Islamic Bookmaking:
The Historical Setting

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Detailed information bearing on Islamic bookbinding is scattered in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish sources and is therefore not easily accessible to the English reader. Relative datings and stylistic groupings of Islamic bookbindings have received a great deal of attention from Western scholars; but the relations between the bookbinder and the booktrade, the varied influences promoting the production itself with regional modifications in process and style, have been less generally known.

Therefore it was thought desirable to consider, with the aid of new sources and materials, the historical, technical, and stylistic aspects of Islamic bookbindings, with the stress on those produced between the twelfth and seventeenth centuries.

Interest in Islamic bookbinding is not new; but the Western student and connoisseur of Islamic art feels that the bindings merit attention for their own sake, even though their contents have been lost, while the Arab proverb says, “For the sake of the book the binding is loved.”

Western interest in Islamic bookbinding has grown since 1890 when Paul Adam included them in his general history of bookbinding and its technique, Adam’s significant articles, based on personal acquaintance with the craft, have followed developments in the Islamic field. Succeeding scholars who pioneered in studying and publishing Islamic bindings were Hendley, Migeon, Sarre, Martin, Gottlieb, Louvier, Boscher, Karabacek, and Miguel y Planes.

There was a dearth of interest caused by the first World War, until 1923 when Sarre and Gritzl published extensive monographs on Islamic bookbindings. Sarre’s purpose was two-fold: to provide facsimile illustrations to aid further study of the material and to characterize the two main divisions, Egyptian and Persian-Turkish, pointing out their peculiarities. Gritzl’s monograph added further subdivisions, Maghribi (North African) and South Arabian. A single binding from Java of the second quarter of the nineteenth century is added. He also aimed through paleographical and library accession indications to arrive at closer relative datings. The third major contribution was Grohmann and Arnold’s The Islamic Book. Grohmann contributed a scholarly historical treatment of the early developments of the Islamic book which, with the stylistic analyses of the early bindings, emphasized the Coptic contribution, while Arnold summarized briefly the Persian-Turkish accomplishments in bookbinding.

The latter field was more thoroughly investigated by Sakisian in several articles. Within the same decade (1930–1940) followed the works of
Mousse, 17 Ricard, 18 Aga-Oglu, 19 Michelet, 20 Thomas, 21 a second work by Grazel, 22 and works by Kühnel. 23 Of these sources we have found Ricard particularly helpful because he deals with the North African region where our two main Arabic technical treatises were composed. Greater clarification continued in the same area with the publication of Marçais and Poinssot, where their painstaking approach to form of the book, composition and specific ornament gave us a body of evidence for their ninth to thirteenth century examples. 24 Meanwhile the present writer’s doctoral dissertation dealt with original source material and the correlation with the Oriental Institute collection of bookbindings. 25 Further connections were established by Petersen between Coptic bookbindings and those of early Islam. 26 Etinghausen’s articles on early Persian bindings and on Near Eastern bookcovers added further chronology. 27 The cornerstone labor of Weisweiler, utilizing common or average book bindings which contained dated manuscripts, further organized our perception of composition and ornament in relation to chronology. 28 In this catalogue we hope to, in a sense, revert to Adam’s seminal work with the aid of our colleague, Guy Petherbridge, book conservator and historian, with his total approach to the materials, tools and processes of the Islamic book.

After surveying the mounting number of publications by Western authors devoted to this fascinating study, most of them inspired by the beauty and technique of the specimens, one can well wonder whether the medieval Islamic authors also considered these objects worthy of their attention and whether they too were interested in the tools and technical processes used in the production of the bookbinding.

It was felt earlier in the course of this study that a search for a list of Islamic authors and works on bookbinding might not be uninteresting, when one considered the rarity of propagandic works at any time. This was particularly true in the Middle Ages, when the demand for the trade were usually acquired by the apprenticeship of the future bookbinder. Other the references to materials and methods were casual or fragmentary, not even described, merely labeled with the name of the locale best known for it. Again, there were recipe books proffered, as by a good cook, without the method of successfully combining the ingredients. Fortunately for this study there were exceptions.

Some of the earlier sources were referred to, or brief citations from them were found, in later texts. Some titles indicate a treatment of bookbinding in particular, others of the art of the book in general, and still others, of it in combination with another professional art or branch of knowledge.

Without pretending to anything like an exhaustive bibliography, we present these sources in two groups: first, available works used dealing specifically with bookbinding or its ornamentation; and second, those which probably contain materials on bookbinding but which are either not immediately available or are presumably non-extant.

