Arts of the Islamic World
INCLUDING FINE CARPETS AND TEXTILES

LONDON 7 OCTOBER 2009

Sotheby's
A COLLECTION OF FIFTY-NINE ARABIC PAPYRUS AND PAPER FRAGMENTS INCLUDING LETTERS AND DOCUMENTS RELATING TO RELIGION, BUSINESS ACCOUNTS, TRADE AND FARMING, FUSTAT, EGYPT, 7TH-11TH CENTURY

Arabic manuscripts on papyrus and paper in a variety of angular and cursive scripts
27 by 18cm. max.

(F59)

The papyrus documents in this lot constitute a fascinating fragment of Arab history. Most likely to have originated from Fustat (Old Cairo), they date from the 7th-11th century and as far as we know are only the third group of early Arabic papyri ever to come to auction, and are of the utmost rarity. They offer a fascinating glimpse of day-to-day life in early medieval Cairo and are an important corpus of historical evidence. They are important for various aspects of historical study, particularly social and economic history, geography, diplomacy, palaeography and language.

During the 19th and early 20th century several discoveries of Arabic papyri were made in Egypt, mostly in Upper Egypt, where the soil was more conducive to the preservation of organic matter than these discoveries are now mostly in institutional collections around the world, including the National Library, Cairo, the British Library, London, the Bodleian Library and the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, the John Rylands Library, University of Manchester, the Bibliotheque Nationale and the Musée du Louvre, Paris, the Staatliche Museum, Berlin, the Staatsund Universitäts-Bibliothek, Hamburg, the Institut für Papyrologie, Heidelberg University and the Oriental Institute, Chicago. Of the discoveries unearthed at Fustat, only the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo and Cambridge University Library possess substantial collections.

Fustat was the capital city founded by the Arab general ‘Amir ibn al-‘As in A.D. 640 after his conquest of Egypt. It remained the capital throughout the Umayyad, Abbasid, Ikshidid and Fatimid periods, finally being destroyed by fire in A.D. 1163. It was the government, commercial and social centre of Egypt and the subject matter of the papyrus fragments reflects this cosmopolitan variety.

The papyri themselves are written in a number of scripts including a variety of kufic and a range of cursive scripts. The existence of such a large group of papyri (and some paper) documents from this period is interesting evidence of the uses of different writing materials and of the spread of the technology of paper-making across the Islamic empire. Although paper-making know-how was introduced into the eastern Islamic world as early as A.D. 746 (at a battle near Samarkand in A.D. 751 the Arabs captured several Chinese prisoners who knew how to make paper) its use spread westwards across the Islamic empire relatively slowly. At the same time vellum (parchment), made from the dried and cured hides of domestic animals, was extremely expensive to produce and was reserved primarily for the writing of Qur’ans and occasionally other religious texts. In Mesopotamia the use of paper developed significantly during the late 8th and 9th centuries and was a major factor in the explosion of intellectual activity which occurred in that region from around A.D. 800-1100. This scholarly activity consisted of the translation of Greek (and Indian) texts, which had effectively lain dormant for centuries during the decline of the Eastern Roman Empire, into Arabic. These texts, which included literary, medical, scientific, astronomical, mathematical, geographical, cosmographical, philosophical, religious and mystical works, encompassed the sum of learning of the ancient world - both East and West. The Arab and Persian scholars of the period, including such luminaries as Al-Kindi, Al-Sufi, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Al-Razi (Rhazes), Al-Farabi (Alfarabi), Al-Biruni, and Al-Ghazali, then commented on and developed the ideas of the Greeks, Romans and Indians, and laid the foundations of the Arab intellectual gift to the world, which resulted eventually in the European Renaissance. The ability to use paper, which could be manufactured in large amounts quickly and relatively cheaply, was a major factor in this intellectual enlightenment. Like the knowledge of the classical world, the technology of paper-making spread across the Arab world and North Africa into Southern Spain (then an Islamic kingdom) and thence into Europe. The period which these papyri encompass (7th-11th centuries) was an interesting period in this context.

