

Case Study 4.3: Storing Books (and Potentially Archival Bundles) in Medieval Arabic Societies

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To what extent archives as distinct spaces existed in the medieval Arabic Middle East or whether documents were rather stored in a range of 'non-archival' spaces, such as in private homes, is disputed in modern scholarship. No specifically archival furniture has been identified to date, and we do not have images depicting a distinct archival space or any such furniture. This is a major methodological challenge for historical scholarship and this situation is in no way unique for the medieval Arabic Middle East. Historians have, thus, tried different options to work with this challenge and the image chosen here can be taken as one such methodological workaround. It is taken from a work called *The Assemblies* (*al-Maḳāmāt*), an entertaining and edifying collection of fifty short narratives featuring a fictional roguish wanderer and eloquent trickster called Abu Zayd. Its author, al-Ḥarīrī (c. 1054–1122), set these stories in cities and towns across the Arabic lands. *The Assemblies* became one of the most popular works of medieval Arabic literature and also engendered an unusually high number of illustrated copies, mostly produced in the thirteenth century. The pictures of these manuscripts have been widely used in scholarship as a rare insight into the social and material world of thirteenth-century Iraq and Syria. The picture chosen here is from a manuscript produced in the early thirteenth century and illustrates Abu Zayd's assembly taking place in a (unidentified) 'library' (*khizāna*). The Arabic term *khizāna* simply means 'storehouse' and could refer to spaces for storing books and documents (or other objects). The codices depicted here were, as was standard in this period, laid on top of each other on wooden shelves. For ease of access, abbreviated forms of the author's name and/or the title were typically written on the codex's fore edge or on a label (not shown in this illustration). The shelves' compartment system was widely used and served to organise the codices according to theme, alphabet and/or size. Artificial lighting posed a major fire risk, therefore, such shelves were positioned opposite the room's window or door, whichever provided the best daylight. Archival documents were often bound into bundles according to the needs of the document-holding individual or organisation. They could, thus, be arranged by criteria, such as chronology, content of the document and/or locality, so that, for instance, all estate inventories of a specific year dealt with by the judge in Jerusalem could end up in one single bundle (see the case study on stringing documents by Anna Steffen in this book, Case Study 1.3). Such bundles were of comparable materiality as the codices depicted here and they were most probably stored together with such codices and/or in separate shelves similar to the furniture depicted in *The Assemblies*.



Fig. 1: Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département des manuscrits, arabe 5847, fol. 5^v, Al-Ḥarīrī, *al-Maḳāmāt*; source: Gallica (<<https://gallica.bnf.fr>>) / Bibliothèque nationale de France.