In the first group, we note: Abū Ja’far al-Nahjūs (d.338 A.H./950 A.D.), the author of Sind’at al-kuṭūb, or Craft of the Scribes, 29 which was used by Tanmī Ibn al-Mu’izz Ibn Bādis (422/1031, d. 501/1110), the part author of Umdat al-kuṭūb wa’uddat ḏawī al-āl-būb, or Staff of the Scribers and Implements of the Discerning. Two manuscripts are in the Oriental Institute collection, 30 one of which has since been published. 31 Abū al-‘Izz Ishāq Ibn as-Sallāt al-Jazā’iri (fl. c. 597/1100) describes designs, important for the study of ornament, in his work on automata, Fī ma’ārjat al-liyāl al-handassīya, or Upon the Science of Geometric Contrivances. 32 Sīdī Aḥmad Ibn ‘Arḍūn (d. 992/1584) composed a work on bookbinding which, as will be seen presently, Sufyānī, 33 our second main source for this study, found profitable. The Turkish work, Menāqīb-i Hānvervīr, or Virtues of the Skillful, was written in 996/1587 by Muṣṭafā ‘Alī. 34 This last work has been used by Karabacak, 35 Hüner, 36 and Aga-Oglu. 37 Interesting excerpts from this work have been used for the present study.

The Arabic Sind’at tasfīr al-kuṭūb wa’uddat ḏawī al-āl-būb, or The Craft of Bookmaking and the Dissolving of Gold, by Abū al-‘Abbās Aḥmad Ibn ʿAbdullāh al-Sufyānī, completed in 1029/1619, has been an invaluable source. The text has been published with a vocabulary correlated with modern terms and usages in the craft by P. Ricard, 38 and in English translation by Levey. 39 Sufyānī, in his introduction, bears testimony to the rarity of propagandic works, at least for his times, when he explains that it was only his disillusioning experience with ungrateful apprentices that led him at last to commit trade secrets to paper.

Careful consideration of these titles leads one to expect that materials pertinent to some phases of bookbinding might well be found in other works bearing titles in which such terms as: ṣīd’ah, ṣīnṣ, ʿamal, ṣudūd, as in the Ibn Bādis work, ‘Umdat al-kuṭāb wa’uddat ḏawī al-āl-būb, and kātib, or their plurals and variants, play the main role. 40 Such titles can be found for known extinct sources that are, however, not immediately available to us as well as for non-extant works whose titles have (nevertheless) survived.

Among interesting works representative of the first of these two groups may be mentioned: Abū Hiliāl al-Ḥasan Ibn ‘All Ibn Sahl al-Askarī, Kitāb al-swā’il, or Book of Pioneers, which was completed in 389/999 or 393/ 1005, 41 on the supposed inventors of the arts and their usages. 42 Here the high regard in which Arabs held the Book written by the Prophet is clearly seen, leading to the inclusion of its production among the arts. The voluminous Naṣīr al-Funūn, or Preciosities of the Arts, was composed between 736/1335 and 743/1342, 43 by Muḥammad Ibn Muḥammad al-‘Alā’ī. The Persian work, ‘Uddat al-kuṭāb, or Tools of the Scriber, by Abū Ḥallāb Ibn Ḥasan Danghūh, was composed from reminiscences of the methods of Sultan All al-Mashhadi and Mājdīn of Herat (d.945/1538). It is possible that the author lived in India under Akbar (reigned 963/1556-1014/1605). 44 Two comparatively later works of encyclopedic extent, probably also drawing their material, as was the custom, from earlier sources, are: Mājma’ al-aṣrā’i, or Compendium of the Crafts, attributed to various seventeenth century authors, 45 and Mājma’ al-‘ulām wa majmū’ al-funūn, or Exposition of the Sciences and Compendium of the Arts. 46 The former is known to contain recipes for the preparation of inks and colors and the latter, written by Wājīd ‘Alī (d.1262/1845–1263/1846), traces the methods of calligraphy, printing, painting, inmaking, and painting on ivory. 47

Among early authors whose lost works (which it is hoped may yet turn up some day) bore titles of interest to us at this point may be mentioned: Jabir Ibn Ḥayyān (d. c. 200/815), who composed 300 tracts about different crafts, sana’t i majmū’ ah, 48 among which one might expect to find a treatment of the art of bookbinding. Dabús, or Muḥammad ibn Yūnūs, wrote ‘Amāṭ al-ṣibghāt wa al-mīḍād wa al-khāb, or Manufacture of Dyes, Tints and Inks; 49 He was a student of al-Kindī, the philosopher (b. 284/ 897, d. 350/961). Dyes were of course necessary to bookbinding.

This brief bibliographical survey of the sources, both those utilized in
this study as well as some not yet available or found gives some idea of the nature of the works herein tapped and correlated as well as pointing further to materials yet to be investigated in the course of further research into the art of the book and its many related fields.

The Historical Setting

Our aim is twofold in this section, first to find the reasons for the phenomenal growth of the Islamic book trade which soon surpassed its predecessors; and second, to discover the Islamic disposition toward the arts and crafts in general in order better to appreciate the status of the bookbinder in particular.

