

**“In some dark corner of the Library . . .”**

**The ‘Mystery’ of the Marsh Manuscripts.<sup>1</sup>**

On Thursday 12<sup>th</sup> August 1714, Mr. Thomas Hearne, then Sub-Librarian of the Bodleian Library, noted in his diary that ‘The Lord Primate Marsh of Ireland having by will given all his Oriental MSS to the Bodleian Library, they were brought this day by Waggon to the Library in eleven boxes.’<sup>2</sup>

The boxes remained unopened until the following day<sup>3</sup> when the contents were counted and were handed over to the Vice-Chancellor of the University and the then Bodley’s Librarian Dr. John Hudson. The manuscripts had been brought over from Ireland at the behest of Marsh’s executors by Mr. John Moland, secretary to the Late Archbishop, for which service to the University (and, Hearne says, for which he would take no money) <sup>4</sup> he was later that year awarded the honorary degree of Batchelor of Civil Law.<sup>5</sup>

According to the receipt, signed by Mr. Moland, the boxes contained eight hundred and twenty-seven volumes together with several catalogues, some in Archbishop Marsh’s own hand. The receipt also reveals that the consignment contained ‘an old seal with Arabic characters cut thereon.’<sup>6</sup>

By far the largest collection of Oriental manuscripts ever to arrive in the Bodleian Library, the Marsh collection contains works in at least eleven languages including Arabic, Persian, Ottoman Turkish, Hebrew, Coptic, Chagatai (Eastern Turkish), Syriac, and Malay, as well as a number of European languages.<sup>7</sup> The collection contains several highly-prized items in addition to an eclectic and valuable list of titles on subjects ranging from astronomy to astrology, law to lexicography, poetry to physic. About one third of Marsh’s manuscript collection was acquired in 1695 at the sale in

Leiden of the private collection of Jacob Golius (d. 1667), the distinguished Dutch Arabist.

The manuscripts which arrived in 1714 were not, however, the first of the Marsh manuscripts to come to the Bodleian. The manuscript – acquired by Marsh at the Golius sale - of the Arabic translation of the *Conica* of Apollonius of Perga now known as MS. Marsh 667 must have been at the Bodleian before 1710, perhaps by a number of years, as this very manuscript was used by Edmond Halley in the preparation of his edition (Oxford, 1710) and Latin translation of the Greek geometer's work. Since the original Greek text of books 5-8 of the work is lost, and books 5-7 are preserved only in a 9<sup>th</sup>-century Arabic translation, Halley, who had studied some Arabic, and with the assistance of Henry Sike, relied on the Marsh Arabic manuscript to complete his work and also to reconstruct the missing eighth book. At the beginning of book five of his edition and translation, Halley included a full page acknowledgement of his debt to Archbishop Marsh for providing the codex for his use.

The codex itself contains a colophon with the date AH 462/AD 1070 stating it was copied at Marāghah in North-Western Iran.<sup>8</sup> Marāghah was known even in the 11<sup>th</sup> century as a great centre for producing manuscripts. However, it rose to real fame in the 13<sup>th</sup> century with the construction of an astronomical observatory and grand library there by Hulagu Khan. The first director of the observatory was the polymath Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 1274) whose glosses appear on the Marsh manuscript a fact which indicates that it had remained in Marāghah until at least the 1260s. A later endowment note on the title page of the codex together with an endowment stamp dated AH 863/AD 1458 shows that, by then, the manuscript had been taken much further east to Herat in modern-day Afghanistan.

Returning to the 1714 consignment of manuscripts, rather than take pride of place in the Library's collections, a controversial statement by Hearne indicates that this wonderful collection was cast immediately into relative obscurity; for we read in Hearne's Latin Preface to Camden's *Elizabeth*, written in 1717, three years after their arrival in the Library, that the Marsh manuscripts 'now remain in the dark in some corner of the Library.'<sup>9</sup>

Hearne was prosecuted at the University Chancellor's Court on account of his preface and one of the points he was taken to task for was this statement of his about the Marsh manuscripts being thus neglected which was deemed to have brought the University into disrepute.

