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The Historical and Cultural Significance of the Arabic Papyri Kept in the Egyptian National Library

Introduction

The Collection of the Arabic papyri in the Egyptian National Library is one of the most important Arabic papyrus collections around the world due to its historical and cultural significance.

The papyrus collection ranks third among the world Papyri, coming after the collection of the Austrian Archduke Rainer "PER" kept in the Österreichischen Nationalbibliothek in Vienna; and the "PSR" collection kept in the Papyrus Institute in the University of Heidelberg, as concerning the papyri quantity and the historical and cultural importance.

The Egyptian National Library started to collect and preserve the Arabic papyri since the second half of the nineteenth century; namely, in 1897 by the Orientalist Bernard Moritz, the most prolific years when most of these papyri were collected were the years from 1899–1905.

The papyri increases and additions were continued up to the end of Bernard Moritz service as the director by 1911; while his term of office started in 1896.

The collection of the Egyptian National Library's papyri were collected from many villages and cities in Upper and lower parts of Egypt, in particular, from El-Faiyum, El-Ashmunein, El-Bahnasa, Ahnasia, El-Fustat, Edfu and Aswan ... etc.

1. Most distinguished subjects treated in the papyrus collection and their importance

The Arabic papyri of the Egyptian National Library in Cairo are most distinguished for the diversity of their topics. Most of them are attributed to the first three centuries of Hejra: 1 to 4 corresponding to the Calendar centuries 7 to 11 in general the subjects of this collection of papyri covered all aspects of life in the Islamic State. For example, there are different kinds of contracts such as the contracts of marriage, selling, purchasing, lease and labour¹ likewise, the government correspondences, i. e., those issued by the state "Dewans"² Departments moreover, "Protocols"³, receipts of tribute and taxes⁴; lists of workers, manufacturers and tradesmen⁵. In addition to the documents of endowment, gift, slave emancipation⁶, heritage distribution, disputes, settlement and the procedure of submitting complaints and grievances to the State authorities.

¹ Most distinguished marriage-contracts preserved in the Egyptian National Library are rare marriage contracts whose registration number are as follows: 159, 128, (140 + 86), 121, 144, 184, 157, (142 + 143), 145, 116, 101, 1871, 173, 108). A Grohmann published them: *Arabic Papyri in the Egyptian Library*, Vol. 1, pp. 71–144.

² Some papyri are summons to come to the state Dewan either to pay debts, to pay tribute and land-taxes, or to settle dispute and run an investigation: among these papyri are those that carry the number of (312, 82, 104, 131, 137) and most of them referred to the Hegira centuries 1–3.

³ The Egyptian National Library preserves around 36 protocols. The protocol means "the first stick in papyrus scrod". These protocols carry the number (6, 61, 62, 31, 18, 50, 51, 21, 5, 34, 66, 56, 67, 60, 29, 68, 3, 42, 7, 53, 56, 57, 54, 69, 65.).

⁴ Many receipts of tribute and land-taxes are preserved in the Egyptian National Library carrying papyri registrations numbers (226, 358, 162, 224, 261 ... etc.).

⁵ A table indicating the names of the craftsmen and manufacturers canying number 235 and dated 3 Hegira century. The tables texts mentioned crafts and trades such as (touchers, cutters, grocers, stonecutters & cook).

⁶ A text of a document of slave-emancipation showing the number (1900, history) dated at the end of Ramadan, 393 H.

⁷ A document presenting grievances and complaints submitted to the bureau of grievances in Abbassyid era written in three languages (Greek, Arabic, Coptic), and bearing the registration number 119.

On the other hand, the Egyptian National Library keeps a rare and precious collection of papyrus texts that contain information about the prices of goods, agricultural crops⁷, some foods, some industries like industry of textiles, ornaments, clothes, robes, shoes, head covers and perfumes⁸. Also the texts of some papyri include important information about the wages of labourers, manufacturers, tradesmen, ranches, owners, servants, guards, porters painters, iron hammerers and builders⁹.

Most precious item in this collection is the rare and single book, wholly inscribed on papyri, entitled the "Al-Gamee in Hadeetli", i. e. "General Book of Prophets Sayings" by the Egyptin scholar Abdullall ibn Wahb ibn Moslem 125–197 H. corresponding to 743–813 A. C. its pages amount to (199) in number, found in Edfu area, in Upper Egypt¹⁰. In addition, there is a rare and valuable collection of the messages sent by the Omayyad Wali (ruler)¹¹ namely, Qurah ibn Sherek Al-Epsei 90–96 H. corresponding to calendar years 709–715.

