

## Hands-on work with manuscripts



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As part of my involvement in the project "Mediating Islam in the Digital Age" (MIDA), I spent an internship in the Gotha Research Library to get some experience with the inner workings of the library, particularly its rich collection of oriental manuscripts. The role I play as an early career researcher in MIDA, a project which is concerned with the effect of technology and digitization on Islam in general, is related to Islamic manuscript collections and their digitization in recent decades. My research is focused on the library of Bahā al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Ḥamīlī (Shaykh Bahaʿ), the famous Arab scholar and poet of the 16th and early 17th centuries in Safavid Persia. Shaykh Bahaʿ' s library does not exist today and what has remained of it are only individual manuscripts scattered around the globe. I focus on reconstructing the library and following the history of its books from their production throughout their travels and their digitization in recent years. Within such a framework of library and manuscripts studies, the internship at Gotha was intended to give me a hands-on experience with manuscripts, their preservation and digitization.

The climax of my time at Gotha was perhaps the experience with the library's collection of around 11.500 manuscripts as well as early printed books. Having worked before solely with Arabic manuscripts, seeing European manuscripts and early printed books next to the oriental manuscripts provided me with a good opportunity for a comparative understanding of these three different traditions of texts. An interesting example of the differences between the European and oriental manuscripts relates to the physicality of them where different material and different styles of craftsmanship can be observed. While oriental manuscripts are predominantly made of paper, the material on which European manuscripts are written depends on whether they were produced in Medieval or in Early Modern Times. Medieval manuscripts are mostly made of parchment. This is particularly true for the manuscripts prior to the 15th century when printed books came to emerge and to gradually replace manuscripts in the book culture of Europe. Amongst the variety of materials used for European book covers of the 15th-17th centuries the application of pig skin is quite common whereas it is absent in the oriental manuscript tradition.

In contrast to the early adoption of print in Europe in the 15th century, print was welcomed with some hesitations in the oriental manuscript tradition. In the orient, writing and copying books by hand continued to be the dominant way of book production well into the nineteenth century. This late adoption of print in Islamdom is reflected in scarcity of pre-nineteenth-century oriental printed books in the Gotha library while a huge number of European printed books preserved in the library belong to that period.

At the Gotha Research Library, I also worked on preparing initial catalogue entries for the several uncatalogued manuscripts and early Persian printed books from what is known as the Benzing collection, a small collection of ten manuscripts and printed books which was acquired by the Research Library at the beginning of the twenty-first century. These books cover a wide range of themes from jurisprudence to geography and poetry. Interestingly, among the manuscripts from the Benzing collection, I found one of the books authored by Shaykh Bahaʿ, the protagonist of my research. This work was copied long after his death in the 19th century.

Beside the experience with the manuscripts and early printed books, the Gotha Research Library also gave me the opportunity to familiarize myself with the process of manuscript digitization, carried out within the library. A visit to the restoration workshop of the University of Erfurt, where damaged manuscripts from the Gotha Research Library are sent to be restored, was another valuable part of my internship in Gotha.

The internship at Gotha enriched my understanding of the manuscript world and made what I have been dealing with mostly in digital form and on the screen very tangible. I am very thankful to both MIDA and all the staff at the Gotha Research Library who facilitated this experience and whose knowledge I benefited from during my stay.

published on 09th May 2022