

ORIENTAL MANUSCRIPT COLLECTIONS: CURRENT STATE, PRESERVATION PRACTICES, AND SOURCE SIGNIFICANCE

Jumayev Temur Jamol ogli,

teacher at Secondary School No. 40,

Oqdaryo District, Samarkand Region.

Abstract: This article analyzes the current state of Oriental manuscript collections, the methods of their preservation and restoration, as well as their significance as scholarly and historical sources. Manuscripts are not only invaluable examples of the spiritual heritage of the past, but also serve as essential sources for history, literature, linguistics, philosophy, and religious studies. The article highlights approaches to preserving manuscripts through modern technologies, their digitization, and the application of international practices. Furthermore, the role of Uzbekistan's Oriental manuscript collections in the global academic community and the enhancement of their source value are also examined.

Keywords: Oriental manuscripts, source studies, manuscript preservation, restoration, digitization, historical sources, cultural heritage, scholarly significance.

Introduction

Oriental manuscripts are valued as some of the most important sources for the study of human civilization. They contain unique knowledge in the fields of history, literature, linguistics, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, jurisprudence, and many other disciplines. In today's era of globalization, the preservation of these manuscripts, their transmission to future generations, and their introduction into wide academic circulation have become matters of great importance. In particular, the rapid development of modern information and communication technologies has expanded opportunities for digitizing Oriental manuscripts, presenting them to the international scholarly community, and ensuring their effective use. Therefore, the study and preservation of Oriental manuscripts are regarded not only as the safeguarding of cultural heritage but also as an essential condition for scientific progress.

On a global scale, research on Oriental manuscripts has been carried out extensively. The British Museum, the National Library of Paris, the Suleymaniye Library in Istanbul, as well as manuscript collections in Cairo, Tehran, and Delhi house thousands of manuscripts from different centuries and regions. Significant international experience has been accumulated in

cataloguing, creating scientific descriptions, restoring, and digitizing these manuscripts. For instance, under the initiative of UNESCO, many manuscripts have been included in the *Memory of the World Register* as part of the world's cultural heritage. Research conducted by both Western and Eastern scholars has revealed not only the historical value of Oriental manuscripts but also their relevance in today's academic and intellectual development.

In Uzbekistan, the preservation and study of Oriental manuscripts entered a new stage after independence. Today, the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhan Beruni of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, the International Imam Bukhari Research Center, the Center for Islamic Civilization, the National Library, and major regional collections hold rich manuscript treasures. Systematic work is being carried out on the scholarly study, cataloguing, translation, and publication of manuscripts. In particular, Uzbek scholars have prepared critical editions of many manuscripts, produced scholarly commentaries, and published them in international journals. At the same time, specialized laboratories are engaged in the restoration and digitization of manuscripts.

From the above considerations, it becomes evident that the study of Oriental manuscript collections today is not only about preserving historical and cultural heritage but also about fostering national identity, reviving spiritual and educational values, and developing international scholarly cooperation. Advanced international practices and the broad range of research being conducted in our country further emphasize the relevance of this field. Therefore, the study of the current state of Oriental manuscripts, the improvement of preservation methods, and the in-depth analysis of their source value remain among the priority directions of scholarly research.

Literature analysis

On the international level, in particular under the initiative of the British Library, the International Dunhuang Project (IDP) was established in 1994 to carry out extensive work on the cataloguing, conservation, and digitization of Eastern manuscripts. The manuscripts taken from Dunhuang are now available on an online platform with over 140,000 catalogue records and more than 538,000 high-quality images, providing scholars with the opportunity to study them remotely.

Sam van Schaik, a Tibetologist and manuscript specialist at the British Library, has been actively involved in significant scholarly projects within the framework of IDP, including cataloguing, palaeographic analysis, and the identification of manuscript scribes.

In recent years, new methodologies have been introduced in the field of digital humanities. For instance, Eyal Poleg's article "New Technologies, Training Initiatives and the Future of Manuscript Studies" describes the future of manuscript research through the use of digital surrogates, advanced conservation techniques, and innovative training programs¹.

In addition, a study conducted by Thomas Reynolds and his colleagues (for example, image-based material analysis of ancient historical documents) employed a method based on two-dimensional Fourier transform to analyze the writing surface of manuscripts. Using this approach, the researchers achieved an accuracy rate of 97% in determining the type of material (parchment or papyrus)².

These methodologies represent an important avenue for the non-invasive study of manuscripts.

In Uzbekistan, scholarly research dedicated to Eastern manuscripts has also become more active. In particular, dissertations by researchers such as B.M.Ne'matov, F.A.Babashev, and K.J.Nosirov have been devoted to figures like al-Farabi, Central Asian thinkers, and their ideas on moral education (for example, "*The Continuity of al-Farabi's Teachings in the Development of Socio-Political Thought*," "*The Scholars of the Khorezm Ma'mun Academy*," and "*The Ethical Education Ideas of Central Asian Thinkers in the 9th–10th Centuries*"). Furthermore, based on the textological analysis of treatises, nineteen manuscript copies of Mahmud al-Zamakhshari's *Al-qistās al-mustaqīm fī 'ilm al-'arūd* were identified, of which twelve have been subjected to detailed textological study, demonstrating the depth of research conducted in this field³.

In addition, on August 4–5, 2025, the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhon Beruni under the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan hosted an international conference on "*Current Issues in the Preservation and Study of Ancient Written Sources*." Following the event, a scholarly collection comprising more than 80 articles was published under the title "*Current Conditions of the Preservation and Research of Ancient Written Sources*," addressing topics such as restoration, source analysis, and other related issues.