Islamic book production was a natural evolution of previous practices, for the Arab came with Islam into a world where books had long been ornamented, treasured, and preserved by Christians, Manicheans, and Jews. Despite early religious disapproval of all books except the Qurʾān—which realized Muhammad’s hope that Allah would vouchsafe the Arabs a written guide for reading and prayer—the Arab soon felt the need to record, in his own language, rapidly growing religious, historical, and literary contributions.

Immediately preceding and contemporary with early Islamic book production there was great activity among the Christians, Manicheans, and Jews. In the Theban district of Upper Egypt the Coptic monks executed commissions to write, bind and adorn books. It is not clear, however, whether “adorning” meant illumination of the text or ornamentation of the leather bindings, or both. Extant bindings of the period from the Fayyām, the White Monastery, and Edfu were plentifully ornamented, and two of these specimens were found in Thebes. It is certain that bindings were made at Akhmim-Panopolis, where other leather products were found.

Recent archaeological finds confirm the production of Manichean books and bookbindings. St. Augustine commented on Manichean expenditure on their codices, “so numerous, so large, and so costly,” and again “on the burning all those luxurious parchments and exquisite texts on decorated skins.” The Muslim Jahiz (d. 255/869) rebuked his fellow Muslim, Ibrahim al-Sindī, for praising the Manicheans for their desire to obtain the best materials and calligraphy and for their expenditure on fine books, since he (al-Sindī) considered these as an evidence of their respect for learning, and of their nobility of soul. Jahiz’s reprimand rested on the argument that the lavish expenditure of the Manicheans on their books, like that of the Christians on their churches, was a further step in the wrong direction since it aimed only at worldly display. The Manicheans were persecuted by orthodox Islam but many were able to hide their books, some of which came to light from time to time. The supporters of the heterodox al-Hallāj (martyred in 310/922) imitated these lavish books in the writing in gold on Chinese paper, and in encasing them in silk or brocade or binding them with costly leather.

The Jews also had a long tradition of having preserved and treasured books before Islam, using scrolls with the unwritten part at the end of the scroll left for protection. From the seventh to the fifteenth centuries, when sheathes and boxes were used, there was an express injunction that, in case of fire even on the Sabbath, books and cases should be saved. God, they felt, was honored by good and beautiful bindings and by the display of books. The bookbinders were regarded with the same high esteem that was given the goldsmith in Jewish communities. Even their tools, such as the awl and needles, were treated with respect. Consequently prosperous Jewish craftsmen continued to live in Spain far into the period of the Christian reconquest. Many documents mention their owning houses, their activity as bookbinders, and their participation in the related trades of leather handling and book manufacture.

Muslims, Christians, and Jews alike were reluctant to have their sacred books bound by anyone other than a coreligionist, for they feared that the unbeliever might incorporate in the boards of the books some profane material, or that in cutting the margins of the book he might profane the mass of waste paper in some way. Pope Benedict XIII found it necessary to issue an edict in 1415 forbidding Jews to bind books in which the name of Christ or the Virgin Mary appeared. Alfonso V (999–1027) notified the Aljamas of the Aragonese Jews to notify the others that “Christians were forbidden to give to be bound, by the above-mentioned Jews, books of an ecclesiastical nature as the missal, the breviary, and the like used to celebrate the divine offices. That the above-mentioned Christians would be punished and fined according to the established amount.” These edicts would seem to point to a general tendency among Spanish Christians of employing Jewish bookbinders.

We shall now consider the influences behind the rapid rise of Islamic book production that resulted in its surpassing that of its predecessors. It is first necessary to have some understanding of The Book, that is, Qurʾān, or, collected revelations to Muhammad, as the nucleus of the Muslim’s zealous book activity.

The Qurʾān is considered “the faithful reproduction of the original scriptures in heaven”; some of it having been memorized and some of it having been written down by Muhammad’s followers. “That some of it was written down in Muhammad’s time is attested by numerous traditions.” The standard edition of the Qurʾān, taking the form of a codex instead of a roll, is credited to the third Caliph of Islam ‘Uthmān (reigned 23/644–5/656), who had it compiled and copied made. The strict orthodox school considered that the “What lies between the two covers is the word of God,” applied to any Arabic copy of the Qurʾān, mushaf, plural mushafīn.

Another question to arise concerning book production was whether anything should be written down except the Qurʾān following the example of Muhammad, of whom it was said, according to some of the companions of the Prophet, that he left nothing (written) except that which was between the two covers. It took some time for permission to be extended to other religious literature, such as the Traditions, embodying the practice of the Prophet. These were handed down orally for a considerable time and the listeners or students memorized what they heard. Therefore a theologian, like al-Dhahabi (b. 673/1274, d. 749/1348), reminds us that it was a token of sanctity never to be seen employing written material other than the Qurʾān, in his work devoted to the biographies of those who knew the traditions by heart. Nevertheless he has left us a large body of religious literature. In his own case the theologian made his works an exception to the rule.

