ARABIC PRINTING BEFORE GUTENBERG - BLOCK-PRINTED ARABIC AMULETS

ARabischer DRUCK VOR GUTENBERG - ARABISCHE BLOCKDRUCKAMULETTES

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More than a century has now passed since the rediscovery of medieval Arabic block printing by Josef Karamack. For most of that time, and even though more than sixty examples have since been identified and catalogued, block-printed amulets in Arabic script have been treated as little more than oddities or curiosities. They reside in library and museum collections across Europe, in the United States, North Africa, Egypt and Istanbul, yet they have not been systematically studied. The examples on display in this exhibition represent a small sample of the known corpus of such artifacts.

Given the slim evidence, it appears that Arabic block prints were produced for some five hundred years, from the latter half of the tenth until the middle of the fifteenth centuries. C. F. Varying in design, content, and quality of execution, the block prints are evidence for an apparently vigorous - if narrowly practised - branch of medieval Islamic technology which has rested in relative obscurity and whose significance is not yet fully appreciated.

The use of the term filiz to refer to block-printed Arabic amulets was proposed by Richard Bulliet of Columbia University, whose 1987 article describes the block print held by the Columbia University Library. While it is uncertain that the block prints were originally known as filizes, the word has come to be accepted as the proper descriptive term by those who study them. Most of the block prints appear to have been used as protections against a variety of real and imagined dangers, an impression borne out, in many instances, by their texts.

Handwritten Arabic amulets are quite common and it was customary in medieval times for a person faced with a potential danger to request such a charm from a Sufi (Muslim mystic), who would compose a text to protect against one or more specifically identified dangers. Block-printed amulets Schon vor über hundert Jahren hat Josef Karamack die mittelalterliche arabische Kunst des Blockdrucks wiederentdeckt. Doch, obgleich bis heute mehr als 60 Exemplare identifiziert und katalogisiert wurden, gelten Blockdruckamulette in arabischer Schrift größtenteils nach wie vor als Seltenheiten oder Kuriösen. Sie befinden sich in Bibliotheken und Museumsammlungen in Europa, den USA, in Nordafrika, in Ägypten und in Istanbul; aber sie harren noch der systematischen Untersuchung. Die für die Ausstellung ausgewählten Exponate repräsentieren einen kleinen Teil des bislang bekannten Korpus dieser Druckkunstereignisse.


Handgeschriebene arabische Amulette kommen relativ häufig vor. Im Mittelalter war es üblich, daß jemand, der mit einer Gefahr konfrontiert war, sich an einen Sufi (islamischen Mystiker) wandte und diesen um eine Zauberformel ersuchte. Daraufhin verfaßte der Sufi einen entsprechenden Text, um dem
were presumably mass-produced, perhaps to meet heavy demand for such protections.

One theory holds that they were, in essence, counterfeit foisted upon a largely illiterate public unable to distinguish between handwritten and printed texts. With most protective charms, they were meant to be carried on one's person so that the protective aura would encompass the bearer. The texts borne by the *tasís* are most often characterized by the standard *hamsa* incantation ("In the Name of Allah, the Merciful, the Compassionate"), followed by one or more Qur'anic passages, and then a prayer invoking God's protection against one or more hazards: pests on the road, the sting of the scorpion, difficult childbirth, malevolent genies, or a variety of illnesses, for example. Many of the amulets are only partially preserved and lack one or another of these features. Still others, by design, contain only one of these elements; most often this latter type is composed entirely of one or more Qur'anic passages, perhaps ones considered by the printmaker to be especially powerful.

An understanding of the origin, development and ultimate demise of the block-printed amulet in medieval Islam is complicated by several considerations. First, with one known exception, none of the block-prints can be reliably dated. The only clue to their age comes from relevant archaeological data—that is, the presence of datable objects in the same location in which the *tasís* were found—and the style of script used in the text of the amulet. Texts in which the older Kufi script is used are assumed to be of greater antiquity. Second, there is almost no reference made to such a craft in any of the contemporary Arabic historical texts. What mention does appear is often ambiguous, even cryptic in nature. There are a few seductive allusions to something which might be interpreted to be printing, but to date no clear description of book printing has been found in medieval textual sources. Third, as with many handwritten documents, many of similar vintage, both the quality of the creators' work and the ravages of time have influenced the legibility of many of the texts.