Analyzes and results

¹ <https://arxiv.org/abs/2211.12135>

² <https://arxiv.org/abs/2203.01042>

³ <https://yuz.uz/uz/news/qolyozmalar-tilga-kirganda>

In Uzbekistan, the largest repository of Oriental manuscripts is the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhon Beruni of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, which preserves around 25,000–26,000 manuscript volumes (many of which contain multiple works). The Institute’s collection has been recognized as one of the richest included in UNESCO’s “*Memory of the World*” program. At the Alisher Navoi National Library of Uzbekistan, the open-access electronic database “*Rare Books and Manuscripts*” provides information about unique written monuments preserved in its collections.

At the broader international level, the *International Dunhuang Programme (IDP)*, led by the British Library, is engaged in cataloging, conservation, and online presentation of Central and East Asian manuscripts. As of 2024, its renewed platform allows remote access to more than 150,000 objects directly from personal computers⁴.

For long-term preservation, ISO 11799 (2015/2024) defines environmental requirements for archive and library materials: stable, low temperatures and relative humidity, with distinct regimes for different materials (e.g., cellulose acetate/film requiring “cold” storage conditions); fluctuations must be kept to a minimum. According to NISO and other national and international guidelines, paper-based collections are generally recommended to be stored at around 16–21 °C and 35–50% RH, avoiding sharp fluctuations. When humidity rises above 65%, the risks of mold growth and insect infestation increase significantly.

For exhibition purposes, light exposure for paper and inks is strictly limited: most guidelines recommend 50–100 lux (with UV filtering) and short-term display only; some also suggest annual limits such as 12 weeks per year.

In preventive conservation, Integrated Pest Management (IPM) is considered an essential component, involving monitoring traps, hygiene measures, isolation, sealing of entry points, and prevention strategies rather than reliance on chemical treatments⁵.

In digitization, metadata and preservation metadata are crucial for ensuring source stability and long-term usability. The Dublin Core set of descriptive elements (e.g., title, author, date) enhances discoverability, while PREMIS defines essential information on events, agents, and fixity needed for the long-term preservation of digital objects. These are often implemented together within a METS container.

⁴ <https://blogs.bl.uk/asian-and-african/2024/04/after-three-decades-of-pioneering-research-the-idp-launches-a-new-and-improved-website.html>

⁵ <https://cdn.standards.iteh.ai/samples/82306/14ec1f766173437ba1c0d98c7a38fa8a/ISO-11799-2024.pdf>

In the practice of the British Library and the International Dunhuang Project (IDP), a multi-stage workflow is applied, including cataloguing, conservation, scanning, legal verification, metadata creation, and online presentation. Through high-resolution images and standardized descriptions, researchers are enabled to conduct paleographic, codicological, and philological analyses remotely⁶.

Among the treasures of Eastern manuscripts, Alisher Navoi's "Khamisa" epics occupy a special place. A copy preserved at the Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhon Beruni, Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, dates back to the late 15th century. It is written on high-quality paper and enriched with miniatures decorated in gold leaf. The manuscript not only embodies the finest example of Turkic literature but also provides essential source material on the book culture, decorative arts, and calligraphic styles of the Timurid era. Scholarly analyses indicate that some folios of the manuscript show ink fading and moisture stains, conditions which necessitate conservation and restoration processes. At the same time, its digitization and open access to the international scholarly community further enhance its value as a source.

Among Eastern manuscripts, one of the rarest works on the history of medicine is Ibn Sina's "Al-Qanun fi al-Tibb" (The Canon of Medicine). Manuscript copies of this work dating from the 11th–12th centuries are found in the collections of Uzbekistan, Turkey, and Egypt. Alongside their role in reflecting the medical knowledge of their time, these manuscripts serve as crucial sources for studying the development of medieval science. Analyses of the manuscripts reveal the use of early Arabic script styles, complex marginal notes, and later textual additions. This makes the work valuable not only as a medical-historical source but also as an object of philological and paleographic study.

Another significant source is the ancient manuscript copies of the Qur'an. The famous "Uthman Mushaf", preserved in Tashkent, dates to the late 7th or early 8th century and is considered one of the oldest Qur'anic manuscripts in the Islamic world. This manuscript, while standing as a supreme example of religious and cultural heritage, also serves as an invaluable source for studying the early stages of Muslim written culture and calligraphic traditions. The preservation of the manuscript requires special care: strict control of temperature and humidity, as well as regulated light exposure, are among the key conditions for safeguarding this unique relic.

⁶ <https://www.loc.gov/standards/premis/>

Thus, the scholarly analysis of the above-mentioned examples from the treasures of Eastern manuscripts demonstrates not only their cultural and religious significance, but also their irreplaceable role as sources in the fields of history, literature, medicine, and art studies.

Conclusions

The treasures of Oriental manuscripts hold immense significance as invaluable scientific, cultural, and spiritual heritage that has left an indelible mark on the history of world civilization. Each manuscript embodies the scientific thought, literary style, religious-philosophical views, and book-making traditions of its time. Today, the preservation, restoration, and digitization of these manuscripts with the help of modern technologies remain an urgent task not only at the national but also at the international level.

As a result of ongoing efforts in our country to safeguard and study Oriental manuscripts, many rare sources are being introduced into scientific circulation. The Institute of Oriental Studies named after Abu Rayhan Beruni, relevant centers of the Academy of Sciences of Uzbekistan, as well as digitization projects implemented within the framework of international cooperation, are ensuring that these manuscripts are transmitted to future generations.

Therefore, the treasures of Oriental manuscripts should be regarded not only as historical sources but also as an important foundation for modern scientific research. Their preservation, scholarly study, and dissemination to the wider public are crucial guarantees for strengthening national identity, safeguarding cultural heritage, and making a worthy contribution to the advancement of science.

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