
Vladimir Rozov

St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia

E-mail: v.rozov@spbu.ru

ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS FROM GORKY SCIENTIFIC LIBRARY OF ST. PETERSBURG STATE UNIVERSITY DEDICATED TO SACRED SPACES AND INTERFAITH RELATIONS IN PALESTINE AND THE LEVANT

Abstract. The article is aimed to describe and analyze contents of the manuscripts from the Oriental department of Gorky Scientific Library of St. Petersburg State University, devoted to the different aspects of interfaith interaction in the holy sites of Palestine and the Syro-Palestine region (Levant). The special focus was made on the period from the end of the Crusades to the end of 19th century. The content of various types of documents was analyzed, including travelogues (*rihla*), doctrinal writings, historical and geographical works (including *fada'il al-mudun* genre), as well as one example of folk epics ("Epic of Sayyid al-Battal"). The article includes a list of manuscripts with brief descriptions of their contents, relevant to the topic of the research. In particular, this article contains description of unique manuscripts that had not previously been the object of scientific analysis.

Keywords. Arabic manuscripts, Department of the Gorky Scientific Library of St. Petersburg State University, holy sites, Palestine, Levant, pilgrimage

Acknowledgments. The research was supported by Russian Science Foundation (project No. 24-78-10027, <https://rscf.ru/project/24-78-10027/>).

The author would like to express his gratitude to the staff members of the Oriental Department of the Gorky Scientific Library of St. Petersburg State University for their assistance in working with the manuscripts.

Introduction

The handwritten collections of St. Petersburg are rightfully considered a treasure, containing limitless wealth of sources on the history and culture of the Arabs, as well as peoples who entered the orbit of the Arab-Muslim civilization. Among the main manuscript repositories in St. Petersburg are the collections of the Russian National Library, the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Oriental department of Gorky Scientific Library of St. Petersburg State University.

This article examines the manuscript sources related to the history of interfaith interaction in Palestine (and more broadly, interfaith relations in the Levantine region) that are stored in the Oriental Department of the Gorky Scientific Library of St. Petersburg State University. The choice of this particular collection of manuscripts was primarily due to its availability, as well as the relatively small size of the collection, which allows for a more in-depth study of each manuscript. With regard to the subject matter of these manuscripts, their significance is determined, on the one hand, by the lack of at-

tention paid to the interfaith relations in the historical period between the end of the Crusades and the First World War [1]. On the other hand, the ongoing period of instability in the region, coupled with a new escalation of the Arab-Israeli conflict, underscores the significance of examining various examples that demonstrate the diverse historical experiences of interaction and the significance of peaceful coexistence among different cultures within the region and beyond.

Arabic manuscripts dedicated to the history of the Holy Land and the wider Levant, which are stored in the Oriental Department of the Gorky State University Library in St. Petersburg, have already been the subject of research. However, the previous works were focused either on universal description of the collection and its cataloging [2] or on a detailed analysis of chosen manuscripts [3].

This defines the goal of this study, i. e. to find descriptions of the Holy Land and its sanctuaries in the Arabic manuscripts of different genres. It could be geographical and historical literature descriptions of certain

cities' merits (*faḍā'il al-mudun*), as well as travelogues (*riḥla* genre), geographical and historical works. I will focus on the significance of Palestine for various ethnic and religious groups, their interaction in Palestine, and more broadly in the region. Descriptions of other sacred sites and pilgrimage routes will also be of particular interest. At the same time, manuscripts related to Christian-Muslim doctrinal debates, as well as Muslim and Arab-Christian catechetical materials were excluded from my analysis. The reason for this decision is following: they do not focus on the actual interaction between ethnic and religious groups, but rather on the desired (by one of the parties) models of such interaction.

A number of general principles should be considered. If the work that has attracted attention is a part of a collection, then the content of that collection has also been examined. This is because the selection of articles for rewriting and inclusion in the collection provides important information about the interests and sources of the collector, and therefore the intellectual environment from which the collection originates. At the same time, the descriptions are organized not in order of manuscript numbers, but according to the following logic: first, unique works and those of greatest interest, followed by works represented by several entries in the library or widely available through other sources, such as published texts.

