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Fakes and Islamic Manuscripts

Abstract: Faking manuscripts in Arabic script has a long history. The prospective targets of these fakes are various groups that have remained fairly constant over the centuries: bibliophiles and collectors are very prominent among those who acquire dubious items, but fakes were also prepared for scholars or pious individuals. Various techniques have been used, sometimes doctoring an original manuscript, sometimes producing a new one imitating an older model. Even facsimiles which were produced in good faith may have been turned into fakes in some cases.

A true 'typology' of fakes is difficult to establish in the field of manuscripts in Arabic script. There have been many instances of clear forgery, the purpose of which may have been profit or mystification, but a multitude of cases abound that cannot be clearly labelled as fakes, involving other processes of text production, such as imitation, reconstitution and embellishment.

Let us start with the most obvious situations. The Blue Qur'an, as it is known, is a manuscript probably produced towards the year 800 and is one of the most magnificent early copies of the Qur'an we know of, even though only a few folios of it have been preserved. Many of them were sold on the market from the end of the nineteenth century onwards and they are now a very coveted item among collectors of Islamic art. One folio currently in a private collection was produced by a modern forger who knew that he would make some money from imitating a manuscript that has achieved such fame. However, the forger was apparently unaware that part of the text he selected for his forgery was actually on an original but unpublished folio of the genuine manuscript.[1]

At a more modest level, we know of folios in Persian or Arabic that are provided with imitations of miniature Persian or Moghul paintings by workshops catering for contemporary travellers, who buy them and take the items back with them when they return home from their journeys in the East, convinced they have

1 Tarek Rajab Museum, Kuwait, P30.

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laid hands on something old and valuable, only to be sold on the internet later.[2] Pages of this kind are often cut out of existing volumes that are dismembered by painters in Iran, India or elsewhere – artists who use traditional techniques in the best cases, but who are often happy with a rough imitation of the original work. The old paper provides the artist with an ancient material that lends some legitimacy to works inspired by the traditional repertoire, but there is no regard for the text and its meaning. This type of activity has turned out to be disastrous for a number of manuscripts pitilessly reduced to being sources of paper for such Persian or Indian miniatures. Whenever parts of the paint flake off or the paper is transparent enough so that one can see through, the underlying script becomes visible, revealing the forgery.

Whole manuscripts are rarely used in such cases, although examples of manuscripts embellished with unrelated paintings can also be found. One exemplar is Paris, BnF Supplément Persan 2086, a sixteenth-century copy of the *Masnavi*, the poems of Jalāl al-dīn Rūmī, the famous mystic (d. 1273), to which some paintings were added in the twentieth century.[3] A more exceptional case can be seen in an Ottoman copy of the Qur'ān, which was painted over in some places: technically, the forgery was obvious, as some parts of the text were missing, having been covered by the paintings, but what was even more surprising was the presence of representations of human beings in it, which is highly unusual in a Qur'ān.[4] However, both may be witnesses to an age when art dealers were more respectful of the book in itself, even when tampering with it. A famous case concerning a slightly different situation is a Seljuk copy of the Qur'an now kept at the Philadelphia University Museum: NEP 27 (dated 559/1164), which is supposed to be one of the few manuscripts from that period.[5] However, a closer look at it will reveal that many of the manuscript's illuminations are actually a patchwork made up of various pieces cut from other ornaments in order to complete or restore the original illuminations. Using the same method, it turns out that marginal decorations like vignettes and medallions are actually pieces cut from larger illuminations and transformed by crude drawings in ink. It is hard to say whether this 'restoration' was performed a long time ago or shortly before the manuscript was sold to an American collector.

2 See <http://www.1001inventions.com/worldspokearabic>, for instance: the last but one image shows a doctor healing a patient, the two figures obviously being painted over an underlying text.

3 See fol. 76b and 77a; information provided by Mr F. Richard.

4 Gottheil 1931.

5 Ettinghausen 1935; Ettinghausen (1964–1965), 1946, n. 6, 1948 and 1951.

This practice can avail itself of a certain tradition to some extent. Paintings were added to a copy of Jami's poems in Persian, which can be dated to the end of the fifteenth century. We know this was done in the Sultan's entourage in Istanbul around 1530.[6] A number of poems are actually covered by miniature paintings that illustrate the previous poem: on fol. 22b, for instance, the upper part of some of the letters that were covered by the painting is still visible.[7] This is a case of 'embellishment' that was at least partially respectful of the text in the manuscript. The artist's goal was not to deceive the reader, but to transform an ordinary copy of the work into a luxury one.

