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## TEXTS AND MANUSCRIPTS: DESCRIPTION AND RESEARCH

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### A NOTE ON THE *AWLĀD AL-ḤILŪ*: A SCRIBAL DYNASTY OF FĀS (FEZ)

In the recently published catalogue to the Shaker Collection of Islamic manuscripts, the author describes a group of Moroccan manuscripts whose illumination, he says, is “in the style of the *Awlād al-Ḥilū*”, though he does not tell us any more about the *Awlād al-Ḥilū*, or al-Ḥilū family [1].

Since first coming across the name of this group of scribes in the 1960s I have always been interested in finding out more about them. It was not an easy task. None of the books on Moroccan decorative arts which I examined said anything; even works dealing specifically with illuminated manuscripts from the Maghrib made no mention of them [2]. Whilst researching other matters in the British Library, I occasionally thumbed through the many Arabic manuscript catalogues available in the reading room looking for the name *al-Ḥilū*: but, by the time I began to be more seriously interested in Maghribī manuscripts, I had — as they say — “drawn a blank”. I was convinced there was nothing to know — in print at least — about the elusive *Awlād al-Ḥilū* [3].

It was not until the publication in 1991, of late Muḥammad al-Manūnī's book, in Arabic, on the history of writing, scribes and manuscript production in Morocco, that comprehensive information became available [4]. It contains the researches of a lifetime, undertaken by the indefatigable Moroccan scholar among the manuscript collections of his homeland, and includes several references to various members of the al-Ḥilū family. However, the information is scattered throughout the text, names are not always given in the indices and occasionally appear confusing. For the sake of convenience I shall try to systemize the information here, and add a few comments and additional information, based on other sources.

Like scribes elsewhere in the Islamic World, those of Morocco were part of an honourable profession, due in a large measure to their copying out the Qur'ān. In Morocco, the script in which the text was written was almost as hallowed as the text itself. “Just as the composi-

tion of the Qur'ān is a miracle, its script is a miracle as well”, said a leading 18th century *ṣūfī* saint of Fās [5]. But scribal practise was not as well organized in Morocco as it was in the Central Islamic Lands. Ibn Khaldūn remarks that calligraphy was not taught as “scientifically” in the West as it was in Cairo. Only in the 16th century did this begin to be done in Morocco.

There were four categories of scribes: members of the royal family and high officials; members of noble and well-to-do families of the main centres; less privileged members of society; and those engaged in teaching [6]. The latter activity was done mostly by imitation. Aḥmad al-Rifā'ī (d. 1846), a scribe from a well-off family who became governor of Fās for a time in 1817, has left an autobiography in which he describes in some detail, how writing was taught in 19th century Morocco [7].

The al-Ḥilū family were scribes, illuminators and binders who worked in the city of Fās from the mid 18th century down to the 20th, though they were probably active before 1700. There were two “branches”: one working in the area of manuscript production and the other consisting of distinguished scholars.

Both were descended from Muḥammad al-Ḥilū al-Waṭṭāsī al-Marīnī, brother of the *wazīr* Yaḥyā b. Yaḥyā b. 'Umar b. Zayyān al-Waṭṭāsī, killed by the Marīnid *sultān* 'Abd al-Ḥaqq (1420—65) in 1458, along with most of his family. Only Muḥammad al-Ḥilū and another brother Muḥammad al-Shaykh escaped by fleeing to the desert, from where they were later able to seize power in Fās [8].

The earliest recorded member of the al-Ḥilū family engaged in manuscript production lived during the reign of *sultān* Muḥammad III (1757—90), in the Second 'Alawī Period — which consisted of those years of the *sultān's* reign. He was Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Ḥilū al-Marīnī al-Fāsī, — whom we can designate as Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Mahdī b. Aḥmad al-Ḥilū (i). Several of the family members included the words al-Marīnī and