Manuscript Descriptions

Ms. O. 1255

Of particular interest among the works devoted to interfaith interaction in Palestine is a short manuscript Ms. O. 1255. It is a description of Archimandrite Jabrā'il Kassāf's journey to Russia, entitled "A Notebook of Events and Reports on Travel Difficulties, Edited in 1860" (*Kurrās ḥawādith wa akhbār mashaqqāt asfār muḥarrar sanat 1860*). It occupies 7 folios (20.0×14.0 cm), densely covered with handwriting performed with *ruq'a* script. This essay is an autograph and, obviously, a unique work. The pasting to the cover of the

manuscript indicates that A. A. Romaskevich (1885—1942) included it to the collection of the University. Despite its title, the work practically does not relate to the archimandrite's trip to Russia, except for the beginning of the journey, namely, communication with the staff of the Russian consulate. Nevertheless, it highlights in detail his friction as a church figure of Arab descendant (originally from Lebanon) with the Greek Orthodox clergy of Jerusalem, as well as his visits to numerous churches and pilgrimage objects in the Holy Land.

Ms. O. 204

It is a collection of manuscripts, written by different hands in different handwriting. It consists of 119 fols. (19.5×13.0 cm) and originates from the Volga-Ural region, dated to 19th century. The collection begins with Islamic catechism "The Quintessence of the Precious" (*Khulāṣat al-khāliṣa*) (Ms. O. 204a) by 'Alī b. Muḥammad al-Badakhshānī (d. ca. 854/1450), presented in the form of an explanation of the key terms and principles of the Islamic faith (fols. 1—41v) written in *naskh* script.

The next treatise (Ms. O. 204b, fols. 42—50v, *naskh* script) of this manuscript is of peculiar interest. This is a short treatise, entitled "Epistle on the Help on the Abridgement [of Prayer]" (*Risālat al-naṣr fī al-qasr*) written by 'Umar Aghā al-Ḥanafī (11th/17th century). The treatise begins with the description of Muslim's victory over the island of Crete, conversion of churches to mosques and adoption of Islam by a part of the island's population. It also discusses the challenges associated with the island's population's resistance to converting to Islam. The main part of the treatise is dedicated to the juridical status of the island — is it a land of Islam (*dār al-islām*), land of treaty (*dār al-ṣulḥ*) or land of war (*dār al-ḥarb*) with consequent arguments regarding the rules of making a prayer (*ṣalāt*) by the Muslim warriors.

The unique historical work "A Rare Pillar in the News About Some Caliphs and Sultans" (*Tuḥfat al-asāṭīn fī akhbār ba'd al-khulafā' wa al-salāṭīn*) by

Yūsuf b. Abdullāh al-Armayūnī (d. 958/1551 or 960/1553) occupies the consequent folios of the volume (Ms. O. 204c, fols. 54—73v), written in *naskh* script. This work, which has already come to the attention of researchers [4], is a summary of Islamic history, starting from the times of Prophet Muḥammad and up to about 960/1517. Despite its extreme brevity and even laconic nature, the text of the work, among other things, describes interreligious interactions during the reigns of the mentioned rulers, including sectarian clashes within Islam, as well as relations with Christians (*al-rūm*) and their sacral objects and places.

The manuscript also lists two other works. One of them is "Shining Jewels on the Classes of Hanafis" (*al-Jawāhir al-muḍī'a fī ṭabaqāt al-ḥanafīya*) by 'Abd al-Qādir b. Abū Wafā' al-Qurashī al-Miṣrī (696—775 / 1297—1373) — an essay describing the Divine Names, the virtues of the Prophet Muḥammad and the biography of imam Abū Ḥanīfa (Ms. O. 204d, fols. 74—87). Another is "An Introduction to the knowledge of Monotheism" (*Muqaddima fī 'ilm al-tawḥīd*) by Abū Ishāq al-Tūnisī (Ms. O. 204e, fols. 88v—92v). Various prayers (*du'ā'*) and extracts from various works occupy the remaining pages of the volume. These works are not directly relevant to interfaith relations in the Levant, but provide a background for the study of this historical document. In particular, the content of the collection indicates that its creator had a strong interest in the de-

fense of Islam. This is significant, as works on the history of interfaith interactions in the Middle East seem to

be of great value to Muslims from the Volga-Ural region in the 19th century.

Ms.O. 138

The manuscript Ms.O. 138 with a copy of the first part of the classic work “The Conquest of Syria” (*Futūḥāt al-shām*) by Abū ‘Abdullāh Muḥammad b. ‘Umar al-Wāqidī (130—207 / 747—823) is worth mentioning separately. The 19th century manuscript is from Tatarstan and consists of 160 fols.