The latter case brings us into contact with an old and important Muslim tradition: that of bibliophily. The search for the oldest copies of scientific or literary texts or autographs is a constant preoccupation of book lovers in search of rare items for their own library. This probably explains the relatively frequent modification of the dates of copies simply by changing a number in the colophon. In a Qur'ān kept at the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts in Istanbul (see Fig. 1, in fine), the first line of the colophon has been slightly retouched by a forger in order to introduce the name of a famous calligrapher, Ibn al-Bawwāb (d. 1022).[8] The first component of his name, 'Ali, is original, but the name of his father, Hilal, has been written over an erasure. The date was altered in the same way on the next line so it would coincide with those of the calligrapher's life.

Another process that was less complicated was adding a note assigning the copy to an artist or a known character (which often happens in the case of loose sheets for albums). It cannot be ruled out that the authors of similar notes acted in good faith in a number of cases. Finally (although we will return to this point later), the calligraphers knew how to reproduce writings. In the thirteenth century, Kamāl al-dīn Ibn al-'Adīm bought a sheet for forty dirhams bearing writing by Ibn al-Bawwāb: after practising, he made a copy of it that he then sold to a bookseller for sixty dirhams as an authentic work by the master.[9]

Bibliophiles were not the only targets of forgers, however: Muslim scholarly tradition paid a great deal of attention to the quality of written texts. In the Middle Ages, Muslim scholars were on the lookout for marginalia – ownership marks and statements indicating collation or transmission – that could indicate that a manuscript had once been in the hands of a famous scholar, as it was thought that

6 MS Paris, BnF Supplément Persan 552; see Richard 1997, no. 89.

7 See <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b84229982/f54.image.r=supplement%20persan%20552> (accessed on 15 March 2020).

8 MS Istanbul, TIEM, 449.

9 Yāqūt, *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, ed. Margoliouth 1907–1926, vol. 6, 41.

these gave the text a guarantee of its accurateness.[10] In the colophons, the copyists themselves did not hesitate to emphasise the quality of the original text they had transcribed if it was the author's copy, for instance. This did not escape the forgers' attention, of course, who saw it as an opportunity to make some money, consequently adorning manuscripts with false notes for the sole purpose of increasing their value. A copy of Galen's *Firaq al-ṭibb* kept in the BnF (Arabe 2859) bears an ownership mark by Avicenna himself (d. 1037) on its first page, to mention just one prominent example.[11] To give some credit to his falsification, the forger was probably also responsible for a minor change made to the colophon, making the manuscript seem considerably older than it really was.[12] Admittedly, it is impossible for us to establish who the 'beneficiary' of this forgery was now: he could have been a collector or a doctor, or both.

To remain in the genre of 'misappropriations' of original manuscripts, namely those without any particular lustre, ancient copies of the Qur'an also provided forgers with abundant material. Early on, the Muslim world lost its precise knowledge of the beginnings of Arabic writing. Now, the script used in north-west Arabia during Muhammad's lifetime or slightly later had nothing remarkable about it from an aesthetic point of view: a collective consciousness arose with a history of Arabic writing, the oldest stage of which was 'Kufic'; in fact, its varieties seem mostly attributable to the second half of the eighth century and especially to the ninth century, but in the eyes of Muslims, their appearance was no doubt better suited to the historical and religious importance of the rise of Islam. From a time that it is difficult to specify, perhaps in the twelfth century, forgers began to add colophons to some of the oblong Qur'ans copied in this style that attributed the copy to some of the most important figures of that period, particularly to the third 'Rightly Guided' caliph, 'Uthmān b. 'Affān (r. 644–656).[13] These forgeries are often distinguished by their rudimentary character and in some cases only rely on a word-of-mouth tradition.[14] Thus a ninth-century copy of the Qur'ān preserved in Istanbul ends with a colophon clumsily placed in the middle of a full-page illumination recycled from another later manuscript, in a vertical format. The forger had to turn it ninety degrees in order to include it in the oblong manuscript and write the colophon.[15] In this case, he was clearly more sensitive

10 See the recommendations in the specialised literature collected by Rosenthal 1947, 20–21 and 23, for instance.

11 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11002054f/f5.item.r=arabe%202859>.

12 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b11002054f/f91.item.r=arabe 2859>.

13 al-Munajjid 1972, 50–60; Buresi 2008.

