DIPLOMACY BETWEEN MING CHINA AND TIMURID PERSIA

It is known that between 1397 and 1421 six diplomatic missions were exchanged between the Ming and Timurid courts. Artistic evidence in the form of contemporary miniatures and especially the puzzling group of drawings and paintings in the Istanbul albums points to a strong fashion for Chinese style in Persia in the fifteenth century. This was brought about by the import of Chinese luxury goods by merchants associated with the diplomatic missions. It is likely that the Chinese paper of the present manuscript and the nine listed above was brought to Persia during one of these missions. It has been suggested that the most likely candidate was the Timurid mission which Shah Rukh sent to China in 1429 and which returned to Herat in 1432. Among the emissaries was the painter Ghiyath al-Din, whose record of his travels is contained in Hafiz i Abrasi’s Zuhdat al-Fawrakhi. 1

THE CHINESE DECORATIVE SCHEME

The Chinese scenes feature a variety of decorative motifs typical of early fifteenth century Ming art, especially blue and white porcelain. There are landscapes with lakes, mountains, pine forests and pavilions. Many pages feature wave designs and many more show larger studies of pine trees, fruit trees, including pomegranates, vines, tendrils, reeds, plants, and oranges. For illustrations of Chinese blue and white porcelain with similar designs see R. Krath, Chinese Ceramics in the Topkapı Sarayi Museum, London 1986, pp.514-518.

1 For this list and references see B. Schmitz, Islamic Manuscripts in the New York Public Library, New York 1992, pp.675-9.
2 Ibid., note 12.
5 Ibid., and B. Schmitz, op.cit, p.68.

For illustrations of related manuscripts and further discussion see:

B. Schmitz, op.cit, pp.67-9, figures 45-7.
N. Tidiey, Persian miniature painting, London 1983, pp.258-245, pl.6 and fig.82.

£50,000-70,000

Miniature Qur’an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, Persia or Anatolia, dated A.H.759/A.D.1359

300 leaves including one blank, 17 lines to the page written in small, neat naskhi script in black on cream paper, small gold borders between verses, margins ruled in gold, with headings in larger thuluth script in gold, two opening double pages of fine illumination in colours and gold, fourteenth century Ottoman burn mouvuq binding with gold painted trolley pattern, fly detached, in a fitted modern cloth box, 70 by 52cm.

PROVENANCE


Edward E Ayer was a Chicago industrialist who made his fortune from railway engineering. In 1911 he donated part of his collection (which was predominantly of western medieval manuscripts) to the Newberry Library, along with an endowment. In 1929 the Library purchased the remainder from him, including the present manuscript and lots 22 and 74 in this sale.

$6,000-8,000

Qur’an section (Sura XXXVI v.21-Sura XXXIX v.57), illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, India, Sultanate, fifteenth century

24 leaves, 9 lines to the page, first, fifth and ninth lines written in elegant thuluth script in blue on a ground of red cross-hatching, intervening lines of thuluth script in gold (gold added later over burn mouvuq); gold lines decorated with coloured dots between verses, text bordered by lateral panels of red cross-hatching; margins ruled in blue and gold, finely illuminated pear-shaped devices in margins, burn headings in fine gold naskhi script on cross-hatched and illuminated panels, two double pages of fine illumination in colours and gold, ornament mostly restricted to margins, margins repaired throughout, some text areas repaired, later red mouvuq binding with stamped decoration, 278 by 208mm.

Other sections from this Qur’an have been sold at Christie’s 28th April 1992, lot 41, and 9th October 1990, lot 49.

£1,500-2,500

£5,600-8,000
Small Qur'an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on gazelle skin, Persia, Qajar, mid-nineteenth century

approximately 330 leaves including 3 blanks, 16 lines in the page written in fine naskhi script on a silver ground on thin gazelle skin, interlinear decoration in gold throughout, gold florals decorated with coloured dots between verses, margins ruled in blue and gold, catchwords in black surrounded by gold, illuminated floral devices in margins, contemporary floral lacquer binding, 60 by 53mm.

Two similar manuscripts of the Qur’an on very thin parchment of comparable size, illumination and script have been sold in these rooms 28th April 1993, Lot 109; and 15th October 1884, Lot 281.