(21.5×17.0 cm) written in *ta’līq* script. The manuscript is beautifully decorated with the colourful ‘*unwān*. The work describes not only the military aspects of the Arab campaigns in Syria and surrounding regions, but also the relations between the Muslim victors and adherents of other religions.

Ms.O. 584

The work directly related to the sacred sites of the Syro-Palestinian region is a copy of the well-known treatise “Selected Pearls in the History of Aleppo” (*al-Durr al-muntakhab fī ta’rīkh ḥalab*) by Muḥammad b. Muḥammad b. al-Shihna (804—890 / 1402—1485). The manuscript Ms.O. 584 occupies 122 fols.

(21.5×15.5 cm, *naskh* script). The copy is dated to 1164 / 1750–1. The work is not primarily concerned with the historical development of Aleppo; rather, it offers the city’s general description. At the same time, special attention is paid to sacred sites: mosques, churches, cemeteries and places of pilgrimage (*mazār*).

Ms.O. 599

The following manuscript is an highly remarkable work, a novel of Sayyid al-Baṭṭāl and his wars against the Byzantines in the area of the Dayr al-Zayt monastery in the land of Syria / al-Shām (Ms.O. 599, 60 fols,

21.5×15.5 cm, *naskh* skript). This is an excerpt from the famous Arabic epic *Sīrat Dhāt al-Himma* (“The Tale of Dhāt al-Himma”), and this manuscript was already in the field of Dr. Frolova’s view [5].

Ms.O. 297, Ms.O. 298

These two manuscripts are copies of the same work, the quite popular cosmography “The Pearl of Wonders and the Uniqueness of Strange Things” (*Kharīdat al-‘ajā’ib wa farīdat al-gharā’ib*) by ‘Umar b. al-Wardī (691—749 / 1291–2—1348–9). The manuscript Ms.O. 297, dated back to 1834 AD, consist of 165 fols. (34.0×20.5 cm) written in *ta’līq* script, and originates from Tatarstan. Another copy (Ms.O. 298) is dated back to 1844; the text is written in 103 fols. (21.0×16.0 cm) in *ta’līq* script as well. This work provides a detailed description of the various religious sites in Palestine that belong to different faiths, as well as

stories about their remarkable features.

Information on the history of the Levant can also be found in general works on world history. There is a range of such works available in the Oriental Department of the Gorky Library. They contain stories about the creation of the earth, prophets, and pre-Islamic dynasties. This information, although being mostly legendary in nature, is significant for researchers, as it provides the perspective of an educated representative of Arab-Muslim culture on the history of the region and (which is equally important), on the holy history of humanity.

Ms.O. 576

The general history is represented by the final part of Ibn al-Athīr’s (555—630 / 1160—1233) work “The Complete History” (*al-Kāmil fī ta’rīkh*). The copy is dated back to

790/1388 and consists of 290 fols. (26.5×22.5 cm) written in archaic *naskh*. This volume covers the period from 441/1049 to 621/1228, and thus includes references to the Crusades.

Ms.O. 806

Another essay on universal history is “Compendium of Knowledge on the History of the Mankind” (*al-Mukhtaṣar fī akhbār al-baṣhar*) by Ismā‘īl b. ‘Alī Abū al-Fidā’ (672—732 / 1273—1331). The manuscript Ms.O. 806 contains the first part of the work on

119 fols. (24.5×17.0 cm) and dated back to 1253/1837–8. This part of the work is interesting because it provides information on the legendary history of mankind and the prophets, as well as the sacred history of the Jews (*banū isrā’īl*).

Ms. O. 1248

The last work on universal history under our revision is “The Compendium of Dynasties” (*Mukhtaṣar al-duwal*) by Yūḥnā Abū al-Faraj b. al-‘Ibrī (623—684 / 1226—1289). The copy Ms.O. 1248 is dated by the end of 19th century and contains 107 fols. (26.0×22.0 cm), written by a presumably European (?) hand, with a modern script, something between *naskh* and *ruq‘a*. This

work also contains a great deal of legendary history and stories about pre-Islamic times. One may say that the topic of this discussion is somewhat divergent from the original focus of the research, but it is important to note that the concept of divine intervention in human history, the stories of prophets, and the development of religious traditions are integral components of cultural identity.