2. Published papyri and papers of this collection

Adolf Grohmann¹² is the most famous and wellknown scholar who realized the historical and cultural value of the Arabic papyri preserved in the Egyptian National Library, where he was able to read the papyri included in this collection in 1930, through the help of the Czechoslovakian president T. G. Masaryk; supported by the Czech ministry of Education and the institute of oriental studies in Prague¹³.

A. Grohmann thoroughly studied hundreds of the papyri kept in the Egyptian National Library during the period starting from 1934 until the end of 1962. Grohmann study led to the publication of more than 800 valuable Arabic papyri containing administrative and financial texts, governmental correspondences, accounting statements, different kinds of contracts, receipts of tributes and taxes, and protocols texts. This valuable study was compiled into ten volumes under the title *Arabic Papyri in the Egyptian National Library*. So far, six volumes were 15 issued, while the other four volumes are being translated to be published, by the National Library as follows.

First volume

First volume of this study includes 72 texts out of those written on the library's papyri. Among the most important materials published in that volume are 13 rare marriage contracts¹⁴ kept in the library, in addition to one document emancipation of a female slave¹⁵, another document of heritage distribution, 18 contracts for selling houses, real estates and lands, in addition to publishing an agreement document concerning a wall owned by two persons, and other important administrative texts.

⁸ The Egyptian National Library preserves many agricultural tables that include very important information about Egyptian main crops, their prices, method of crops' gathering, and amounts of tribute and land. Taxes imposed as well as the wages of workmen and craftsmen. The registration numbers of these papyri are 191, 1953 C, 229, 394, 243, 182 on the face, 192.

⁹ Concerning these subjects, the Egyptian National Library preserves great number of the texts of Arabic papyri; some of them deal with purchasing various kinds of clothes, jewels and perfumes. Their registration number are 631,405, 1741 C., 26 ... etc.

¹⁰ There are many texts of Arabic papyri that contain important information about grasslands, ranches, animals, cattles, and wages of servants and manufacturers. Some registration number of these papyri are 97, 607, 683, 531, 707 on the back, 323.

¹¹ A rare book bearing the registration number 2123-new), published by the researcher: I. David Weill: *Le Djami ibn Wahb (text planches et commentaire)* I, E.A.O. Le Caire. 1939–1948.

¹² The Egyptian National Library preserve more than 20 letters sent by the Omayyad wall Qurah ibn Shreek Al-Ebssy. Some letters are complete texts, while the others are scattered parts, some letters carry the numbers 314, 331, 338, 43, 329, 330, 340, 328, 337, 332, 289, 288, 290, 335, 336, 333 etc.

¹³ Professor of Semitic languages and history of oriental culture in Prague University.

¹⁴ A. Grohmann mentioned that in the first part of his book *The Arabic Papyri in the Egyptian National Library*, Vol. 1. P.1, Cairo 1934. It is well-known that this book consists of 10 volumes. Six of them were issued, the other four volumes are being translated and published.

¹⁵ The Egyptian National Library is currently designing a systematically scientific plan to translate and publish the other four volumes, by a team of scholars of translation and texts authenticity in the Arab world; including the Egyptian searcher and Expert of English language "Louis Shafik Shaker" while Prof. Dr. Hassan Habashy, and Prof. Dr. Hussein Nasar are assuming the responsibility of revising this big work.

Second volume

Issued in September, 1936 this volume compiles 73 papyri of those preserved in the Egyptian National library in addition to an illustrated supplement of papyri tables attached to the volume. This supplement contains 24 plates tables most important texts published in this volume are 3 contracts of houses selling and a contract of selling a palm tree dated in Robi 1, 324 H., in addition to 7 contracts of stores and houses, lease. Grohmann¹⁶, also, published two work contracts for some workers and a mosque servant; besides, 3 reports concerning a husband fitness, that is “pre-marriage examination”¹⁷. In addition to other documents dealing with the distribution of an heritage and accusation of some persons, one of them dated in the month of shabaan, 348 H.