Beginning with Josef Karabacek's notices in 1928, descriptions or depictions of individual pieces periodically have found their way into print, and various scholars have speculated on their origins, their purposes, and who their creators might have been. Beyond this, however, no systematic investigation into these artifacts has been done. An exhibition mounted in 1894 at the "K. u. K. Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie" (now the "Museum für angewandte Kunst") included twenty examples of medieval Arabic block printing that had been brought back to Austria from Egypt over the previous decade. Block-printed Arabic amulets have appeared in exhibitions, occasionally, since then, but not in such great numbers. Interest in them has remained relatively low among both scholars and the general public. The pieces displayed here are meant to represent, in some small way, the range and scope of medieval Arabic block printing as a craft and a cultural phenomenon. How and why they were produced is not well understood.

One of the pieces included in the 1894 exhibition and now in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek in Vienna, is presented here, in the current exhibition [58]. Its inclusion constitutes a kind of link between Karabacek's rediscovery of the block prints and our continued interest in them today. This fragmentary amulet is unique in that it bears a bilingual text in Arabic and Coptic. A single line of Coptic runs vertically along the right border of the Arabic text, set off from the latter by two sets of double lines. This is also apparently the earliest example of printing using Coptic characters that we possess.

We can assume from this that the amulet has an Egyptian provenance. Moreover, it is not unreasonable to surmise that either the creators of this particular amulet or their customers, were conversant with, or had strong ties to, the Coptic community on the basis of the fact that the amulet has its origins in such an ethno-linguistic background. Similarly, we can imagine that the amulet had been passed down through a local family or community, which had its origins in such an ethno-linguistic background.

The latter assumption seems far more likely, since such amulets—often inscribed with protective incantations or deities—were widely traded in Egypt, as well as in the neighboring regions of Syria and Lebanon. It is therefore not surprising that the amulets were found in such quantities in the ancient city of Alexandria, which was the center of trade and commerce in the Mediterranean world for centuries. In fact, the discovery of this particular amulet in Alexandria would provide further evidence of the widespread use of amulets in the region, and their importance as a means of protection against evil spirits. It is clear that the amulets were highly valued by their owners, as evidenced by the fact that they were often inscribed with protective incantations or deities. The latter assumption seems far more likely, since such amulets—often inscribed with protective incantations or deities—were widely traded in Egypt, as well as in the neighboring regions of Syria and Lebanon. It is therefore not surprising that the amulets were found in such quantities in the ancient city of Alexandria, which was the center of trade and commerce in the Mediterranean world for centuries. In fact, the discovery of this particular amulet in Alexandria would provide further evidence of the widespread use of amulets in the region, and their importance as a means of protection against evil spirits.

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munity. In other words, the appeal of such work, or the value it was perceived to have, likely transcended the bounds of any particular religion.

Consisting of twelve lines of text, the next item which is presented in the current exhibition is a fragment of a larger piece no doubt containing a much longer text. The letters are in a style known as Naṣīḥ, here rendered in a rather crude, blockish form. This example is rather unusual in that many of the letters are pointed, that is, they bear the dots which help to distinguish between Arabic letters which are otherwise identical in form to one another, and the diaritical marks used to indicate vowels. When pointing and vowelling do occur in palaeo, they are most often used in Qur'ānic passages in order that the meaning of the sacred text should not be misconstrued. Notice, also, the wrinkles running diagonally across the paper. Many pieces exhibit this characteristic, which seems to be the result of the printing process, however that was accomplished.

The text is comprised of the first six verses of Surah 34, Sūrat al-Shawkānī ("Chapter of Sheeks"), from the Qur'ān. The opening verses of this early Meccan chapter speak of the challenges to Muslim beliefs posed by unbelievers and offer reassurance of God's favour to Muslims. Perhaps this text was employed, as is a minimal safeguard for someone who was employed to work required frequent contact with non-Muslims who challenged the tenets of his or her religion. Alternatively, this passage may simply have been a favourite of its maker.

