not contain the *dīwān* of a certain poet and advises the caliph as follows:

Begin by arranging the works of poetry (*ʿamal al-ašʿār*), starting with the Muḍar tribe, than Rabīʿa, then Yaman. What is not there, your servants will bring to you from their own stock. Whatever they only have as lecture notes (*mā kāna samāʿan li-ʿabīdika*), and whatever they cannot replace, the copyists you appoint will copy it and the binders of the library will bind it.²³

Al-Ṣūlī continues to say that, although his own library may be diminished by this, he cannot stand for the caliph to have something that is not perfect. After this discussion, al-Rādī decides to donate his library to his sons: day after day, he has books brought to him and proceeds, with the help of his courtiers, to divide them up between the two princes, keeping some for himself and leaving the least valuable to the courtiers, who sell them by weight.

This episode corroborates two hypotheses advanced above: first, al-Ṣūlī advises the caliph to arrange his books by subject, and within the subject he suggests a subordinate criterion – for classical poetry it is an arrangement by tribe, but one may imagine different rationales for other subjects. Second, the caliph will have his copyists reproduce those works which the courtiers only have as *samāʿ*, which here it seems uncontroversial to understand as lecture notes.

We hear again, tangentially, of al-Ṣūlī’s library in 329/941, when al-Ṣūlī’s home is ransacked. Amongst other precious objects, ‘they found a portion of my notebooks, which they pillaged’.²⁴ He is now poor, he says, and survives on the revenue of a garden he owns and on his notebooks.²⁵ While the expression ‘the price of my notebooks’ (*aṭmān dafātirī*) may imply an actual sale, it seems unlikely that he would sell the tools necessary for obtaining an income: the expression might also

²² F. Rosenthal, *Muslim Historiography*, 48, quoting Ibn al-ʿAdīm’s *Buġya*; the Arabic text is on pages 541–2. See also A.S. Tritton, *Materials*, 168.

²³ Al-Ṣūlī, *Aḥbār al-Rādī bi-llāh*, 39–40.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 210.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 211.

mean that al-Şūlī used these notebooks for teaching, or that he rented them out to other scholars.²⁶

In fact, at this time al-Şūlī is in Başra, and one of his student is a young al-Tanūhī (d. 384/994), who will go on to become a judge and *adab* author. In *al-Faraġ ba^cda l-şidda* al-Tanūkhī recalls that when he was a boy his father had been appointed testator for al-Şūlī, who had not named any heirs in his testament. However, when the scholar died in Başra in 335/947, three poor brothers went to al-Tanūhī's father, claiming that their mother had been related to al-Şūlī. At length, they produced the necessary testimony and were awarded a portion of the inheritance, which the judge had converted into money in the meantime. Unfortunately, al-Tanūhī does not specify the amounts of money involved, nor does he say whether the possessions left by al-Şūlī included books.²⁷ As mentioned above, at least one *daftar* survived into the late fourth/tenth century and was seen by Ibn al-Nadīm.

Information on al-Şūlī's library is too scarce to allow a precise picture to emerge, and leaves us with more questions than answers, beginning with the obvious ones: which titles did it contain? Were these all lecture notes, as the scholar claimed? How many of these were personal, and how many had been acquired? How much did he spend to keep expanding the collection? How were the books organised exactly? Were they only for his personal use? Despite this uncertainty, what seems to be implicit in all the snippets of description found in the sources and discussed above is that al-Şūlī's library was remarkable, and not only in the eyes of its owner, for its physical appearance as well as for its contents.

Reflecting on this material has also highlighted practical differences between a public library and a private one: for instance, al-Şūlī's servants must have been conversant with the arrangement of the library if they were able to find a book when ordered to do so. However, it is not clear whether any of these servants were employed exclusively to look after them as librarian, cataloguer, copyist or binder. Moreover,

²⁶ Pedersen, *Arabic Book*, 34, mentions cases where scholars borrowed books from senior colleagues for copying (quoting Yāqūt, *Mu^cġam*, 2722), although it is not clear whether this implied a money transaction. I am grateful to Antonella Ghersetti for this reference as well as for many helpful comments and suggestions on the first draft of this paper. I should also like to thank the anonymous reviewers.

²⁷ Al-Tanūhī, *al-Faraġ ba^cd al-şidda*, 3: 262–7 (story no. 328). The eldest brother, Abū ^cAlī Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ğa^cfar, later adopted al-Şūlī as his *şuhra*. He has a short entry in al-Ḥaṭīb's *Ta^rrīḥ Baġdād*, 4: 407.

maintaining a library was an investment: it could contribute to its owner's income, help him get into the good graces of a patron, or be part of his inheritance. Finally, al-Šūlī's ambiguous reputation as a scholar – knowledgeable, but only in writing; a good poetry editor, but a plagiarist – reflects a well-known conflictual relationship between the oral and the written in medieval Arabic culture.

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