215,000-20,000

Qur’an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper in a fine contemporary lacquer binding, commissioned by Mir Sultan Ahmad Khan, copied by Abd al-Shakur al-Alyani, Persia, Qajar, dated A.H.1284/A.D.1867

393 leaves including two blanks, 14 lines to the page written in fine naskhi script on polished paper, interlinear gold decoration throughout, gold florals decorated with coloured dots between verses, margins ruled in blue and gold, marginal commentary in fine naskhi within illuminated panels, finely illuminated devices in margins, some headings in thuluth script in gold on finely illuminated panels of floral motifs, one double page of excellent illumination in colours and gold, opening double page of fine illumination in colours and gold, one leaf torn, nineteenth-century floral lacquer binding, 167 by 97mm.

2,000-3,000

Qur’an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, copied by Muhammad Shaffi, Persia, dated A.H.1077/1666

275 leaves, 16 lines to the page written in naskhi script on paper, small gold rounds between verses, margins ruled in gold, occasional commentary in margin in black, jaz divisions marked in margin in red, catchwords in red in ruled panels, opening double page of fine illumination in colours and gold, one leaf torn, nineteenth-century floral lacquer binding, 167 by 97mm.

£6,000-8,000
This miniature Qur'an is interesting for the quality of the manuscript, the quality of the gold covers and casket, and its history.

The manuscript itself probably dates from the sixteenth century. In 1730 the pages were probably trimmed slightly and the gold filigree covers and casket were attached, with a dedicatory inscription to the Ottoman Sultan Mahmud I and with the signature of the goldsmith, one Muhammad Ali. 1750 was the year Mahmud I succeeded to the Ottoman throne and the Qur'an may have been given to the new Sultan as a gift (hence the dedication) or simply adorned by a loyal subject to commemorate his succession. Sometime in the late nineteenth century the opening double page of illumination with the Surat al-Fatihah was replaced, probably due to condition problems. At around the same time the brooch was added to the top of the casket.

£3,000-4,000

Purchased by an American envoy in Turkey in the late nineteenth century. By direct descent to the present owner.
Qur’an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, Ottoman, dated A.H.917/A.D.1511

435 leaves, 12 lines to the page written in neat naskhi script on cream paper, gold roundels decorated with coloured dots between verses, margins ruled in colours and gold, divisions of ten verses marked in margins with the letter ‘ain in red, circular illuminated devices in margins throughout, 24 divisions marked in margins in white on gold panels within finely illuminated devices, some headings in white within illuminated panels of floral motifs in colours and gold, opening double page of fine illumination in colours and gold, five leaves with repairs in margins, later brown morocco binding with gilt-stamped central medallion, cornerpieces and border cartouches of scrolling foliate motifs picked out in red and black, rebound, with flap, red morocco doublures, 175 by 127mm.

£6,000-8,000

Qur’an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper in a fine lacquer binding, Persia, Qajar, c.1870

248 leaves, 15 lines to the page written in fine naskhi script in black, interlinear Persian translation in red, gold flourets decorated with coloured dots between verses, margins ruled in blue and gold, catchwords in black in neat naskhi, finely illuminated marginal devices with floral motifs in colours and gold, commentary in margin in neat black šikāʿeh script within gold panels with floral devices in colours and gold, some headings in gold on finely illuminated panels, two opening double pages of fine illumination in colours and gold, five leaves with some smudging, generally good condition, fine contemporary floral lacquer binding and doublures, 255 by 169mm.

£6,000-8,000

Qur’an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, copied by Muhammad Mahdi al-Tabrizi, Persia, dated A.H.1195/A.D.1684, in a fine lacquer binding signed by Muhammad Ali Ashraf, dated A.H.1171/A.D.1757

257 leaves, 17 lines to the page written in neat naskhi script on paper, gold roundels between verses, margins ruled in gold, catchwords, divisions of five and ten verses marked in margins with the letters kha and ‘ain in gold, occasional commentary in margin in šikāʿeh script within gold panels, illuminated floral devices in margins, some headings in blue or white thuluth on gold panels, three double and two single pages of fine illumination in colours and gold, Persian lacquer binding signed by Muhammad Ali Ashraf, dated 1171/1757, some small patches of flaking, rebound, 146 by 98mm.

