New Lights on Block Printing in Medieval Islam
في العدد

- ذكرية الألوط إلى أحسن المسلة
- شرح على السلك والفنون ومعام الألوط والمقايي المسوب للين صور
- دراسة كوديكولوجية تطبيقية على قطع من المخطوطة العربية الإسلامية
- الشفنا يدير حقوق المصنف الفغمي عباسي، نسخة نادرة وفريدة
- فتح مكتبة فلسطين بين العرب والمغريبة
- تستضيف عربي لدراسة
- Medieval Islam by Lutfallah GARI

أضواء جديدة على موضوع الطباعة بالقواقب في القرن للشفت الشرف
- New Lights on Block Printing in Medieval Islam
- فحص مخطوطة مكتبة النشر الشرق
New Lights on Block Printing in Medieval Islam

Lutfallah GARI

Abstract

Great efforts were made by scholars who highlighted the history of block printing in Medieval Islam. But more can be added, depending on any new items which can come up at any time. This humble paper tries to contribute to the subject by presenting the following items:

1 - Correction of misunderstanding Ibn al-Abbār’s statement.

2 - Correction of an erroneous statement in al-Iḥāṭah by Ibn al-Khaṭīb.

3 - If we exclude the previous statements of Ibn al-Abbār Ibn al-Khaṭīb, we still have clear uncontroversial statements from medieval Islam about block printing. The word "ṭirs" or "ṭarsh" in two poems and explaining its meaning by medieval Arab authors,
and the event of printing paper money in Tabriz, Persia in 1294, are examples. Here I present a new statement for the first time, from a *hisba* (market inspection) treatise.

4 - Another new statement is presented from a treatise on sleight of hand.

5 - The words *tirs* and *tarsh* and which one of them is related to amulet block printing?

6 - Two events of paper money in Damascus, one century before the Tabriz event.

7 - Schaefer (2014) presented a metal amulet or Arabic printing block, which is now in Glasgow Museum Resource Centre, as a single artefact on this subject. I add to that three pieces made of steel.

8 - A fine and complete amulet scroll with polychrome block print is kept in the David Collection, which was not mentioned in the Schaefer’s (2006) thorough list.

**Introduction**

Great efforts were made by scholars who highlighted the history of block printing in Medieval Islam. Schaefer\(^1\),\(^2\) gave a thorough review of the works written by several scholars since the 19th Century, including Hammer-Purgstall, Karabacek, Carter, Bosworth, Bulliet, Roper and Milstein, to name just a few. The research is still being pursued; papers like the one of Muehlhaeuser\(^3\) are adding new important information to the subject.

But more can be added, depending on any new items which
can come up at any time. This humble paper tries to contribute to the subject by presenting a few items.

*Ibn al-Abbār’s Statement:*

Ibn al-Abbār (1199–1260) was a historian and poet who served various rulers in Islamic Spain and North Africa. In his book titled *al-Hullat al-Siyarāh*, under a biographical entry for the vizier Badr ibn Aḥmad, he states:

“Then (the Caliph) al-Nāṣir appointed him to the vizerate, the office of gatekeeper, the military command, the horses and the mail. He was without equal in the provinces. The official edicts were written in his house. Then he sent them *liṭ-ṭabā‘ fa tuṭba‘* (interpreted by Hammer-Purgstall and Schaefer)

as: to be printed”.

The editor Hussain Monés explained the statement correctly as follows:

(Means that he sends them to the Caliphate’s Court, to be sealed and stamped with the official state’s stamp).

As Monés correctly explained it, the word *ṭabā‘ here* means “sealing and stamping”. This meaning is found in comprehensive reliable (Arabic-Arabic) dictionaries like *Tāj al-‘Arūs*, which says:

"الطابع كهاجر (وتكسير الباء): ما يطبع ويختتم ... مثل الطابع على الصحيفة، أي الخاتم، يريد أن يختتم عليها".