That such a restriction on books did not prevail but extended first to religious books and then to secular literature is evident even in the time of Jahiz (4/255/869), in his Praise of Books:
The Persians left as their heritage their architecture, building cities and fortresses like those of Aizabad, Ispahan, and Mada'in. The Arab, shared with the Persian in architecture but specialized in writing anecdotes and poetry. The composing of books is more effective than building in according the accomplishments of the passing ages and centuries. For there is no doubt that construction eventually perishes, and its traces disappear, while books handed from one generation to another, and from nation to nation, remain ever renewed. And their reading is more enlightening as a resume of the period than architecture and painting.

Were it not for the wisdom garnered in books most of the learning would have been lost. The power of forbearfulness would have triumphed over the power of memory.

He pictures for us the attitude of the man who persisted in spite of the long continued disapprobation of some of the theologians like Suhb (b. 727/1326, d. 797/1370) who enjoined the waraq, or stationer, or the naqsh, or copyist, and the mutallal, or bookbinder, to limit their activities to books on ethics, tradition, prayer, and exhortation. He also sought to hinder them from selling their services to those who would perpetrate the stories of the desert or of passion, false testimonies or false tradition, even though the world tempted them with higher wages to make the books that lead astray.

Theologians disputed vainly other practices affecting the copying of the Qur'an, such as: diacritical marks, vowel sounds, and punctuation signs, as well as its ornamentation in color, gold, and silver. The latter was an expression of the desire to beautify what was valued and exalted, and included the decoration of headings, five and ten verse marks, titlepages, flyleaves, endpapers, and covers. Some theologians were found to praise this ornamentation, like Ibn Mas'ud (d. 33/653), on the ground that the more beautiful the muslah's decoration the more the reader was aided. Ibn Sîrîn (d. 110/728) told Ibn Abî Da'ud that gold decoration was beautiful. There were others like Abû al-Darîdî (d. 31/651) and Abû Dharr (d. 33/653) who disapproved of using gold for decoration, as reported by Ibn ' Abbottîd (d. 68/868-8) and Abû 'Ubaydî (d. 223/857).

The early centuries of the Muslim era did produce, as we have seen, many books other than the Qur'an which were praised and treasured by the cultivated. In turn, the decoration of these other books was achieved by the copyists. The tools of calligraphy gained the attention of the theologian and mutallal. On the one hand, Shâkih Abû Muhammad (d. 438/1047) in his Muhkmasar al-mukhtar, or Abridgement of the Abridgement, insists that it is permissible to decorate books other than the Qur'an with gold and silver, so it is permissible to decorate the inkstand and penbox. On the other hand, the "if" of the finding above is disapproved in the jihâb regulations of Ibn al-Ukhawwâs (d. 720/1329), who considers the decoration of copies of the Qur'an with gold and silver lawful, if the object was to show regard for it, but was not lawful to decorate books other than the Qur'an with gold and silver, nor was the decoration of inkstands, small knives, and penboxes permitted. These sample findings show that ornamentation had extended with general acceptance to the Qur'an and in spite of theological and legal attitudes to the other books. The body of secular Islamic literature which has survived the destruction of libraries in wars, fires, and pillagings proves that the attitude of the cultivated prevailed.

The volume of book production was dictated by the prolific work of some authors and the fewer individual contributions of the many. Many were the authors of hundreds of titles to their credit. Jâbir ibn Hayâyân (d. c. 208/821) has already been mentioned as the author of three hundred pamphlets about the arts, and Abû al-'Amîdî (d. 240/854) is said to have filled a thousand volumes with his verses, but it is by no less than 400 works.

This productivity continued into the later centuries is still attested, for instance, by the output of Jarîl al-Dîn al-Suwaysî (b. 849/1445, d. 911/1505) the number of whose known works, exceeding 336, might seem incredible were it not for the known facts that many of these were these brief tracts.

Authorship and transcription were encouraged by the numerous avid bibliophiles of medieval Islam when libraries served as one of the prizes of war and avocations of peace. The three great royal libraries of fame were those of (1) the Abbasîd Caliph, al-Ma'mûn (reigned 873-883); (2) the Murâwiyyah, al-Hajâj II of Spain (reigned 350/961-356/967), whose catalogue alone filled forty-four volumes of twenty leaves (40 pages) each; and (3) the Fatímîd, al-Hâkim, founded 396/1005 in Cairo. All three libraries employed staffs to keep the libraries in order, to transcribe, copy, illuminate, and bind or repair the bindings of the books.