Third volume

This volume was issued almost one year and half after the second volume publication. It was issued on march, 1938, containing 69 texts from those texts written in the Arabic papyri. Perhaps, the most important papyrus is that one carrying the registration No. 119; dated through the years 137–140 H. corresponding to the year 724–757. The papyrus was written in three languages (Greek, Coptic and Arabic), and its subject was *Notices written in three languages concerning complaints of trespassing*. It is worthy mentioning that this volume was supplied with a catalogue of 22 papyri illustrated tableaux. This valuable volume also contains 20 letters and part of a letter sent by the Omyyad Wall (ruler) Korah ibn Shereek El-Absey through the years 90–96 H. corresponding to the calendar years 709–715; in addition to 15 statements about records and accounts dealing with financial matters and taxes. In addition, this volume includes 4 notices regarding coming to the department of land taxes. Two other documents are published in this volume representing two petitions submitted to the Cailph concerning the taxes and financial matters in addition to other texts.

Fourth volume

This valuable volume is considered one of the most important scientific studies conducted by A. Grohmann on the Arabic papyri preserved in the Egyptian National Library. Grohmann wrote its introduction in Cairo on December 1952. 74 Arabic papyri were published in this volume, in addition to an supplement containing 28 tableaux of the papyrus texts. This volume is distinguished for the corrections of the mistakes published in the former three volumes, as well as a list of the abbreviations included and another table for the indexes, names of countries and well known personalities. Most important papyri and texts published in this volume are 5 statements regarding enumeration of persons and animals¹⁸, statements of accounts and taxes. Also, this volume includes a list inscribed on bones of camel shoulder dated back to the 2–3 H. centuries corresponding to calendar Centuries 8–9.

Fifth volume

The introduction of this volume was issued in the Christmas of 1954. Around 74 Arabic papyri were issued in this volume, most of them deal with financial and commercial matters including statements of agriculture and agricultural goods; in addition to a document dealing with selling a Nubian girl slave dated back to the 3. Hegira century (= 9. cent.)¹⁹, and another document concerning the loading of a ship in Edfu city dated back to the same century. Another document related to the payment of money-aid to a prisoner-of-war and dated to Ramadan month, 262 H.²⁰

¹⁶ A rare document carrying the registration number 1900-History concerning the emancipation of a female slave whose Coptic Name was Dagachah), changed into the Arabic name “Safra” after her emancipation.

¹⁷ Grohmann enlisted, in the introduction of this part, the name of the persons who participated with him in the verifying, publishing and reading of the texts presented in his volume. He wrote this introduction in the German city Leitmeriz in September, 1936 G, i. e., after only the elapse of two years and one month after the issuance of the first part of this study.

¹⁸ See attached table 1.

¹⁹ See attached table 2.

²⁰ See attached table 3.

Sixth volume

Grohmann started preparing this volume at the beginning of 1956, and completed this work at the end of June 1962. 77 texts were published in this volume. In addition to a supplement at the end of the book where²¹ illustrated tablets from the texts displayed. This volume contains around 2) various papyri dealing with cattle and sheep accounts. Grohmann, also, published 17 papyri treating of merchants, manufacturers and tradesmen accounts. Moreover, this volume contains 42 texts covering accounting and commercial matters, employees' payrolls and statements of financial expenses and expenditures.

3. The first index of the Egyptian National Library's papyri

Since the establishment of the papyrus collection in the Egyptian National Library as from the beginning of 1896, by the orientalist B. Moritz no index had been made to provide necessary information about their preparation, subjects, places where they were found; in addition to, other important information about each papyrus concerning its subject, number of registration, dimensions, where found number of lines, state, date, type of handwriting and ink, and other information that may be useful for the students and researchers.

Since my assignment as the supervisor of Arabic papyri in the Egyptian National Library, by the Supreme Council of Antiquities 1995, I have managed to produce the first volume of the general index of the Arabic papyri for the first time since the collection establishment more than one century ago.

The first part of this index contains a classification and indexing of around 444 Arabic papyri²². Each classification and indexing card includes considerable information about each papyrus concerning (registrating number, subject, history, material, dimensions, number of lines, type of handwriting and ink, Grohmann's publication number, place where the papyrus was found, and other useful information²³. The papyri of this collection were microfilmed; and meanwhile each card of index coupled with photocopy of the Papyrus were microfilmed together in one slide. I believe that this is the first time in the world to microfilm the papyrus photocopy together with its card in one microfilm slide; taking into consideration to record down the registration number of each papyrus on the Recto or the Verso. Currently, we are approaching to finish the index of the second part of this project so as to be available for the students and researchers all over the world, hoping that it will be exchanged with the world collection of papyri.