“ṭāba‘ (or ṭābi‘) is what impresses and stamps ... like ṭāba‘ (stamping) on a sheet; he
means: stamps and seals it”.

Also we read from the same source:

"الطابع كصاحب: الناشر.. رأيت الطابع يُريد الطابع".

“The ṭābi‘ is the inscriber...” (A proverb says:) I saw the ṭaba‘ (the stamp) in the hand of the ṭābi‘ (the inscriber)”.

Dozy also gave the same meaning for ṭab‘ (i.e. sealing and stamping), in a lengthy entry with quotations from Arabic Sources.

Schaefer said already that the upcoming Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s statement is “a puzzling passage”.

This is also true about Ibn al-Abbār’s statement.

**Ibn al-Khaṭīb’s Statement:**

Hammer-Purgstall presented a passage from the book al-İḥāṭah fī Akhbār Gharnāṭah (acquaintance on Granada events) by Ibn al-Khaṭīb (1313-1374). He was using a copy of a manuscript, despite that he did not say it clearly. But we know that the book was not printed when he published his article. Throughout his article he was doubting about the correct reading of some words, and saying that any erroneous reading is from the copyists' mistakes. The statement on Purgstall’s article was about the biography of Abū Bakr al-Qalalūsī (1210-1308).

It states:

[He raised to the vizier al-Hakīm a book on properties (of materials), manufacturing inks and the device for impress-
ing or printing the book, which (the book) was singular in its content.

Purgstall himself was “taking into account some uncertainty about the reading of one particular word in the relevant passage of al-Iḥāṭah” \(^\text{(14)}\). He said that the correct statement should have been: وَوَلَّة طِبَّة الكَتَاب (the device for printing books, in plural tense)\(^\text{(15)}\).

Purgstall did not specify which manuscript he was using. He mentioned that he tried to get copies of the same book from various libraries in Europe; but he could not\(^\text{(16)}\).

The statement in recent editions\(^\text{(17)}\) of al-Iḥāṭah is as follows:

ورفع للوزير ابن الحكم كتاباً في الخواص وصناعة الأَمْدَة والطبع الشاب، غريبًا لمعناه.

The literal meaning for this text is: [He raised to the vizier Ibn al-Ḥakīm a book on properties (of materials), manufacturing inks and the young customing, which was singular in its content]. Needless to say that these words (young customing) are meaningless.

In order to know the correct statement of Ibn al-Khaṭīb we need to review the book itself, which was published in 2007\(^\text{(18)}\).

The book subjects include: recipes for inks, writing on metal, unseen writing for encryption, clays for sealing and stamping, covering the writing with pastes, designing the page lines and dimensions, spot removal, coloring fabrics and other materials like wood & hair coloring.

Therefore, the following reading is recommended as the correct one:
Schaefer says that this book “contains a brief account of printing or a printing device”\(^{(21)}\). He did not mention on which page we can find such an account. Now this is ironic, because the book has not mentioned this subject at all!!

**Ibn ‘Abd-Ra’ūf’s Statement:**

If we exclude the previous statements of Ibn al-Abbār Ibn al-Khaṭīb, we still have clear uncontroversial statements from medieval Islam about block printing. The word ḥirṣ or ṣarsh (printing block) in two poems and explaining its meaning by medieval Arab authors\(^{(22)}\),\(^{(23)}\),\(^{(24)}\), and the event of printing paper money in Tabriz, Persia in 1294, are examples.

In this paper I present a new
statement for the first time. In his hisba (market inspection) treatise, Ibn ‘Abd-Ra’ūf (died 1033 CE)\(^{(25)}\) states the following\(^{(26)}\):

فَأَمَّا أُهِلَّ الأُحْرَاز فَيَؤُمِّنُونَ أَنْ يُكْتِبُوهَا
بِأَيْدِيَهُمْ، وَلاَ يُكْتِبُوهَا عَلَى النَّمَالِب، فَإِنَّهُ لَا يِس
بِمَخْطُوْطٍ. وَيُنْهُوُنَ عَنِ الْكَلَامِ عَلَيْهَا بِتَلَك
المساطر التي لهم.