Many prosperous citizens or learned men accumulated libraries worthy of vying with the royal ones. In the time of Ma'mûn, three brothers known as the Banû Mâsû, were reputed to have spent 500 dinars a month for their translators alone. The wazîr Ibn Khîlîl (b. 318/930, d. 381/991) in Fâtimîd Cairo established a library upon which he expended 1,800 dinars a month for the staff of authors, copyists, and bookbinders. In Cordova, many rich men spared neither trouble nor expense in collecting books, until in the tenth century, according to Abû Sîrîd, "any man of power, or one holding a government position considered himself obliged to have a library of his own." In Spain, the men of the Caliphate of Al-Andalus, and in the beginning of the sixth century A.H., was famous for its size.

The emphasis on numerical estimates of books in a library shows that books were displayed as material evidence of culture and position though at times they were acquired out of mere vanity. Ibn Khaldûn (d. 1080/1406) after attending a book-auction, where he was outbid on a book by someone who merely wanted the book to fill a vacant place in his library, observed pungently: "He gets the nasi who has no teeth." The contents of Islamic libraries are recorded as consisting of dafâtir, or pamphlets; mukhrâbâh, or perforated, sewn-together sheets; and mutallalî, or leather-bound volumes.

Royal libraries were not, as a rule, readily accessible. This is illustrated by the case of Ibn Sinâ, who asked for the privilege of the use of the royal library of Buhrâh as his reward for curing Sultan Nâhir Ibn Mansûr (reigned 336/947-387/997). On the other hand, the movement of scholars to libraries in many parts of the Islamic world was encouraged. The Spaniard, Ibn Sa'd al-Ludays Thalghids for its not less than thirty-six libraries where he was made to allow excerpts from important works.

Excerpts were made not only in libraries but also in the shops of the booksellers, where scholars were free to browse, copy and discuss the books which became links in the scholarly tradition of Islam. Al-Muhammâd, the Umayyad general (d. 82/702), admonished his sons in his will: "Oh my sons, do not remain in the market places except with the bookseller and the maker of mail armour." Here, the equal value placed on the knowledge of books and the knowledge of weapons seems to show the high esteem in which the former was held even by a general.
human need served by the craft (weaving, cultivating the soil, and building ranking highest); (4) the advantage of the craft to the general public (like keeping the beasts where all men are equally benefited, or sweeping public places); and (5) the craft as an artistic end in itself (here page-kull and musicians rank higher than painters, whose art is considered as having nothing to it except the imitating of the forms of natural things, which in spite of the skillfulness of the craftsman produces errors). 103

Ghazzali (b. 450/1058, d. 505/1111) incorporates the Sunnite and Shi‘a views in the hikayat ‘ala al-din, or The Revivalization of the Religious Sciences. 104 The ‘Hikayat contains an encyclopedic range of subject matter which shows some indebtedness to the Hikayat al-safi‘at. 105 Scattered through this work are references to crafts that are often introduced as illustrations in presenting problems of his time. In the first chapter, the “Book of Science,” crafts are dealt with in the section called “On Testimonies of Reason,” 106 in a manner that is reminiscent of the evaluations of the Hikayat.

In line with the theological approach is that of the public including the aristocrat and the commoner. The case of Tamim ibn al-Mu‘razi ibn Badas, our early book-binding authority, is an illustration of a sovereign interested in the economic welfare of his people. He gained his knowledge of the crafts from his father, al-Mu‘izz, whom he succeeded as the sovereign of Ifriqiya (Tunisia) and the neighboring countries. Father and son honored persons of talent and encouraged aptitude in the crafts throughout all the cities and among all classes of their kingdom. Their subjects were trained to produce articles which they traded with double profits in distant lands. 107

Craft designations attached to people’s names were carried with some pride, 108 and professional men were not opposed to earning their living by means of craft. 109 An understanding of the daily problems and practices pertaining to a craft may be gained by studying the regulations of the hibah, or office of public welfare, administered by the mutasib, or officer responsible for them.

Among the authors to treat the subject was Mawardi (b. 364/975, d. 450/1058), whose main concern with the crafts of goldsmithing, weaving, bleaching, and dyeing, seems to be the fear that the craftsman may abrogate with materials belonging to the client. 110 Sarakhi, appointed mutasib in 282/895, wrote two books (which have not yet come to light) on the subject the Small Book on the Frauds and Profession of the Hibah and the Large Book on the Frauds and Profession of the Hibah. But these probably discussed the duties and qualifications of the mutasib as an officer with specific control of trade practices, and one who, therefore, required an inside knowledge of good and suitable materials and of correct processes, as did the works of Saqati (end of 5th/11th century), 111 Abd al-Rahman ibn Nasr (d. 589/1193) 112 and Ibn al-Ukhwawa (d. 729/1328). 113 Some of their regulations and restrictions for dyeing (fast and non-fast dyes), for shoe-making (the best leather and thread to be used), and for painting (no portrayal of what is forbidden), are also applicable to the processing and binding of the book.