In another entry in his diary dated 20<sup>th</sup> May 1718, Hearne relates a conversation he had had that same evening with the same Dr. Halley and another man who asked him about what he had said about Archbishop Marsh's books being *in tenebris*. He says,

I told them 1<sup>st</sup> that, not being published, they are so. 2<sup>ndly</sup>, that if anybody was reflected upon, it must be my self only, since they were placed where they are by my own direction. But then I will say further, that the place is not so convenient as I would have wished. They are certainly in a dark place in a corner, and we go to them through a trap door, and 'tis pretty difficult to reach them. There is a much more proper place that I had for them in my view, and that is, the biggest of the two studies in the Picture Gallery, which is a fine, large, dry room, in which stand the MSS. given by Francis Junius and shelves were here put up some years ago, by order of the Curators on purpose for MSS. It will contain several thousand books, besides those of Junius's. But the room hath been turned into a ware-house, for many years, by Dr. Hudson, which was the reason I did not nominate that place, when the Archbishop's MSS. were brought in, well knowing that the Dr would have been in a rage at it. The use he puts the room to is for printing paper and copies of the books that he prints, and here 'tis

that he sells his books. I easily gathered from Dr. Halley's whole discourse that Dr. Hudson hath been one of the chief promoters of my prosecution.<sup>10</sup>

Leaving aside Hearne's swipes at his superiors, his metaphorical explanation of the words 'in some dark corner' as meaning 'not published' is, apart from Dr. Halley's efforts, certainly valid if a little facetious. Moreover, the fact of the physical inaccessibility of the manuscripts may have been an inconvenience for Library staff in fetching the material for readers, and, in fact, a pre-echo of Hearne's remark was made by Savilian Professor of Geometry John Bainbridge (1582-1643) nearly one hundred years earlier; In a letter dated 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1626 to the Reverend James Usher, then Archbishop of Armagh, Bainbridge writes on the difficulty of obtaining a copy of the Qur'an – a book he recognized was crucial for acquiring a proper knowledge of Arabic - saying, 'ours are bound prisoners of the Library, wherein are many Arabick books, but *authore nescio quo, de re nescio qua* (By what author I do not know; about what subject-matter I do not know).' Bainbridge goes on to say that he hopes to bring the books into a 'better light'.<sup>11</sup> However, except to a select few scholars, it was the linguistic inaccessibility of the material that was the greatest barrier to the discovery and publishing of what was contained in the Marsh Collection during the second and third decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century; for out of the nearly eight hundred codices in the Marsh Oriental collection today, more than five hundred are in Arabic, with Persian the next well-represented with around seventy volumes. Syriac material numbers at over forty items followed by Hebrew with thirty-five. Eighteen Turkish works, eight Armenian, six Chinese, and a single work for each of Coptic, Malay, and Sanskrit make up the remainder of the collection. With the exception perhaps of Hebrew, during the period in question, there were quite simply only

a handful of scholars suitably qualified to read in these languages - if there were any at all.

Records of readers' names and the printed books and manuscripts they consulted in the Bodleian are preserved in the Library Records which, although they contain several chronological gaps, are a fascinating and useful source of information.<sup>12</sup> If we look at the period prior to the accession of the Marsh collection, for which records exist from November 1711 until October 1713, after which there is a lacuna, and then they resume from November 1714 until October 1716, we see only one or two names recorded as readers of Oriental material. The first name we come across is that of Jean Gagnier (d. 1740), a French convert to Anglicanism from Catholicism who had come to England in 1702. Gagnier, a Hebraist and Arabist, read frequently in the Bodleian during this period and it is his name that appears the most as a reader of Oriental books. On November 12<sup>th</sup> 1711, for example, Gagnier consulted two manuscript volumes of the *al-Ṣiḥāḥ* Arabic lexicon of al-Jawharī (d. c. 1002) from the Pococke collection, as well as a Coptic lectionary, and a book of Hebrew law from the Huntington collection. On two consecutive Thursdays, the 21<sup>st</sup> and 28<sup>th</sup> of July 1712, he consulted the selfsame volumes, and did so on a number of other occasions during this time. To the end of October 1712, the only other reader to read what might have been an Arabic manuscript in the Bodleian was a certain Lamb<sup>13</sup> of University College, who, on the 4<sup>th</sup> August of that year, consulted MS. Huntington 399 – a book which today is unidentified except for the title 'Bebusius de jure Mohammedico', apparently a work of Islamic law.<sup>14</sup>

Among other readers of Oriental material in this period the name Wilkins appears in November 1715 as having consulted an Arabic 'mirror for princes' as well as a Coptic liturgical work. This would surely have been David Wilkins (1685–1745),

scholar of Coptic and rival of the aforementioned Gagnier, whose name appears at intervals throughout late 1715 and early 1716 in the Library records.