[Regarding the amulet sellers: they should be told to write them with their hands. They should not write them on a mold; it is not a handwritten manuscript\(^{(27)}\). They should not try to market them with the predesigned templates that they possess].

**Al-Zarkhūnī’s Statement:**

Here is another account about block printing of amulets, presented for the first time. Al-Zarkhūnī (died ca. 1406) was a master on sleight of hand. In his book *Zahr al-Basātīn fī ‘Ilm al-Mashātīn* (garden flowers on “sleight of hand” knowledge) we read\(^{(28)}\):

وَمِنْهُمُ السَرِّيَّة أَعْظَمُهُمْ حَيَاً وَمِكْرَاً.

ولهم طريق كثير، منها أن الهماك الذي
معهم مكتوبة فإنها يغير القلم، إنما هي بالقوالب
الخشب المحفورة، ويسمونها الفاريخ، والطرش
بها عباره عن الكتابة.

[Among those (tricksters) are the amulet writers (*surmaṭiyyah*)\(^{(30)}\), with the strongest tricks and foxiness. They have several methods; one of those is that the magic formulae (*hayākil*)\(^{(31)}\) in their possession are not written with a pen. They are made of inscribed wooden molds; they call them exhibited sheets (*maṭārīd*). The ṭarsh on them is the written text].

**ṭirṣ or ṭarsh?**

Muehlhaeusler\(^{(32)}\) had a lengthy
and fruitful discussion about whether the correct term, in Medieval Arabic sources is ٓтарش ٓطرش ٓطرش or ٓطيرش. Here are the main points in his discussion:

1- Some scholars use the word ٓطرش to refer to Arabic block prints. Others argue that term means the printing block itself, which was used to produce amulets.

2- The word ٓطيرش (instead of ٓطرش) is used in some manuscript copies of the two poems that mention amulet printing block making(33). The author gave several citations, from Medieval Arabic sources, which prove that ٓطيرش means the writing sheet.

3- The root ٓط-ٓش(ٓش) "is associated exclusively with deafness; and it would be futile to discuss its many manifestations in the literary corpus at this point"(34).

4- It appears, according to the author, that the term ٓطيرش or ٓطرش are used in connection with amulets and printing only in the mentioned two poems.

5- "Given the variants in the texts, one cannot say with certainty how the term was pronounced". Consequently he recommended to use the modern term "block printing amulets" instead of neither ٓطيرش nor ٓطرش.

But more can be said about the subject. According to Dozy, one of the various meanings of the word ٓطرش was "encursting"(35). Al-Zarkhûnî's statement above says: "The ٓطرش on them (i.e. on the wooden molds) is
"the written text". These two accounts can be interrelated to give the exact meaning of ţarsh.

Furthermore, this shows that the root t-r-š(sh) is not associated exclusively with deafness; and it is not futile to discuss its many manifestations in the literary corpus.

Al-Zarkhūnī's statement also shows that the word ţarsh was found in another source, in addition to the mentioned two poems.

**Paper Money in Damascus, before Tabriz**

Researchers mention the production of printed paper currency in Tabriz by the Ilkhanids, in 1294, as the only event of its kind throughout Medieval Islam. But we find two more events in Damascus, both were about one century before the Tabriz event. So far the text accounts about these two events are short and lack details. More text material is waited for to shed light on them.

For the first event we read that Nuredin, or Nūr-ad-dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī, who reigned during (1146-1174) met with Damascus merchants who complained to him about the paper money’s value fluctuation with respect to the golden dinar. Some times each qirṭās قرطاس (piece of paper) was worth 1/60 dinar, and on other instances it was equal to 1/67. They asked Nuredin to nullify the paper money and issue golden dinars instead. But Nuredin refused the idea, not because of the Cabinet’s wel-
fare, but because the populace (al-sūqah) had large numbers of those pieces. Nullifying the paper currency without compensation or reimbursement would cause terrible harm to them\(^{36}\).