14 The Tashkent Qur'an, for instance; see Déroche 2013, 57–77.

15 MS Istanbul, TIEM, 457, fol. 442b.

to the caliph's reputation than to historical facts: the sources attribute the writing down of the Qur'an to 'Uthmān, but they do not credit him with a copy of the text. Most of the manuscripts belonging to this group of 'misappropriations' are ancient copies of the Qur'ān, but in recent years isolated folios have also been produced by forgers who crudely imitated the Kufic script for clients eager to own a sample with the name of a famous figure from the beginning of Islam.[16]

An exaggerated interest in very old copies could also lead forgers to cater to the needs of amateurs, sometimes producing whole manuscripts with great skill. The manuscripts produced for the market cover a wide range of texts and situations. A list of Persian manuscripts made between the sixteenth and twentieth century to satisfy the curiosity of amateurs and scholars has been created. Long controversies may arise and the authenticity contested by some will be fiercely defended by others. It should be added that the widespread habit in Islamic countries of providing manuscripts with a new binding when the old one is in a bad condition makes it difficult to distinguish the different dates of reshuffling that a volume goes through. In the Persian domain, the case of the *Andarz Name* (or *Qabus Name*) agitated the circles of specialists in the 1950s; a symposium was even organised to take stock of this illustrated manuscript, which concluded that it was a forgery. It was far from being the only case of this kind, however, even if its miniatures did give it a special place among them all. Up to four early copies of 'Umar Khayyām's *Ruba'iyyāt* surfaced in the 1950s as well, first eliciting the enthusiasm of such scholars as Arthur Arberry until it turned out that they were produced by a 'manuscript factory' in Tehran transcribing the text from a printed edition published in 1925. The manuscript BnF Arabe 6726 is a copy of a text by al-Aṣma'ī (d. 828?) whose colophon says it was transcribed by Ibn al-Sikkīt, a famous Arab philologist of the ninth century (d. 858?).[17] The text itself had aroused the distrust of specialists in Arabic literature, especially since the colophon was dated to a few months after the death of the copyist, as is commonly accepted. In addition, codicological and palaeographic studies shed light on a series of peculiarities that have very little to do with actual practice in the ninth century.[18] In spite of these arguments, though, some scholars still believed it was a genuine copy.[19]

16 I will not take into account the letters supposedly sent by Muhammad to various rulers here as they are not manuscripts but documents.

17 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10030057s/f54.image.r=arabe%206726>.

18 Déroche 1990.

19 For instance Zīdān 2004, 122.

The careful and very specific script in this copy invites us to compare it with other manuscripts apparently from the same early period that are noteworthy due to the quality of their writing, their unusual features, the age of the copy and the character of the text, which is dubious sometimes. This is the case for a manuscript with the *Adāb al-falāsifa* by Ḥunayn b. Isḥāq (d. 873), the renowned translator of Greek medical texts.[20] It was copied in 863 in a very particular script that reappears on a manuscript of the *Dīwān al-Sajjād* in a private collection transcribed in 910 according to the colophon, but which also seems suspect.[21] Are they the work of the same forger or the same workshop? Both of them surfaced in Iran. In these two cases as well as five other manuscripts from the tenth century reported as forgeries, it should be noted that they are texts composed by authors who enjoyed great prestige. Judging by the quality of the writing, this aspect was probably important to the buyer.

The borderline between imitation and forgery was actually very thin since professional scribes and calligraphers were trained to imitate earlier scripts. In Ottoman times, the teaching of calligraphy gave a high status to an exercise called *taklid* (Arabic: *taqlīd*). To attain a certain level of mastery in using the reed pen or *qalam*, a student had to memorise a piece of calligraphy that had been placed in front of him and then reproduce it – by memory – to the point where one could not tell the difference between the original and the copy. This practice was not restricted to those who were still students, as confirmed calligraphers reported in their signature of a page that they engaged in the exercise of *taklid*. This explains the important role that copying played in calligraphic production, be it in manuscripts or in calligraphic compositions (*levha* in Turkish). This is something quite different to transcription, of course, since the result of the copy operation thus understood is ideally a duplication of the original.

This exercise, which has been scrupulously performed by generations of Ottoman calligraphers, is separated by the thickness of a hair, so to speak, from a reprehensible activity: forgery. A brief anecdote will demonstrate this. One of the disciples of Şeyh Hamdullah (d. 1520), the great Ottoman calligrapher of the sixteenth century, had succeeded in imitating his master's writing to the point of perfection, but was still waiting to be recognised as a calligrapher in his own right. He slipped one of his own works among the productions waiting for his master's signature. Şeyh Hamdullah signed it without realising the trick until the student revealed it to him. Understandably, he was severely reprimanded for

20 MS Tehran, University Central Library 2165 (see Dānesh-Pajūh 1961, 858–862 and pl.).
21 Déroche 1987–1989, 351.

doing this.[22] Calligraphers frequently found themselves working in such grey areas between *taklid* and producing fakes of real documents.