The painter Muhammad Ali Ashraf, often known simply as Ali Ashraf, flourished during the second half of the eighteenth century, his known works dating from around 1759-1779. The present binding resembles closely one sold in these rooms, 19th October 1994, lot 83. Several other pieces of lacquer signed by him, predominantly pen-boxes and mirror-cases, have been sold in these rooms 19th October 1994, lot 60, 15th October 1984, lot 157; 9th July 1979, lot 138; 24th April 1979, lot 367; 14th April 1976, lot 372; 14th April 1976, lot 368; and 9th December 1970, lot 202. For a further discussion of the artist see Muhammad Ali Karimzadeh Tabrizi, The Lives and Art of Old Painters of Iran, London 1986, vol.1, no.648, pp.368-375.

£3,000-4,500
41 Qur'an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, copied by Shah Mansur bin Mu'aw al-Din al-Kashani, Persia, dated A.H.982/A.D.1574

404 leaves, 9 lines to the page written in neat naskh script on cream paper, interlinear Persian translation in red, gold roundels decorated with coloured dots between verses, margins ruled in colours and gold, catchwords in red, occasional marginal notes in green, illuminated devices in margins throughout, some headings in silver thuluth on illuminated panels, opening double page of fine illumination in colours and gold, contemporary floral lacquer binding and doublures, 118 by 70mm.

£3,000-5,000

42 Qur'an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, copied by Abu'l Qasim Ibn Mulla Zayn al-Abidin, Persia, Qajar, dated A.H.1279/A.D.1862

220 leaves, 20 lines to the page written in neat naskh script on polished paper, interlinear gilt decoration throughout, square gold devices between verses, margins ruled in gold, catchwords, illuminated foliate devices in margins, some headings in red thuluth on narrow illuminated panels, opening double page of fine illumination in colours and gold, contemporary floral lacquer binding and doublures, 118 by 70mm.

£1,200-1,800

43 Qur'an section (Sura XI v.28-Sura XII v.49) in Arabic, découpe muhaqqaq on paper, copied and cut by Abu al-Qadir al-Dimashqi, Syria, twentieth century

80 leaves, 5 lines to the page written in neat muhaqqaq on buff paper, découpe florals between verses, radiating découpe roundels in margins, modern brown morocco in Mamluk style, 329 by 240mm.

£2,000-3,000

44 Qur'an, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, Persia, Qajar, late nineteenth century

208 leaves, 19 lines to the page written in neat naskh script on polished paper, gold florals decorated with coloured dots between verses, margins ruled in colours and gold, marginal commentary in shahseh script in black and red with interlinear decoration in gold, catchwords, illuminated marginal devices, summa headings in blue thuluth on illuminated panels, opening double page of fine illumination in colours and gold, fine contemporary lacquer binding with central coat containing birds amongst floral sprays, smaller roundels with landscape and architectural scenes, all surrounded by scrolling floral work in gold, 282 by 176mm.

£1,500-2,500
ARABIC, PERSIAN AND TURKISH MANUSCRIPTS

45 Al-Bukhari. Al-Jami’ al-Sahih (section XXXIII), Arabic manuscript in maghribi script on velum, copied at Granada, Southern Spain, dated A.H.714/A.D.1314

22 lines, 26 lines to the page written in neat maghribi script in brown ink on velum, headings written in bold maghribi, occasional marginal commentary in different hands, qur'anic verse in fourteenth century red morocco with stamped central medallion, with flap, 268 by 200mm.