The same source tells a story about the son of a religious poor person who reported to Nuredin that his father was jailed because he was not able to pay the rental of his leased house. When Nuredin asked about the annual rent value, the answer was: 150 qirātās\(^{37}\).

Other sources tell us that King al-‘Ādīl\(^{38}\) (in 1215) issued black paper money (al-qarātīs al-swardā’)\(^{39}\). But he faced a strong opposition from an influential religious leader named ‘Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī who let him cancel his project and withdraw his paper currency,\(^{40}\).

If we may compare the events of Damascus and Tabriz we find that the Tabriz rulers were dictators who tried to force their paper currency through death penalty. But the two Damascus rulers had peaceful communication with their people, and acted in the favor of the latter. The metal currencies were not outlawed at all while using the paper one. Although the available sources do not add any information about how and why the paper currency was issued during the reign of Nuredin, most probable that it was treasury bonds. This can be deduced from the character of Nuredin, as we know it from his biography.

*New Printing Blocks to be Studied*

Schaefer presented a metal
amulet or Arabic printing block which is now in Glasgow Museum Resource Centre, as a single artefact on this subject\(^{(41)}\). I add to that three pieces from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Their approximate dimensions and inventory numbers are given in the caption of each plate below. The exact size and the precise date of each one need to be pursued in future research.

All three are made of steel, with wood foundations. The Museum attributes them to North-West Africa, and estimates their date to be the 17th to 19th Centuries. These three blocks, and the one presented by Schaefer, outdate the claim that the block printing of amulets stopped after 1400 CE.

**An Amulet from Copenhagen**

A fine and complete amulet scroll with polychrome block print is kept in the David Collection, a museum in Copenhagen (Inv. no. 85/2003). The museum attributes it to “Egypt, or perhaps Iran; 10th-11th century”. Its height is 86.6 cm and the width is 4.5 cm.

Its top portion has attractive decoration with Qur’anic verses. The rest has God’s 99 names. The text at the top – “God’s support and a speedy victory” \(^{\text{نصر من الله وفتح قريب}}\) – is known from Islamic armor, indicating that the scroll was intended for a warrior.

The amulet was not mentioned in Schaefer’s list\(^{(42)}\).
Plate 1: a metal amulet printing block from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Inventory number: (MW 635.2011). Width (approximately) = 17 cm; Height (approximately) = 55 cm.
Plate 2: a metal amulet printing block from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Inventory number: (MW 636.2011). Its dimensions are equal to those of the previous one (Plate 1).
Plate 3: a metal amulet printing block from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Inventory number: (MW 634.2011). Width (approximately) = 31 cm; Height (approximately) = 43 cm.
Plate 4: An amulet scroll with polychrome block print, the David Collection, a museum in Copenhagen (Inv. no. 85/2003).

Notes


(7) Ibn al-Abbār: al-Ḥullat al-Siyarā, op. cit. vol. 1 p. 253. Schaefer relies on this edition by Hussain Monés; but he does not mention the editor’s interpretation!!


(9) al-Zābīdī: Tāj al-‘Arūs, op. cit., vol. 21, p 444.


(12) Hammer-Purgstall: Journal asiatique, op. cit.

(13) The first publication was in 1901 in Cairo.

(14) Schaefer, Karl: Enigmatic Charms, p. 27.


(25) His biography is in al-Ṣilaḥ by Ibn Bishkwāl, biography number 1126.


(27) He believed that the potency of an amulet is weak if it was not handwritten.


(29) The correct word should be اتن. The word surmaṭ was thoroughly investigated and explained by


(33) In fact the editions of the two poems that I consulted use the word širr, not šarsh.


(35) Dozy, Supplément, op. cit., Tome 2, p. 35.


(38) He was the full brother of Saladin; he succeeded his brother as a ruler of Egypt and the Levant. He reigned during 1200-1218.


(42) Schaefer, Karl: Enigmatic Charms.