INTRODUCTION

The Arabic literature of interest to manuscript studies and produced in the manuscript age is quite extensive. Apart from numerous statements and passages scattered in Qur’ānic and Ḥadīth literature, biographies, and historical accounts, there are substantial chapters of works and complete compositions, rich in technical vocabulary, on various aspects of bookmaking and penmanship [1]. This should not be surprising as Islamic civilization is, for all intents and purposes, a civilization of the book. The vast intellectual output, which has emerged from the manuscript age, is a testimony to this phenomenon. This literature constitutes a written tradition that is very important for the overall picture of manuscript making in the Islamic context.

Although a good number of relevant works has survived, albeit some in one copy only, a substantial amount of compositions are known to us only by name. Some of them may still be hidden in unexplored public and private collections and others in brief or rare catalogues, while yet others are certainly lost.


On the other hand, we are fortunate to have access to a substantial and growing number of works spanning the period between the 3/9th and early 14/20th centuries, which have either been edited or translated or analyzed in one form or another. And thus the present survey lists some 148 important extant compositions by 124 authors. Prominent among these works are administrative manuals, which contain a wealth of information on writing, writing implements, calligraphy, and paper formats. It is thanks to these compositions that we can gain a better understanding of the development of Arabic calligraphy and penmanship; for it was the charactery and its secretaries / penmen (kuttāb) who often initiated new reforms in this area. Calligraphy and penmanship, from the early ‘Abbasid period on, became the most important art of the book and it is not surprising that Arabic authors often refer to this field as the “science of writing” (ṣīḥ, ʿilm al-khāṭṭ, ʿilm al-kitābāh, ‘ilm al-qalam).

Among the early chancery manuals mention should be made of Kiṭāb al-kuttāb of ʿAbd Allāh al-Baghdādī (3/9th c.), Risālat al-khāṭṭ wa al-qalam of Ibn Qutaybah (d. 276/889), Adab al-kuttāb of Ṣamālān (d. 335/946), Kiṭāb al-kuttāb of Ibn Durustawayh (d. 347/956), and Maʿālim al-kitābāh of Ibn Shīrāz (d. 625/1228). Later examples include works by such famous Maṣūlīk writers and calligraphers as Ibn al-Wahlī (d. 711/1312), al-Nuwayrī (d. 732/1332), Ḥusayn al-Kāṭib (fl. 781/1379), al-Zītāwī (d. 806/1403-4), al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418), al-Āthārī (d. 828/1425), Ibn al-Sāʾīgh (d. 845/1441-2), al-Ḥīrī (d. 891/1486), and al-Ṭībī (fl. 908/1502). Indeed, the