By the year 1000, paper was being used in Iran and Mesopotamia even for the writing of the Qur’an, whilst in Egypt and Northern Africa vellum was still being used for the writing of the holy text. A Qur’an in the Museum of Turkish and Islamic Arts, Istanbul, is dated A.D. 993 (Ms.4536, for a single leaf in the Nasser D Khalili collection, London, see Déroche 1992, no.85), while in A.D. 1001 Ibn al-Bawwab wrote his seminal copy of the Qur’an (now in the Chester Beatty Library, Dublin, ms.1431, see Rice 1955). In the Islamic West at this stage vellum was still used for Qur’ans and for many other religious texts (witness a vellum copy of a Malikite text copied in Southern Spain in A.D. 1021). This relative conservatism in relation to writing materials was to continue in Morocco and Spain for some centuries, especially for the writing of Qur’ans.
The attempt at developing not only paper-making technology in Egypt, but also the technology of printing (also gained from the Chinese), is witnessed by the existence of a group of 11th century xylograph printed documents and prayers, of Egyptian origin, and mostly printed on long, thin strips of paper akin to talismanic scrolls. A single piece was sold in these rooms 22nd October 1993, lot 25, while extensive collections exist in the General Egyptian Book Organisation (formerly the Khedival Library) and the Library of Princeton University, New Jersey. Interestingly, the use of xylograph (wood block) printing for Arabic characters (even the angular kufic scripts) was not deemed a success and quickly died out. The use of printing did not return to Egypt until the end of the 18th century, but the technology itself was passed on, both across North Africa to Southern Spain and through the Mediterranean maritime contacts of the Fatimid Empire to Europe, leading ultimately to the Gutenberg Bible and William Caxton’s printing press.

In dynastic terms, the 7th-11th centuries in Egypt saw the passing of the Umayyad dynasty, the Abbasids, the Tulunids, the Ikshshids and the arrival of the Fatimids. This was the period when the Islamic empire was at its highest point of glory, when the boundaries of the empire were expanding as far as Afghanistan and Central Asia in the East, and Spain in the West, when the religious, intellectual, cultural and geo-political aspects of Islam were brimming with confidence and shining brightly during the European Dark Ages. This is the historical context of these present papyrus fragments.

A further group of early papyrus fragments was sold in these rooms 3 May 2001, lot 12.

† £20,000-30,000 €23,600-35,400
2

A LARGE ILLUMINATED QUR’AN LEAF IN KUFIC SCRIPT, NEAR EAST OR NORTH AFRICA, LATE 9TH CENTURY

TEXT: SURAT AL-BAQARA (II), PART OF VERSE 187

Arabic manuscript on vellum, 7 lines to the page written in elongated kufic script in brown ink with vocal points represented by red, yellow and green dots, wide untrimmed outer margins
text area: 23.5 by 14.3

leaf: 36.5 by 27.1cm.

This folio is a superb example of ‘Abbasid luxury Qur’an production at its most stylised point in the late 9th century. It is perhaps possible to define this style (equating to Déroche’s group ‘D’ styles) as the mature ‘Abbasid Kufic’, with the script displaying the ‘sober beauty’ that Déroche mentions in the catalogue of the Nasser D. Khalili Collection (Déroche 1992, no.21). Manuscripts with this kind of austere beauty seem to emphasise the power and significance of the text through the execution of a confident hand; the use of horizontal stretching (mashq) abstracts some of the letters which underlines the centrality and iconic status of the word of the Qur’an. The vertical letter-forms provide a visual balance to the horizontal elongation but for the time being they are not the focus. Other features of the script which characterise the style include a relatively wide and even spacing of the letters along the lines and of the lines on the page; a typical horizontal format for the text area and page; few or no original letter-points, and a regular visual rhythm.

Four leaves from the same manuscript were sold in these rooms; 1 April 2009, lot 1, 9 April 2008, lot 17; 24 October 2007, lot 8 and 18 April 2007, lot 4. Other related leaves and manuscripts are as follows: Qairawan, Musée des Arts Islamiques (Carthage, no.328); Nasser D. Khalili Collection, London (Déroche 1992, no.21); a bifolium exhibited in Berlin 2006 in the exhibition Ink and Gold (Fraser and Kwiatowski, no.7); Sotheby’s, 29 April 1998, lots 5 & 6, 15 October 1997, lots 2 & 7; Bernard Quaritch, cat.121, no.4.

£10,000-15,000 €11,800-17,700