

Partial leather binding or *Chaharkuse*: Talking about Islamic manuscripts

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A shared vocabulary for the scholars and conservators who study and treat manuscripts is a critical tool in their work with these historical documents. Consequently, the lack of such a tool for Islamic manuscripts has adversely impacted their research and preservation. To address this need, an illustrated, searchable list of basic terminology for Islamic manuscript conservation has been created and is accessible on-line at: <http://www.hepworthscheper.com/lexicon/lexicon-en.html>. In this paper, the functionalities of the database will be demonstrated: its intuitive organization, focused definitions, internal cross-referencing and ability to be searched on alternative parameters will be discussed and shown. These features make the database easy to engage with and of immediate utility to those conserving and studying Islamic manuscripts.

Surviving Islamic manuscripts number in the millions and are largely held in collections across the developing world where conservation education is often extremely limited. In this context, the individuals responsible for preparing condition surveys and carrying out treatments do not have the vocabulary with which to describe what they see. But even more fundamental, lacking essential words to carry out their work, they may not even know what to look for or how to understand what they find. First then, the database is a consciously directed effort towards stimulating and supporting education for conservators in these locations and making available to them the tools that they need.

Additionally, since the Islamic manuscript tradition inherently lies outside European manuscript developments, scholars of this other tradition in the West have also struggled with vocabulary issues. Different structures and different processes of manufacture in Islamic manuscripts have been largely described using terminology borrowed from their European counterparts. Examples will be given of how this can create unintended errors in understanding, when the meaning of words in the European tradition is incorrectly applied to a different, non-parallel situation. The database creates a new resource for Western scholars to enhance their communication.

Although the database is currently available in English, translations into Turkish, Persian and Arabic are in various stages of production. Islamic manuscripts were created within a multi-lingual cultural context and the database intends to tap that rich linguistic potential. Terms sometimes already exist in the original languages, for example, for naming structures distinct from their European manuscript correlates. These words can be brought into the Western vocabulary, reducing the need to use awkward and misleading translations. However, the challenges and complications of this multi-lingual reference will also be touched on in the paper. A problem also arises when a term does not exist in any known language for a particular structure or feature. The authors will describe their approach to this problem and its impact on the database.

Finally, this database provides a model for creating similar tools for other non-Western manuscript traditions. With perhaps fairly modest changes, this particular database template could be adapted so that the specialized vocabulary appropriate, for example, for Syriac, Ethiopic or Coptic manuscript traditions could be developed and made more widely accessible.