Each of these Moslem attitudes, theological, royal, common and legal, reflects primarily the acceptance of the crafts on an economic or practical basis. What of the crafts at the level of the arts? Let us re-examine the sources. We find that there is no clear-cut disapproval of the figural arts in the Qur‘an. 114 The Hikayat al-safi‘at, by mentioning the painters as a craft group, 115 shows an openmindedness towards the arts not then generally
current in orthodox Sunnite or Shi’ite circles. In the section “On Testimonies of Reason,” Ghazâlî enlarges the domain of the crafts to include what we would call the professional sphere, but his classification omits specific mention of art and decoration. Evidences of the general appreciation of art despite theological disapproval or indifference are reflected in poetic allusions to decorations and objects of art; in the attitude of men of science as to the good effect of beautiful decoration in stimulating mind and body; in the various descriptive adjectives applied by accepted writers to the degree of skill in an art; and in the association of specific arts with certain races or countries. We have seen how the crafts entailed in the production of the book, including that of bookbinding, through their major objective of making copies of the Qur’an, attained their classification as arts. The bookbinder’s identity was often merged with that of others concerned with the production of books. This was due in part to a somewhat ambiguous expression encountered in the Arabic term warrâq, plural, warrâqîn, used for a person engaged in one or all of the activities of book production, including that of bookbinding. This comprehensive use of the term no doubt reflects the multiple functions of the artisan in the book trade before differentiation of labour progressed in varying degrees.

We have noticed the term warrâq applied to the stationer and bookseller, and shall point out some of its other applications especially where it indicates the participation of a bookbinder.

The warrâq is characterized as a scribe by Sûfî (d. 335/946). The warrâq, he reports, was asked “What do you wish for?” and replied: “A split pen, brilliant ink, and thin leather.” Sûfî naturally couples “the ink with the inkstand, the paper with the writing, and the warrâq with the books.”

The first warrâq recorded by name in Islam is Malik ibn Dinâr (d. 130/747), who copied Qur’ans for a fee. Abu Bishir al-Dhulbah (d. 129/942) was called al-Warrâq al-Razi, or the scribe of Razi because he was originally from the province of Râi and copied or sold books.

To Dabâhi, as in the earlier days, “the warrâq is the nasîkh, or copist, who furthermore sells paper (kâlîgah) and is therefore called al-kâlîgah.” Nasîkh amplifies the duties of the warrâq, saying that when the book leaves the writer’s hand after he has authenticated and written its words, it should be emended from beginning to end. In another paragraph he adds that emendation is among the collective functions of the warrâq. Subki says that the warrâq is a papermaker and seller, and lends his excellence as a craftsman. He implies that in the craft are those who assist in the writing of the mushaf, the books of science, and the contracts and oaths of the people. We can even discern the office of the notary-public in this definition.

The book agent acted as an intermediary in obtaining new works from authors, or collector’s items for resale to the bibliophiles. The idea of the book agent as warrâq is illustrated by Khalîl ibn Ahmad who brought the Kitâb al-A’in from Khurasan to the market of Basra for sale.

Many of the warrâqûn were active as authors, editors, and compilers. The Spaniard, Ibn ‘Abd Rabîhi (646/956, d. 328/940) emphasizes this literary activity. Nadîm in Baghdad uses warrâq as editor or compiler in the case of Sindî ibn ‘All, while discussing the Grand Book of Songs attributed to Ibns al-Mawâlî. Nadîm himself is an illustrious example of a warrâq as bibliophile or author, which may have been an inherited designation since his father sold books. The honorable status of the warrâq is suggested in two instances where a high ranking envoy is associated with the craft. Abû al Yûsuf of Baghdad (c. 212/835, d. 298/910) was noted for the perfection of his calligraphy and for the beauty of his warrâq. That warrâq may suggest something other than calligraphy is strengthened by the tale of Zâd al-Baghdâdi, one of the envoys to the Andalus, who stayed in Cordova. Being one of the well known warrâqûn famed for accuracy and beautiful calligraphy, like ‘Abbas ibn Amr, al-Sâqîlî and Yusuf al-Ballûtû, he covered books and was employed by al-Hakam II (reigned 350/961-366/976 for the warrâqûn.

The warrâq as a bookbinder and warrâq as bookbinding is indicated by Ibn Khalîlikan’s (608/1211, d. 682/1283) use of the last term and is so translated by de Slane. The passage refers to the neglected profession of warrâq in twelfth century Spain and compares the poverty of its practitioner, to the tailor’s needle “which clothes others but is naked itself;” the implication being that a warrâq as bookbinder provides protective covering for books, but not enough economic protection for himself.