Ms. O. 151, Ms. O. 270, Ms. O. 597

Cosmographies, which pay attention to the sacred history, as well as the Muslim conquest of Palestine, are represented by three copies of “History of the Nations” (*Ta’rīkh al-umam*), predominantly known as ‘History of Years of the Kings of Land and Prophets’ (*Tā’rīkh sinī mulūk al-ard wa’l-anbiyā’*), by Ḥamza b. al-Ḥasan al-Isbahānī (ca. 270—350–60 / 893—961–71). All three manuscripts seem to be copies from one source and originate from

Tatarstan. The manuscript Ms.O. 151 consists of 66 fols. (25.5×19.0 cm), written in *ta’līq* script. This copy was produced by the scribe Muḥammad ‘Alī in 1258/1842. The same person wrote and decorated another copy of this treatise, Ms. O. 270 of 100 fols. (25.5×19.5 cm). The third copy of the text, Ms.O. 597, is created in the same decade and consists of 170 fols. (21.0×17.0 cm), written in *ta’līq* script as well. All three copies are decorated with *‘unwāns*.

Other historical and geographical works that relate to other regions, such as Egypt and the Ural-Volga region, were not included in this list of works relevant to the Syro-Palestinian area as they are beyond the scope of

this case-study. However, these works may be of interest to researchers studying issues of interfaith interaction and therefore deserve further attention in a separate study.

Ms. O. 1238

In conclusion, a work is worth mentioning, which only tangentially relates to the main topic of the research, but is of significant interest itself. This work is a travel diary by the Swedish orientalist Matthias Norberg (1747—1826), written in Arabic (Ms.O. 1238). The text is written in notebook that contains 34 fols. (20.0×16.5 cm) in total, but only 14 of them have text, others were left blank. One side of each page contains Arabic text, which

was clearly created as an exercise of the language, and the translation into Swedish is placed one by one. The diary describes traveler's journey through Italy and Greece in 1779. During his visit to Greece, he met with representatives of the Orthodox Church who expressed concern about the hostility of the Turkish government in a more indirect manner. The diary ends abruptly on the departure from the port of Thessaloniki.

Conclusion

The Gorky Scientific Library of St. Petersburg State University has a number of historical documents that provide an insight into the history of religious interactions in Palestine and the region of the Levant. These are travelogues, dogmatic writings, historical and geographical writings, as well as one piece of folk epics. While most of these documents are well-known and have been published in printed form, there are also a number of rare and unique manuscripts that deserve closer attention. These include both unique manuscripts Ms.O. 1255, Ms.O. 1238 and works from manuscript Ms.O. 204. It is essential to preserve and publish these documents of great historical significance for future generations.

It is worth noting that a number of hypotheses have not been verified. For instance, it was expected that information regarding the holy sites of Palestine would be found within treatises related to the *hajj* and more broadly, “merits of the cities” (*faḍā’il al-mudun*); however, none of the existing writings on the pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina contain such information. The works of the genre

faḍā’il al-mudun are rare in the library's collection. As for the literature on pilgrimage, it is either of North African origin, from the collection of *shaykh* Muḥammad ‘Ayyād al-Ṭanṭāwī (1810—1861), or refers to the Muslims of Central Asia, the Caucasus and the Volga-Ural region. The lack of attention to Jerusalem in this context looks very strange. Muslims of the Russian Empire traveled from Istanbul to Damascus, and from Damascus to Mecca and Medina, visiting Jerusalem on the way, and it is reflected in the works of Muslims from the Russian Empire dedicated to *hajj* [6]. A more comprehensive examination of the subject matter is therefore necessary.

Surely, the list of manuscripts given in this article could be supplemented. Perhaps descriptions of the sacred places of Palestine and the struggle for them can be found in works of other genres that have fallen out of sight. In the future, it is also necessary to describe the manuscripts that may contain the relevant information in other manuscript collections in St. Petersburg, namely, the Russian National Library, the Institute of Oriental Manuscripts of the Russian Academy of Sciences.

Notes

1. Sokolov, 2022: 173.
2. Beliaev & Bulgakov, 1958; Frolova & Deriagina, 1996.
3. Frolova, 1990; idem, 1993.
4. Idem, 1990.
5. Idem, 1993.
6. Kane, 2015: 49—51.

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