While the previous examples undoubtedly took place in the field of forgery, the particular situation of calligraphy is rather more complex. The exercise of the *taklid* turned artists into possible forgers, but it was also a way of obtaining public recognition for their talent. Let us go back to Ibn al-Bawwāb a moment, who was mentioned previously. He was once in charge of a library belonging to Bahā' al-dawla (r. 989–1012), a Buyid prince who owned a valuable copy of the Qur'ān copied a century earlier by another famous calligrapher, Ibn Muqla (d. 940). This manuscript was a multi-volume set of thirty *juz'* – a popular division of the Qur'ān into thirty sections each containing the same amount of text. One of the volumes had been lost, though. Ibn al-Bawwāb bet his master that he would succeed in redoing the missing *juz'* and that it would be impossible to distinguish it from the others. He set to work immediately. In the prince's library, he collected old papers from Samarkand or China, which resembled the original manuscript, and copied the text. Then he executed the illumination, taking care to give the gilding the appearance of being old. Finally, he took the binding from one of the original *juz'* of the series to cover the one he had just written and made a new one to replace the one he had taken, artificially aging the latter. Almost a year later, his master remembered the bet, asked the calligrapher if he had completed his work and was shown the now complete thirty-volume set. Despite examining it carefully, he was unable to identify the new volume. The forger was not rewarded for his skill, however, as the prince did not pay the stake; eventually, Ibn al-Bawwāb was 'paid' with scraps of Chinese paper from the library instead.[23] The story does not say if he used them for new fakes, though…

Similar anecdotes provide a stage for other calligraphers, too; again and again, imitating the hand of an illustrious master of the past provides the copyist with a means of being recognised as his equal. The 'false' piece of writing thus helps to reveal the truth.

Bibliophily and more generally the taste for collecting famous calligraphers' works developed from the tenth century onwards in highly diverse circles. We can leave the scholarly libraries aside here since their owners often copied the texts they needed themselves and valued the accuracy of the text more than the quality of the script in which it was written. As we have seen, however, this did not protect them from forgers. On the other hand, it was not uncommon for a wealthy person to privilege prestigious pieces signed by great calligraphers. One

22 Huart 1972, 126–127.

23 Yāqūt, *Irshād al-arīb ilā ma'rifat al-adīb*, ed. Margoliouth 1907–1926, vol. 5, 446–447.

of the most popular figures in the Muslim world is Yāqūt al-Muṣta'simī, who lived in Baghdad in the thirteenth century (d. 1298); manuscripts copied in his hand or imitating his style abound. Looking at the latter, it is difficult to distinguish outright fakes from copies made by later calligraphers who indicated in the colophon that they had reproduced a work originally produced by the master. The copies made in the manner of a master also draw our attention to the existence of facsimile production, perhaps intended for collectors keen to have a specimen of Yāqūt's artwork in their own library. The manuscript BnF Arabe 6082, a copy of the Qur'ān ending with an apocryphal colophon in the name of Yāqūt on fol. 381 b,[24] was probably produced in Ottoman Turkey during the fifteenth century and was no doubt intended to satisfy some rich patron from the outset. The script and illuminated double-page opening on fols 1b–2a were clearly not a thirteenth-century production.[25] This discrepancy was probably soon forgotten, though, making the manuscript another fake Yāqūt among many others.

The skill of the copyists, their knowledge of ancient texts and practices, and the absence of watermarks in Oriental paper sometimes make it hard for us to be sure about the authenticity of an item we are holding in our hands. In a general way, codicological examinations make it possible for us to see some of the truth. In the case of BnF Supplément Persan 1918,[26] the presence of a recent European watermark in the paper used for the first quire with an illumination stating that the manuscript was copied for Mehmet II's library in Istanbul is the only clue that enables a researcher to tell that this volume was skilfully transformed into a 'royal' copy in the nineteenth century. In many other cases, there is still some doubt remaining, however, particularly regarding calligraphy, but also in terms of the illuminations included in the manuscripts or copies, as great value was attached to imitating the old masters in Persian and Ottoman culture.