Frequently one finds composite amulets that are produced using more than one printing block to achieve a more elaborate result. In one example we see such an attempt. Here, the text is interspersed with three sets of geometric designs, a sort of chain link or lozenge device, in three places on the paper. This has the effect of making the text appear less dense and more visually appealing. The final line of the amulet is produced in negative, that is, the printing block was carved in such a manner as to make the text appear white against a black background, in emulation of bas relief stone carving. Together with the use of the Naṣīḥ script, this adds a certain elegance to the piece and serves as a distinctive marker for the end of the amulet.

Each of these features, the decorative geometric design, the main text and the motto in Kūfi, was probably produced with a separate printing block.

The characters themselves are in the distinctive clean, angular Naṣīḥ style often encountered in these amulets. One other feature to be noted is the use of small circles, seen in lines ten and sixteen, as marks of punctuation indicating the ends of sentences or verses. One common variation on this system places a dot in the center of the circle. The paper in this piece is severely eroded and much of the remaining text is fragmentary and unclear. Several lines near the middle (lines 11–17) seem to be a partial list of the Ninety-Nine Names of Allah (God), and the final line in Kūfi reads: Lā ēziwā tuh bīl-Allāh ('There is no strength but in God').

The complete amulet also exhibits the three elements of a motto in Kūfi script, a geometric design and the main text. Again, as with the previous example, each element would have been printed using a separate block. The printing in Kūfi at the top of this piece is done in a somewhat more elaborate manner, however, in that it incorporates text in both relief and bas relief. This would suggest that a certain artistic sense motivated those who created the block prints and that there was some experimentation being carried out in the carving of the printing blocks. Moreover, design would appear to have been an important element in the appeal of the amulets to the public, perhaps lending them an impression of weightier importance, higher status or greater efficacy.

For some unknown reason or set of circumstances, block printing in the Arab world ceased about the middle of the fifteenth century. It was difficult to determine with any precision when the production of block prints actually stopped, but no exact examples later than the mid-1400s are presently known. One of the latest examples is also one of the most visually impressive and technically complex.

This amulet, currently in a private collection, is quite charming. The text on the verso of the block that bears the main lines of text is written in a very clear Kūfi script. The words form a single line, with some letters being connected to their neighbour. The text is written from right to left, which is typical for Arabic scripts. The individual letters are well-defined and there are no ligatures or other decorative elements. The script is quite legible, with each letter clearly distinguishable.
als eine der Arbeiten von Adolph Grosmanns papers several years ago.1 Its importance for the history of Arabic block printing lies not only in the quality of its execution, but in the fact that it is the only example which can be dated with any precision. This is because the uppermost of the three strips of paper used to form the document bears a bell-shaped watermark similar to that found on European paper dating to the first third of the fifteenth century.2 The creation of the present example, then, is roughly contemporary with the appearance of block books in Europe and only slightly earlier than the development of movable metal type by Gutenberg.

printing started in China as early as the 8th century C.E., and block-printing also spread as far as the Middle East and Egypt within the next four centuries.3 Movable type first appeared, also in China, in the 11th century4, wooden blocks were used by the Uighurs in Central Asia ca. 1300, and movable metal types were cast in Korea in the 14th century or earlier.5 But it was not until the mid-15th century that Gutenberg first introduced the art to Europe. The European printed book, it has been observed, was "born in one of those creative periods of change and transition, which all lasting civilisations go through".

One aspect of this change was undoubtedly the rise of philological scholarship, and the growth of scientific knowledge. The study of Arabic sources played a significant part in both developments. But Arabic texts, unlike those in Greek and Hebrew, did not feature in the output of the 15th-century incunabula printers, nor, with only a handful of exceptions, in that of their 16th-century successors.

1. "Precursors" of Arabic typography

As far as is known, only two works of the incunable period contain Arabic script of any kind. The first was the Persergnatio in Terram Sanctam by Berhard von Breydenbach (d. 1497) printed by the artist Erhard Reuwich in Mainz in 1486, with woodcuts produced by himself. One of these is a table of the letters of the Arabic alphabet, with romanised versions of their names. The letters are rather crude and misspelled, with a somewhat angular, "gothic" appearance (especially the ʌ, ɔ, ɔ, and ʌ), but nevertheless recognisable. The book enjoyed considerable popularity, and further editions and adaptations were published in a number of the languages and countries of Europe, from Spain to Poland.6