
SCRIPTS, PAGE SETTINGS AND BINDINGS OF MIDDLE-EASTERN MANUSCRIPTS

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INSCRIPTIONS ON THE COVERS OF ISLAMIC MANUSCRIPTS: AN INTRODUCTORY STUDY

Inscriptions (*ketāba* or *katība*) on the outer and inner covers of Persian, Arabic and Turkish manuscripts are an attempt at adorning the bindings as well creating the air of grandeur and flaunting the peak of art reached in the embellishments. Inscriptions for book covers were therefore done scarcely and exclusively for lavishly decorated covers. It was certainly aimed at producing covers of higher artistic level. As a rule, inscriptions appeared of course on the covers of books with texts, which were either very important or famous such as the Holy Qur'ān, the *Šāhnāma* of Firdawsī, *Mathnawī* of Rūmī, *Kullīyyāt* of Sa'dī or the *Dīwān* of Ḥāfīz, which also had the merit of being convenient presents to the patrons. A manuscript would deserve to receive elaborate inscriptions on its binding because of its calligraphic hand, illuminations and miniatures.

It was both hard and expensive to inscribe texts on book covers. The binder had to have the text of the inscription written by a calligrapher according to the size and the place available. The calligraphic pieces were then given to the engraver who carved them on metal plates [1]. These stamps were obviously produced for the covers of a single specified manuscript. The procedure was first used for leather bindings, but from the 11th/17th century onwards, as lacquer bindings became widespread, inscriptions on book covers became easier to produce; in this case, the binders used to ask calligraphers to write the inscriptions. If the formers were not also painters and illuminators, they would order the decorations to a master capable of observing the harmony, symmetry and other artistic proportion in respect with other ornaments.

All this explains why the number of inscribed book covers is limited. If I am not far wrong in my guess, it is probable that the number of those, which are catalogued, does not exceed thousand instances. I have myself examined about 200 inscribed bindings for this study.

Unfortunately, cataloguers did not always specify the characteristics of the inscribed covers and they did not describe them all. It is therefore vital that cataloguers and cu-

rators of libraries and collections should gradually develop separate catalogues of this specific material. I have suggested to the authorities of the librarianship departments of Iranian universities to urge students to write dissertations on this subject in the hope that it could a first step towards appropriate studies and catalogues of the inscribed bindings preserved in Iranian libraries and collections.

Among the many scholars who have been working on the history of Islamic bindings since the time of Paul Adam [2], one can mention the name of E. Gratzl who wrote a few lines on inscribed book covers [3], dealing with their general appearance. Later, G. Bosch and his colleagues described some inscribed book covers in the Oriental Institute of Chicago University [4] and D. Haldane published some bindings kept in the Victoria and Albert Museum [5].

The study of the codicological aspects of these inscriptions, of their place and their compositions are of manifold cultural importance. A first point is their artistic and decorative aspects, which remind us of the rendering of the same motifs and compositions on Persian carpets and wares: one could find interesting parallels with the inscriptions on metalwares [6]. These were not the only source of inspiration for the binders who in most cases took up the compositions, decorations and inscribed texts used by the illuminators in the rosettes (*šamsa*), medallions (*turanj*), frontispieces (*sarlawḥ*), and two-double-page frontispieces (*čahār lawḥ*) in order to produce a luxurious inscribed book cover.

Creating a binding with inscriptions was regarded as an ultimate stage of artistic perfection, with no less value than producing drawings and paintings. This is why in the 9th/18th century Šaraf al-Dīn 'Alī Yazdī, in a piece of verse written for the cover of a luxurious manuscript of Firdawsī's *Šāhnāma*, speaks on behalf of the book cover:

اگر چند هستم چو خرم بهار / مشو قانع از من به نقش و نگار

Though I am the same as the flourishing fresh spring time /
Do not be contented with me to my designs and decorations.