Ibn Khalîlikan, a century after Ibn Khalîlikan, lists among the function of the warrâqûn, the copying and emending of books, and the title al-Warrâq or binding of them.

In these many references to the term warrâq we have seen only that it was used to cover the many distinct branches of the book trade, one of which apparently was bookbinding, and that on occasion it indicated the collective functions of the entire production.

A variety of Arabic and Persian terms for different phases of bookbinding and for the bookbinders are frequently met with, some clear enough, others again need clarification. Associated with jildûs, skin or leather, are the following: musâqâlet, the term for volume or book; jildûs, the word for the process of bookbinding, used by Ibn Badis and others; and musâqâlah, plural musâqâlûn, or the plural musâqâlûd, used for bookbinder.

From the root safara, to see, or he wrote, comes: tasfur, or the process of bookbinding; and both, safar, plural safârûn, safârûn, musâfâr, plural, musâfârûn, or bookbinder, the former is used especially in the Maghrib.

The rest of the terms, less frequently used, may be divided into four groups according to the basic meaning of their roots: (1) where the sense is to gather together—’ism, or to heap up, yields arrâm, or bookbinder, according to Lane; and hâm, or to bundle, gives us hazam, or the sewer of paper into bundles; (2) where the sense is to put together the core, with jildûs, or manuscripts, books, and pamphlets, and tabâhûf, or the binder (of the jildûs) and bookseller; skb, or to bind, may become habbûk, or the sewer of the leaves of a book, ornamental sewer or bookbinder; (3) juz’-al-’azîr, or part, portion, quire, coupled with Persian gandil, a part, or the stitching together of the parts of a book; and jirdûs, or to fasten tightly; (3) where the sense suggest the covering part of binding—from tba’-al-’azîr, or to scrape off, develops.
shbā, or to bind a book with thin leather, and (4) where the meaning is to repair, or mend—the root ram (رَمَّ) or to repair, may also mean to bind books.

The parts of this study devoted to technical considerations will further clarify some of this terminology.

Islamic literature has preserved for us the personal names of some bookbinders because of the fame of their craftsmanship or because of their respected activity in another profession.

Nadīm names Ibn Aḥi Ḥarīsh, who worked as a bookbinder in the library of al-Maʿānīn (reigned 988/812–918/933), Shīfāt bin Muḥammad bin al-ʿUṣāfī. This library, which is known as a pious nickname related to the awl and scissors, the implements of early bookbinding, Abū Bilāl bin Shāhīn, Dimyānī bin Aṣār ibn al-Hajjām (which appears to be a Christian name), al-Husayn ibn al-Saffār, Ibrāhīm, and his son Muḥammad. Muḥammad represents the second generation in the same craft. Qādī Ḥanūf ibn al-Maʿānīn was the librarian for the first three Fāṭimid Caliph, serving until 335/946. During this time his chief duties were the collection, preservation (i.e., repairing bindings), and copying of books. Muqaddasī, famous author and traveler, was proud of his bookbinding ability, which seemed to provide him with a part of the money for his other activities. Another Qādī, Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Qādī ʿAbdallāh and Ibn Khalef, the warāqā, composed a catalogue for the khāṭābs al-kutub, or library, of Cairo, and repaired its volumes for the wazir, Abū al-Qāsim “Ali ibn Ahmad, in 435/1043.

The author of our early source on bookbinding, Tanūn ibn al-Murīzī bi Dāris (b. 422/1031, d. 508/1108), was familiar enough with the process to have practiced the art. Another author-bookbinder was the Spanish Ibn Sarāl al-Shantarīnī (517/1213). Rāwandi (d. 570/1174–580/1184) in his verse to his patron, Sultān Kāf Khusraw, says he studied calligraphy, bookbinding, and gilding in Iraq. Jamāl al-Dīn Māsā ibn Yaqtān (663/1264), Allāh al-Salāma, prefect of Damascus, also decorated bookbindings.

In the nineteenth century it appears that the bookbinder was sometimes also the copyist and illuminator. An early dated bookbinding where the bookbinder’s name is known is dated on the evidence of its 863/1459 manuscript, which states that the text was written by the calligrapher Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn ibn Muḥammad, who was also the illuminator and binder. The calligrapher-bookbinders Mūsā ibn ʿAbd al-Ghaffār, Muḥammad ibn Ahmad ibn ʿAbd al-Šams al-Ḥariqī (d. 884/1479), and Muḥammad ibn Muḥammad ibn Ahmad ibn ʿAbdullāh al-Šams. Arent active in Mamlūk Egypt and Syria.

