

Arabic Medical Manuscripts: Digitization and Cataloging

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Abstract

Introduction: After the Arabic-speaking scientific community had gained access to the Greek medical tradition through the translation movement, after the 8th century CE, Arabic physicians started adding new information to this ancient material, including knowledge on medical subjects, diseases, and their treatments. Thus, the Arabic medical books contain material unavailable in the Greek medical corpus. This new material is a very important source for scholars of the history of medicine in the Middle Ages. Moreover, unknown numbers of Arabic medical manuscripts were written in Arabic by many physicians from different origins.

In 1970, the famous Arabist Manfred Ullmann emphasized the urgency of cataloguing Arabic medical manuscripts in his reference work “Die Medizin im Islam”, pointing out that the manuscripts ought to be in the center of scholarly work on the history of Arabic medicine and natural sciences “today and in the foreseeable future”.

Although quite a large number of new manuscript catalogues from different libraries and archives have been published since the 1970s, some of which are also available online, unfortunately their digitizing movement is still insufficient for a complete review of their contents in order to assess their historical value.

Objectives: This presentation will shed light on the most important attempts made to produce catalogues of Arabic medical manuscripts (either physical or electronic ones). Furthermore, this paper will study the advantages of developing such databases about medical Arabic manuscripts, especially electronic ones, and of providing searchable and systematic access to the bibliographical records, to the valuable contents of the manuscripts, and, if possible, to the (digitized) manuscripts themselves.

Keywords: Arabic Medicine; Arabic manuscripts in middle ages; Digitization and Cataloging.

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