

University Library, Leiden

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More than four centuries ago, the University Library in Leiden started collecting Arabic manuscripts and printed books. Although there are other university libraries in the Netherlands which have collections in the field of Islamic Studies, Leiden has by far the largest collection in this field.

The acquisition of Arabic books and manuscripts has always had its problems. Booksellers in the Netherlands have never been able to supply Arabic titles, except when a local publisher took the trouble to produce them (fortunately, quite a large number of publishers did so, most notably firms like Brill or Elsevier). Direct purchasing from the Middle East has never been anything but difficult, dependent as we were on Dutch merchants residing in the Middle East or consular agents. Fortunately, this situation appeared to change for the better, when, in the 1970's, a bookseller in Beirut started distributing catalogues containing the best of what was available in the Arab World, and who could also conduct his correspondence with our Acquisitions Department in English. The Lebanese civil war put an end to all this: the books kept coming from Beirut (after the local militias had levied their export fees), but the bookseller himself had moved to Cyprus. When, in addition to this, financial transactions became impossible, we were confronted with the awkward situation that we received bills we could not pay, and books we had not ordered but could not return because the mail service to Lebanon had been discontinued. By 1986, we had so much of our assets tied up that it became unworkable.

In 1987, Jan Just Witkam, curator of Oriental Collections at Leiden University Library, paid a visit to the International Arab Book Fair in Cairo.

Buying Books at the Cairo International Book Fair

Booksellers and publishers from all over the Arab World participate in this yearly fair, not only putting their books on display but also selling them to the public at attractive discounts. Witkam decided it would be worthwhile to send someone over from Leiden to see if direct purchasing would work. If it did, we would have the additional benefit of cutting out all the 'middlemen', an attractive proposition from the point of cost effectiveness. The only thing was that the amount of purchased books would have to be fairly high, in order to reduce overhead costs (travelling expenses etcetera) to a minimum per title.

This was all very well, but how could we get the books out of Egypt? In the oldest bureaucracy in the world it often seems that everything is illegal unless expressly permitted, and as far as we knew we needed an export permit. For this we called upon the service of the Netherlands (now Netherlands/Flemish) Institute for Archaeology and Arabic Studies at Cairo. The Institute turned out to be quite willing to help us to obtain the necessary permits and to despatch the books in the mail. The Leiden Library representative could also enjoy the Institute's hospitality in return for a nominal fee (cost effectiveness!).

In 1988, less than six months after I entered

the service of the Library, I went to Cairo to visit the Book Fair. Everyday the Institute's chauffeur drove me to the fair grounds in Medinet Nasr, a Cairo suburb. I checked the stands of booksellers and publishers from countries like Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Tunisia and Morocco, and I bought everything that looked new and interesting. When I ran out of money I returned to Leiden, leaving the books in the care of the Institute. Three months later, I received the five hundred titles I had bought via the post.

Until now this procedure has remained basically unaltered. Local purchasing appears to be cheap enough to defray all extra expenses, and I have found the Cairo Book Fair to be a veritable goldmine, especially for titles from smaller publishing houses, or other titles on out-of-the-way subjects that do not usually find their way into the catalogues of the regular booksellers.

Nevertheless, doing business in the Middle East does have its surprises. I was, for instance, in Cairo at the Book Fair when the second Gulf War broke out. Notwithstanding the fact that Cairo is further from Baghdad than Amsterdam from Moscow, most airlines discontinued their services immediately. The first to give up was KLM, our national pride. Eventually, I flew home with Austrian Airlines, almost the only company that

was still 'in the air', presumably, as rumour had it, because Austria's excellent relations with Iraq safeguarded Austrian aircraft from being attacked by Iraqi missiles.

A few years later my books took unusually long to arrive. Enquiring at Cairo's General Post Office produced a formal declaration with many brightly coloured official stamps, stating 'that the books in question were already in my possession'. After months of waiting the Egyptian Mail delivered a great number of parcels on my doorstep with 'University of Tokyo' on the labels. Immediately I wrote to Tokyo, informing them of this unusual event and politely enquiring if they had received my books. They had indeed and in the end everybody received their own books (to the detriment of cost effectiveness however). This unfortunate incident has prompted us to engage the services of a private Egyptian courier service, which works excellently. ♦

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