As for the Marsh manuscripts, it is not until the 18<sup>th</sup> April 1716, which appears to mark the arrival in the Library of the Orientalist Simon Ockley of Cambridge, that the records identify any as having actually been read. This was at the very least Ockley's third visit to the Bodleian, his previous visits were in 1701 and 1706, and it lasted about five months during which he was a regular reader until the record peters out again in September 1716. Ockley was researching for his book *The History of the Saracens* which was published in 1718, and the first work he consulted was a History of Aleppo from the Marsh collection (MS. Marsh 36). However, in the Library records, the Marsh codices were referred to variously as MSS. Armachanus, Armach., or Arma., rather than MSS. Marsh at that time due to their association with the Archbishop of Armagh, and indeed in Halley's edition of the Conica, the author refers to the aforementioned Arabic codex he used as *Codex Armachanus*. During his stay, Ockley also read MS. Marsh 289 – part of a universal history by Sibṭ ibn al-Jawzī (d. 1257), MS. Pococke 55 – an early Islamic chronicle by al-Wāqidī (d. 823), and MS. Marsh 592 – a book on determining the direction of the temple at Mecca and the construction of prayer niches.

The only other name of an Orientalist scholar to appear in the Library records before the record pauses in October 1716 (it resumes for 1720) is that of Henry Wild of Norwich who is first mentioned at the end of July 1716.<sup>15</sup> Wild is known to have transcribed many extracts from the Arabic manuscripts of the Bodleian. For example, Library records for the 18<sup>th</sup> August 1716 show that Wild consulted MS. Pococke 20, a famous classical work of Arabic grammar by Ibn Ājurrūm (d. 1323), and Wild's

transcript of this manuscript apparently produced at this time is still held by the Library as part of MS. Bodl. Or. 312.

By the time records resume in 1720, it seems clear that the Marsh collection is beginning to emerge from the darkness into the light. Gagnier is still a regular and steadfast reader in December 1720 when he consults MS. Marsh 3 (by this time the collection is regularly being referred to by the name Marsh rather than Armach.) – a book containing prayers and a famous poem about the Prophet’s mantle, perhaps in preparation for his 1723 Latin translation of Abū l-Fidā’s Life of Muḥammad. He also consults MS. Marsh 592 which Ockley had looked at before him. A Dr. Hunt is also mentioned in December of 1720 as a reader of Arabic manuscripts from the Huntington, Pococke, Thurston, and Marsh collections. Presumably this is a young Thomas Hunt (1696-1774), future Laudian Professor of Arabic at Oxford, whose transcription of MS. Marsh 40, a manuscript he consulted on this visit, is held by the Library as MS. Bodl. Or. 411 and runs to 276 folios.

After another gap in the records which resume again in 1726, we find Gagnier still beaver away; on August 11<sup>th</sup> of that year he is reading two Marsh manuscripts on Astrology and Astronomy. However, what really indicates from this point on that the Marsh manuscripts are now firmly on the agenda is that on the 14<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> of September of 1726 more than fifty of them were ‘deliver’d to Mr. Sedgley to be repair’d or bound.’ The collection was clearly being used by scholars and was now receiving due care and attention through repair and rebinding.

With the publication by the Clarendon Press in 1787 of Johannes Uri’s Catalogue of the Oriental manuscripts in the Bodleian Library, still more light was shed on the Marsh collection which was catalogued in its entirety, and Uri’s impressive volume would have found its way into all the great libraries of Europe and even beyond. Now

in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, online catalogues may now be accessed from every device imaginable, and, three hundred years after the eleven boxes arrived in the Library, the arduous and tortuous endeavour to bring the Marsh collection, and its sister collections to light in the Hearnian, metaphorical sense of being published does indeed continue. The year 2014 did in fact see the latest manifestation of this endeavour with the publication of an edition and translation of MS. Marsh 539, a 13<sup>th</sup>-century manuscript copy of an 11<sup>th</sup>-century work. In Uri's catalogue this book is given the Latin title *Sapientiae Palma*. Later catalogues simply call it *A collection of quotations from ancient authors, Greek and Arab*, and it was eventually published under the title *A philosophy reader from the circle of Miskawayh : text, translation and commentary*.<sup>16</sup>

A certain 20<sup>th</sup>-century Orientalist scholar said that Orientalism was both difficult and simple; difficult because the languages are hard to master, but simple because once they had been mastered one only needs to go to Istanbul where there may be half a million manuscripts, choose one and publish it.