Oriental bibliophiles seem to have been great consumers of copies and facsimiles of manuscripts, which became potential fakes once the circumstances in which they were produced were forgotten. There is nothing extraordinary about this, seeing as our dictionaries highlight the ambiguous relationship between fakes and copies. In French, 'copy' is offered as a synonym for counterfeiting, and vice versa; the borderline between the two is tenuous. We have now seen how the passage from one register to another is not always easy to spot in the world of Muslim copyists and calligraphers. A fake readily takes the form of an ambiguous tribute to an illustrious predecessor, and identifying skilfully produced but

24 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10031320w/f400.image.r=arabe%206082>.

25 <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10031320w/f6.image.r=arabe%206082>.

26 Blochet 1928, 296.

forged Islamic manuscripts will remain an arduous task as long as the tools facilitating this identification remain as poor as they currently are.

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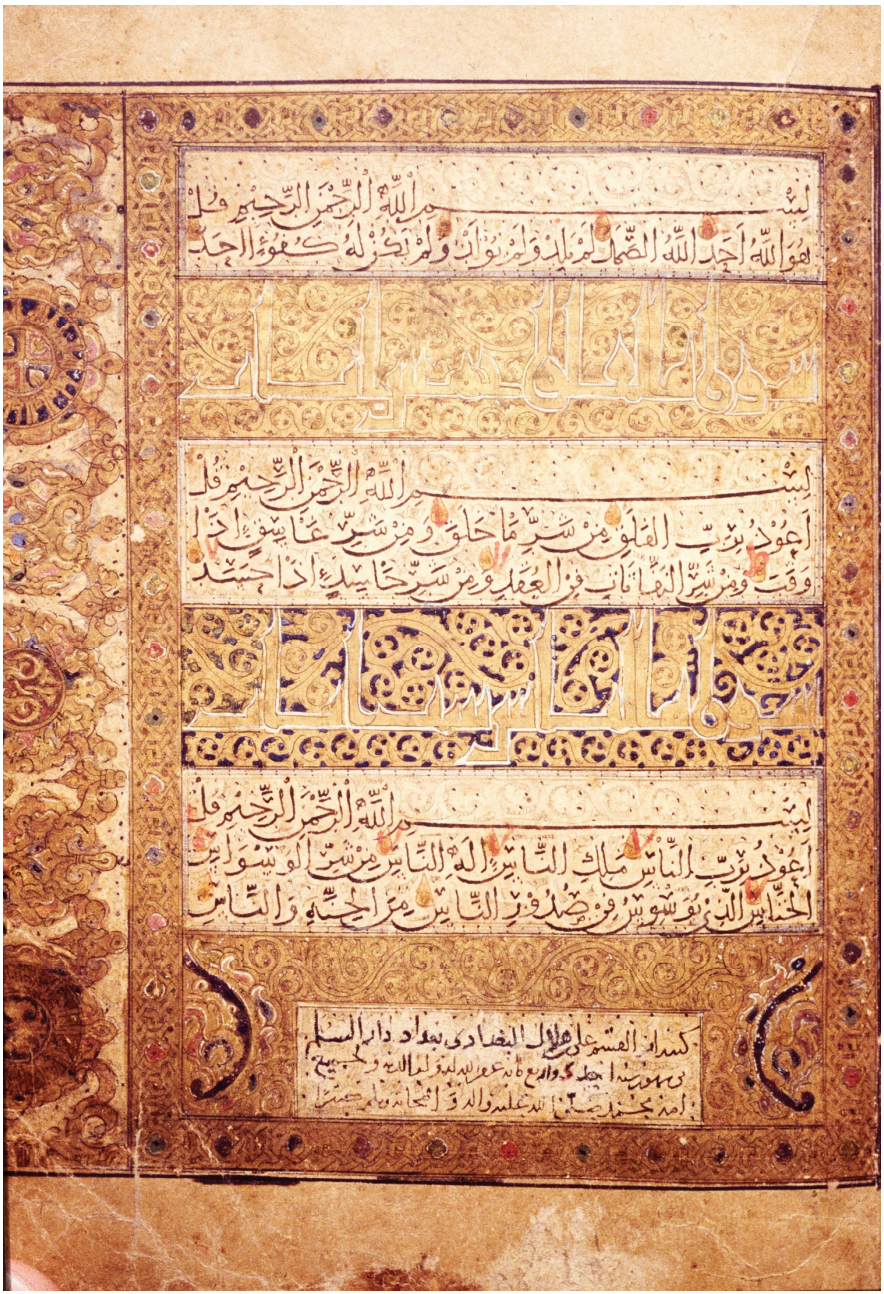

Fig. 1: MS Istanbul, Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, 449, *Qur'an*. Fol. 148 r° with the modified colophon; © Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts.