

‘UNWĀN ILLUMINATIONS IN ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS (PART 1)

Unlike miniatures, which are for well-known reasons unusual in Arabic manuscripts [1], artistic ‘*unwāns* are among those adornments which became an organic part of the Arabic manuscript book. Despite this, however, the number of Arabic manuscripts adorned with ‘*unwāns* is likely not very large. While we lack any broader statistics, we present the results for the collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies: among 10,822 descriptions of manuscripts in the published catalogue [2] there are fewer than 200 copies with artistic ‘*unwāns*; no more than 1.8% of the entire collection.

Despite these modest indicators, the amount of study accorded artistic ‘*unwāns* does not at present correspond to their significance in the Arabic manuscript tradition. The only specialized study remains Cl. Huart's entry in the “Encyclopaedia of Islam” [3], which contains but a few lines and is entirely outdated. It is likely thanks to the prestige of the Encyclopedia of Islam that the term “‘*unwān*”, used by Huart to designate this particular phenomenon, has been adopted in the literature [4], despite the inconveniences it causes [5]. In recent decades, however, many authors have taken to avoiding it, replacing it — with some justification — with the term “headpiece” (Russian *zastavka*, German *Kopfstück*) [6].

In general, in works on manuscripts or the art of the manuscript book, artistic ‘*unwāns* are mentioned rather frequently, but these mentions are, unfortunately, usually in passing, and fail to add anything essential or new to this rather interesting topic. The only exceptions I know of are the descriptions of the artistic ‘*unwān* given by A. B. Khalidov [7], L. V. Dmitrieva [8], and O. F. Akimushkin and A. A. Ivanov [9]. They are apparently the first attempts to describe the ‘*unwān* as a type of manuscript book decoration typical of Muslim art; they merit interest not only because they are constructive, but because they are, paradoxically, mutually non-coincident and non-contradictory [10].

As concerns the illustrative material on artistic ‘*unwāns*, it has remained exceptionally thin and infrequent. Moreover, it is spread over many editions. The description of Arab manuscripts is still dominated by a tendency toward palaeographic appendices, and catalogues, which are the main sources of information for manuscript scholars, traditionally present illustrative material in keeping with this *idée fixe*. We provide two examples over a broad chronological spectrum: the catalogue of W. Ahlwardt [11]

and the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies [12], the appendices of which contain, respectively, 63 and 96 photo reproductions, do not give a single artistic ‘*unwān*. The codicological orientation among archaeographers is only beginning to take root, and in G. Schoeler's 1990 catalogue, for example, 7 of 129 photographs reproduce ‘*unwāns* [13]. A notable number of ‘*unwāns* have been published by D. Duda [14], but the explanation there is somewhat different (she has described only illuminated manuscripts). The ‘*unwāns* published outside of catalogues have been few and far between.

The reproduction source material for the study of ‘*unwāns* is still in a state of infancy. While this process continues, and with much of the accumulated material still unstudied, we must apparently deal with the difficult task of treating verbal descriptions of ‘*unwāns* in catalogues and in the scholarly literature. The timely creation of a technical language for this, currently lacking, would lessen authors' dependence on the troublesome and costly inclusion of photo reproductions. This is one of the tasks that the present article aims to perform.

A careful study of reproductions and unpublished originals from the manuscript collection of the St. Petersburg Branch of the Institute of Oriental Studies has shown that the external decorative diversity of artistic ‘*unwāns* conceals a comparatively simple composition common to all or most ‘*unwāns* in Arab, Persian, and Turkic manuscripts.

It is this compositional structure, which displays some variation, that could provide the basis for classifying ‘*unwāns* and for a formal verbal description in catalogues and secondary literature. All of the necessary terminology we currently lack could be developed in the course of studying and describing concrete examples, for we will need such terms as soon as ‘*unwāns* become the object of the greater attention they warrant.

The generalized image of an ‘*unwān* resembles a vertical cross-section of a well. This comparison — only one, of course, of several analogies that come to mind — allows us to develop the necessary terminology for our descriptions. The outline (O), or contour, of the well is a key element in the composition of an artistic ‘*unwān* and the main criterion for the formal classification of ‘*unwāns*. As numerous examples suggest, one can identify three more elements in the well: its cup (C), an indispensable element in ‘*unwān* composition, and its base (B) and foot (F), which are common, but optional (either together or individually). The outline