Dāsid Muḥammad (c. 951/1544) in Hālāt-i Hāmmervān, a Persian account of calligraphers and painters of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, includes an account of Ustād Qiwān al-Dīn of Tabriz, to which is attributed the invention of cut-pattern work (manāḥbāt-kārī) on bindings, who was brought by Baysungur Mirzā to Herāt as a member of the library staff assembled to produce books. In a paragraph on the royal library of Sīlah Tūmnān, Dāsid Muḥammad mentions his bookbinders, Kamāl al-Dīn and ʿAbd al-Wahhāb, known as Khwāja Kākū and Mawlānā Muḥṣin. In Turkey, Muḥammad Chelebi was head bookbinder at the time of Sultān Selīm (d. 1520). There seems to have been a family monopoly of the craft with Muḥammad’s younger brother Ḥusayn Chelebi, a Muṣṭafā Chelebi, and a Sulaymān ibn Chelebi, as members.

Sīdī Ahmad ibn ʿArslān (d. 992/1584), a judge of the Maqhrī, probably practiced bookbinding to earn a living, as was the practice and pleasure of many professional men. Ṣufyānī, one of our two chief sources for the technical clarification of Chapter Two, profited greatly by Sīdī Ahmad’s writing on the subject.

Finally, we have the fourteenth century list of Habīb Ibrāhīm Mīrāz, which includes Mir Ḥusayn Ghawzmī, his pupil, Qāsimbān of Tabriz, the latter’s son, Muḥammad Zamān, and Mawlānā Qāsim ‘Allī, a companion of Ḥusayn. There are two items of interest in this list, the use of saḥbaj, the term for bookbinder, and the mention of Tabriz as the place from which the binders came to Turkey. As we have seen, this locale supplied us with the fiftieth-century binder, Qiwān al-Dīn. In addition some personal names of bookbinders have survived on the bookbindings themselves. A number of covers in the Moritz collection, particularly those from South Arabia, are stamped with small dies bearing names, presumably those of the bookbinders, since to the names are added the word ʿunād, or “work.” For example, Oriental Institute binding No. A.12125 has a border of repeated stamps in the center fields of which are inscribed ʿunād al-Rabīʿ ʿunād al-Rabīʿ, or “the work of al-Rabīʿ.” Oriental Institute bookbindings Nos. A.12132, A.12134, A.12135, and A.12146, are all stamped ʿunād Amin (ʿunād Amin), or “work of Amin.” Two Persian bindings in other collections bear the names of bookbinders: one, signed Muhammad ʿAllī of Tabriz, is dated 735/1334; the other, which is much later, uses stamps above and below the centerpiece which are inscribed “Mullāʿlī Muḥammad Saḥbaj, 1197” (1783).

There are other dated and datable bookbindings, although it is always questionable whether the date of the binding is that of the enclosed manuscript. However, the concern here is the bindings to which the name of a bookbinder can be assigned and it is apparent that they are rare.

Summary

From the multiplication of the pre-eminent Book of Islam an organization mushroomed for the production and marketing of books throughout the Islamic world. It did not appear like a jinn out of the sands of the Arabian desert. Many of its practices and certain elements in its organization had been inherited from the Christians, Manichaeans, and Jews. But the widespread zest for learning, which centered in the study of the Qurʾān and Traditions about the life and sayings of Muḥammad and his Companions, was contagious and early extended to great quantities of books of scientific research in history and geography and to a literature filled with poetry and tales of adventure. The approval of some theologians for the copying, voring, and decoration of the Qurʾān, because of the attitude and support of a large body of cultivated persons, was subsequently assumed for the rest of the books.

The organization behind the book trade was tightly interwoven. It was composed of many branches and stretched like a web across the Islamic world. Theological attitudes towards the crafts allied to book production were important as toward all Muslim activities. The theologians agreed with public opinion in extolling the crafts generally but differed with it in the question of the arts. Through the association with the Qurʾān, however, the bookbinder might assume the stature of an artist without discredit.

Therefore we find the bookbinders were esteemed as craftsmen and men of standing in their communities; and their craft was not unbecoming
to Qidis, or judges. Sometimes the bookbinder is difficult to identify because the term warth was used for persons engaged in many of the different branches of the book trade. But whether this art served as an avocation, as in the case of Ibn Badis, the twelfth century sovereign of a realm, or as a vocation, as in that of our crusty Sufyani of the fourteenth century, its products, the bindings are among the greatest glories of the book. Some of the bindings even preserve the names of their binders as part of the ornamentation of their covers.


2. P. Adams, Der Buchhändler, seine Technik und seine Geschichte, Leipzig, 1890.


8. Ibid.


12. Miguel y Planes, Restauración de los arte hispano-arabe en la decoración exterior de los libros, Barcelona, 1913.


17. A. Moret, "Zur Geschichte der Islamischen Buchbinder der Ägypten," Cairo, 1931.