Perhaps we need not venture so far as Istanbul since, in our very own Bodleian, there may very well be many more such gems as this hiding under their unassuming titles, waiting to come to light.

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<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank the following people for their kind advice and assistance during the preparation of this article: Dr. Bruce Barker-Benfield, Mrs. Gillian Grant, Professor Alastair Hamilton, Mr. Stephen Hebron, Dr. Oliver House, Dr. Jason McElligott, Mrs. Alice Millea.

<sup>2</sup> See: Thomas Hearne, *Remarks and Collections of Thomas Hearne*, ed. D. W. Rannie, Oxford Historical Society, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1898 (hereafter referred to as "Hearne"), vol. IV, p. 394.

<sup>3</sup> See: Hearne, vol. IV, p. 394, in a letter to Sir P. Sydenham.

<sup>4</sup> See: Hearne, vol. IV, p. 415 (October 13<sup>th</sup> 1714).

<sup>5</sup> A version of Marsh's will dated March 1709 mentions Mr. Moland as a notary public. See: G. E. Cokayne, *Some notice of various families of the name of Marsh*, Exeter : William Pollard, 1900, p. 41.



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For mention of this degree, see: 'Michaelson-Morcombe', in *Alumni Oxonienses 1500-1714*, ed. Joseph Foster (Oxford, 1891), pp. 1007-1026 <<http://www.british-history.ac.uk/alumni-oxon/1500-1714/pp1007-1026>> [accessed 13 December 2014].

<sup>6</sup> See: "Box list" signed by Moland and dated 13<sup>th</sup> August 1714 in the Oxford University Archive ref: WPalpha/20/1. Further details and the whereabouts of the seal are, as yet, unknown.

<sup>7</sup> For an overview of the Bodleian Library's early Oriental collections including that of Archbishop Marsh, see: Colin Wakefield, "Arabic Manuscripts in the Bodleian Library: The Seventeenth-Century Collections" in *The 'Arabick' Interest of the Natural Philosophers in Seventeenth-Century England*, edited by G. A. Russell, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1994. See also: G. J. Toomer, *Eastern wisdom and learning : the study of Arabic in seventeenth-century England*, Oxford : Clarendon Press, 1996.

<sup>8</sup> For an earlier discussion of this MS, see: A. F. L. Beeston, *Bodleian Library Record* 4 (1952), pp. 76-77 (where, however, the *abjad* date *tā' sīn bā'* is converted 472 not 462).

<sup>9</sup> William Camden, *Annales rerum Anglicarum, et Hibernicarum, regnante Elizabetha*, ed. T. Hearne, 1717, p. LVI.

<sup>10</sup> Hearne, vol. VI, p. 365-366.

<sup>11</sup> The life of the Most Reverend Father in God, James Usher, late Lord Arch-Bishop of Armagh, Primate and Metropolitan of all Ireland. : With a collection of three hundred letters, between the said Lord Primate and most of the eminentest persons for piety and learning in his time, both in England and beyond the seas. London 1686, p. 370-371. Also quoted in: Alastair Hamilton, *William Bedwell The Arabist 1563-1632*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1985, p. 26.

<sup>12</sup> See: Library Records e. 543-e. 555.

<sup>13</sup> Possibly Simon Lamb, of Chaddesley, co. Worcester, who matriculated in 1709' See: Labdon-Ledsam', in *Alumni Oxonienses 1500-1714*, ed. Joseph Foster (Oxford, 1891), pp. 868-892 <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/alumni-oxon/1500-1714/pp868-892> [accessed 13 January 2015].

<sup>14</sup> See: Summary Catalogue, vol. II, part 2, p. 1031 (where 'Babusius', apparently an error in the transcription from the 1697 Catalogue of Edward Bernard, Tom. I, pt. 1, p. 283, no. 6145 (399), where the name appears as 'Bebusius'). Perhaps the name Bebusius is an error for Dabusius and refers to the current MS. Huntington 39, *Kitāb al-Asrār fī al-Fiqh* of Abū Zayd al-Dabūsī (d. c. 1039).

<sup>15</sup> For the scant details of Henry Wild's career, see: D. M. Dunlop, "The 'Arabian Tailor', Henry Wild" in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London*, Vol. 19, No. 3 (1957), pp. 579-581.

<sup>16</sup> Elvira Wakelnig, *A philosophy reader from the circle of Miskawayh : text, translation and commentary*, Cambridge: CUP, 2014.