One of the major distinguishing features of the manuscript mode of textual production and transmission was the reality of textual variability: this could range from minor differences of spelling from one manuscript copy of a text to another, or it could entail quite extensive differences within a given textual tradition, with entire sections or components of other works added, or subtracted, from some copies and not others. Authors often continued to revise their own works during their lifetimes, resulting in multiple “authorized” versions of ostensibly the same text circulating even before the physical death of the author. One of the goals of the Open Islamicate Text Initiative’s focus on manuscripts is to work towards new ways to explore and make sense of the dynamics of manuscript culture, in particular the evolution of texts as revealed in multiple manuscript witnesses (the lineages of texts as often as not coming to resemble bushes as much as trees!). Over the coming months we will be exploring various dimensions of manuscript culture as it relates to textual variation, how it came about, what it meant for premodern audiences, and how we in the present can best study such variation, whether at the “micro” level using more traditional philological methods and tools, or at a more “macro” level using quantifiable analysis and, in the near future we hope, enhanced handwritten text recognition capabilities.

This week’s installment examines a narrative account of manuscript tradition variability, in the form of a biographical anecdote. The anecdote, which comes from the *Quḍāt Dimashq* of Ibn Ṭūlūn (d. 1546), has to do with one axis of textual variation in particular, that of regional variability, which in this case caused some degree of confusion and worked against the fortunes of the unfortunate judge. I came across the story in Helen Pfeifer’s wonderful new study of Ottoman elite sociability, *Empire of Salons: Conquest and Community in Early Modern Ottoman Lands*, a book that is most useful for understanding the social contexts in which many early modern Islamicate manuscripts would have been used and even produced. Here is my translation of the passage in question, followed by brief analysis:

And on Saturday, the eighth of Sha’bān, this new judge came to Damascus, and his name was Yūsuf. He settled into the house of Khowja ‘Īsa al-Qārī, then he moved to the house of Ardabish opposite the ‘Azīziyya. Then he taught in the Umayyad Mosque the portion of al-Sayyid al-Sharīf [al-Jurjānī]’s *Ḥashiyya al-Kashshāf*’s dealing with the start of [Surah] al-Baqrah. There was present with him the teacher Hamza al-Asmar of the ‘Abd al-Raḥman al-Ashqar [Madrasa], of the Khātūniyya al-’Aṣmatiyya [Madrasa], and Ḥasan al-Samayn of the Mārdāniyya [Madrasa] and his assembly, plus some Rūmīs [that is, Ottoman Turkish speakers]. But their copies [of the text] turned out to be different from the copy of the teaching judge, yet he depended entirely on it and did not turn aside to another, and their reading along became all confused. He quoted material from al-Sa’d al-Taftāzānī but did not mention anything from the *ḥashiyya* of al-Ṭibbī nor anyone else.

There are a couple of things that are worth pointing out in terms of our interest in manuscript culture and materiality: one, it is striking that the madrasa teachers brought along their own copies of the text from which the judge Yūsuf was to teach, which suggests that either they had personal copies or at least had ready access to such copies in some sort of library collection, whether of an individual, a mosque, a madrasa, or some other institution. Copies of this particular *ḥashiyya*—that is, a commentary on a commentary of the Qur’ān, here the famed *tafsīr* of Zamakhsharī—are relatively common in modern repositories, though not super-abundant, at least based on catalog records (it is possible that the text is more common than it appears, since it might exist as a literal marginal commentary and hence unrecognized or uncatalogued).

A close-up of a book

Description automatically generated

A likely 17th century copy of Jurjānī’s *ḥashiyya*; this copy features a high percentage of undotted letter forms, another possible route of textual variability ([Princeton University, Islamic Manuscripts, Garrett no. 646H](https://catalog.princeton.edu/catalog/9963577613506421))

But more to the point, the story suggests that speaking of Jurjānī’s super-commentary as a discrete text might not be quite accurate: despite there being only a little over a century between the text’s composition and Yūsuf’s disastrous teaching session, enough changes had accumulated in the regional transmission histories that teacher and audience were faced with incompatible texts that made the audience’s following along totally confused. Even controlling for some exaggeration on the part of Ibn Ṭūlūn (or his sources) in order to show up the newly arrived Rūmī judge and the textual tradition upon which he drew, this story suggests rapid potential rates of change in a textual genres like *ḥashiyya*. Without knowing any details of the text’s history, several routes of such change are possible: one, Jurjānī himself may well have composed and put into circulation multiple ‘editions’ of the text, a practice that was not uncommon among authors in the manuscript age. In such instances any edition would potentially have the same authorial standing among readers and copyists, and we can easily imagine one authorial version becoming dominant in Anatolia, another in Syria, and so on. Two, I suspect that super-commentary and gloss as genres have a high degree of horizontal transfer: the movement of words, lemmas, lines, and entire passages from one text into another, either through scribal mistake or deliberately as scribal editorial intervention. Commentary is already a fundamentally intercalated genre, the commented-upon text interlaced with the commentary, and, as was often the case in the so-called “post classical” tradition, additional commentary and glosses either further intertwined or hovering about on the margins. In such close quarters a certain degree of textual promiscuity is not too surprising, and, as the story above reveals, the different trajectories a text could take once the author’s ink was dry might have unexpected social consequences. Alas, the judge Yūsuf was to have a short career in Damascus, his bad start with Jurjānī’s *ḥashiyya* a prefiguring of rough sailing to come.

In other cases textual variability has had a more productive and irenic role to play, and might even be seen as fundamental to some textual genres. However much of this story remains to be told; our reflexive sense of what a text in the manuscript age actually was remains rather constrained by the expectations of print publishing, and often does not reflect the actual social and material circumstances and realities. One of our goals at OpenITI is to make use of emergent technological tools and processes to better explore and make legible the complexity and depth of manuscript textual traditions, so as to explore the sorts of evolutions a text like Jurjānī’s *ḥashiyya* undertook and so to better understand the lineaments of Islamicate textuality and of how textual production and change in general work, topics that are not just of historical interest but are quite fundamental to many pressing epistemic and societal questions we confront today.