4. Relationship

The relationship of the Egyptian National Library Collection with the Arabic papyri collections around the world it is worthy-mentioning that many parts of the Arabic papyri in the Egyptian National Library are complementary pieces for many texts of the Arabic papyri in the world collections abroad such as the collection of archiduc Rainer in Vienna, Austria; the collection of C. Wessely in Prague, Berlin collection, the collection of British Museum in London, the collection of Schott-Reinhardt in the institute of Papyri, Heidelberg University, and the Louvre Museum in Paris, France.

Examples that support our opinion

1. A papyrus in the Egyptian National Library showing the registration No. 312, whose subject is (a summon to a tax-payer to come to the land-taxes dewan-department) another piece of the papyrus included in the collection of the Archiduc Rainer, Vienna, numbered PERF 1154, another piece numbered PERF 1156 and a third piece with the registration No. PERF 1115²⁴.

2. An Arabic papyrus in the Egyptian National Library with the registration number 331; whose subject is a special letter to send wheat to the town and to liberalize customs for wheat trading, dated in Rabi 1, 91

²¹ See attached table 4.

²² At the completion of the sixth volume of this study, the printed parts of this book, (volume 1 to volume 6) are finished mean while, the rest of volumes (7-10) are in the process of translating, revising and printing. About 444 papyri were published in the six volumes; as for the other 4 volume it is expected they will include around 344 papyri.

²³ See the attached table 5 concerning the classification and indexing of the Arabic papyri texts preserved in the Egyptian National Library.

²⁴ See Corpus Papyrorum Raineri (CPR), Series Arabica.

91 H. (= Feb. 7, 710). The lost part of this papyrus preserved in the British Museum; under the registration number P. Museum No. 6231²⁵.

3. The Arabic papyrus 233 of the Egyptian National Library, whose subject is a list of the landlords and different kinds of crops. Another papyrus preserved among the Schott-Reinhardt collection in Heidelberg under the number PSR 395 and another part kept in Berlin Museum (P. 15143).

4. An Arabic papyrus preserved in the Egyptian National Library under the registration No. 259 whose subject is a piece of a statement concerning some cultivators dated back to the third Hejri century. Another part of the papyrus preserved in the collection of C. Wessely, Prage, under the number P.C. Wessely 1222.

5. An Arabic papyrus kept in the Egyptian National Library under the number (338) whose subject (special type of land taxes), dated 90–91 H. (= 710). Another part of this papyrus kept in the British Museum (P.Lond. P. M. 1380)²⁶.

5. Recommendations

Although the Arabic papyri in the Egyptian National Library ranks third in the order of the Arabic collection in the world; still, it is of great importance for the rest of world collection, especially, the collection of Archiduc Rainer PER, the Schott-Reinhardt, Heidelberg PSR, the collection of C. Wessely in the oriental institute, Prague, and the collection of Ann Arbor, in the oriental institute, Chicago, therefore, I found it necessary to suggest some recommendations that will help publishing some texts of the Arabic papyri in cooperation with the world collection:

1. Coordination between the collections of Arabic papyri preserved all over the world and the collections of the Egyptian National Library; by exchanging the papyri indexes and information about the missing parts in each collection in order to complete the texts and subsequently publish them.

2. Examining the tiny parts of the Arabic papyri in each collection because many pieces carry different registration number. While in fact, they are parts of one Papyrus. I myself noticed that fact on my review of the index cards of the collection of Schott-Reinhardt, Heidelberg, where I found that two Arabic papyri carry two different registration numbers while they are actually two pieces of one Arabic Papyrus document.

3. Paying attention to publish the texts of Arabic papyri and to train the students and researchers to read the papyri. I managed to design illustrative tables for the Arabic alphabetical letters used in the texts of some Arabic papyri during the first three centuries of Hegira.

4. Teaching the texts of Arabic papyri in the departments of History and Civilization.

5. Exchanging information about the scholars and researchers concerned with the study of Arabic papyri, and exchanging their researches and studies.

²⁵ P.Lond. IV ed. H. I. Bell: *The Aphrodito Papyri with an Appendix of Coptic Papyri*, London 1910.

²⁶ See the Arabic papyri kept in the Institute of Papyri, University of Heidelberg, under the registration no. PSR Heid Arab. No. 848. The other registered as PSR Heid. Arab. No. 756.

It is noticed that these two pieces are integral of one papyrus that spoke about the purchase of goods and crops, and provided information about Dirham, Dinar, Fils and Kirat.