This particular copy of section XXXIII of Bukhari's Sahih is interesting because of the colophon, which records that it was written at Granada (Ghorna) on the Monday the 22nd of Rabi’ al-Akhir in the year 714 AH (6th August 1314 AD). Maghribi scripts can vary markedly, and their greatest diversity is found in Qur'anic manuscripts, in which the aesthetic content of the script was as important as its legibility. However, in non-Qur'anic manuscripts the legibility and functional aspects of the script were more important, so there is a strong uniformity among most non-Qur'anic maghribi scripts whatever their geographical origin. This can be most ably demonstrated by comparing the present manuscript with lot 46 in this sale, which is also a section of Al-Bukhari's Sahih, but was written at Almeria in Spain. The scripts are so similar and the size and format of the manuscripts so close, that were it not for the colophons, it would be natural to assume that they both formed part of the same manuscript. Comparison with another manuscript in this sale, lot 47, copied at Bougie in Algeria in 1168 AD, and with a manuscript copied at Fez in 1219 AD and sold in these rooms 27th April 1994, lot 46, reveals the homogeneous aspects of non-Qur'anic scripts in the whole of the western Islamic region over several centuries.

By the time this manuscript was written, the Kingdom of Granada was the only region of Spain still under Islamic rule. The majority of Islamic Spain had succumbed the Christian Reconquista during the thirteenth century.

Al-Bukhari's Al-Jami’ al-Sahih is one of the classical collections of the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad (haddith) and is one of the single most important Islamic religious texts after the Qur'an itself. The author lived 810-870 AD.

£3,000-4,000

46 Al-Bukhari, Al-Jami’ al-Sahih (section XXXVII), Arabic manuscript in maghribi script on velum, copied at Almeria, Southern Spain, dated A.H.732/A.D.1332

24 leaves, 26 lines to the page written in neat maghribi script in brown ink on velum, headings written in bold maghribi, occasional marginal commentary in same hand, qur'anic verse in red morocco with stamped central medallion, with flap, 269 by 197mm.

For a discussion see footnote to previous lot.

£3,000-4,000
Abu'l Fath Uthman Ibn Jinni (al-Masuli). Kitab Sirr al-bina’at (on grammar), Arabic manuscript on paper in maghribi script, copied at Bijaya (Bougie), dated A.H.563/A.D.1168

144 lines, 23 lines to the page written in fine maghribi script in brown ink on thick paper, headings and significant words written in bold maghribi, marginal commentary in several hands, folios 1-3 and 144 with frayed edges, now repaired with slight loss of text, leaves losses in later red morocco, worn, with flap, 266 by 196mm.

The author, Abu'l Fath Uthman bin Jinni, is one of the most celebrated Arabic philologists. The son of a Greek slave, he was born at Mosul in 912 AD and was apprenticed to the great Basran grammarians Abu Ali al-Farisi. During his life Ibn Jinni was bade at the court of the Hamdanid prince Salif al-Dawla at Aleppo and at the court of the Buwayhid ruler Afdal al-Dawla in Fars. He was a direct contemporary of another great philologist, Ibn Faris, and was a friend of the poet al-Mutanabbi, who coincided with him in both Aleppo and Shiraz. His reputation as a grammarians is founded on his incisive analysis and lucid explanations. He was at the forefront of the development of Arabic grammar in the tenth century into a self-conscious science. There was a flow of ideas between the sciences of law, logic and philology in the twelfth century and 'the most brilliant representative of this grammatical syncretism was Ibn Jinni' (M. G. Carner, 'Arabic Grammar' in "Religion, Science and Learning in the Abbasid Period", CUP, 1990., p.130). Ibn Jinni is also credited with founding the science of etymology. He died in Baghdad in 1092. The present work is concerned with vowels and consonants.

BIJAYA (BOUGIE), WHERE THIS MANUSCRIPT WAS COPIED, IS A PORT SITUATED EAST OF ALGIERS. IT WAS A SPLENDID CAPITAL OF THE HAMMADID DYNASTY IN THE LATE ELEVENTH AND EARLY TWELFTH CENTURY, DURING WHICH TIME AL-NAISR AND HIS SON AL-MANSUR BUILT THE CASTLE OF THE PEARL, INSTALLED GARDENS, PALACES AND EVEN AN AQUEDUCT TO BRING FRESH WATER FROM MOUNTAINS INLAND. LIFE IN BOUGIE WAS LUXURIOUS AND IN SOME WAYS EXCESSIVE (SAROTHERY OR INSTANCE - APPARENTLY PEOPLE TIED THEIR SHOES WITH GILLEDED RIBBONS). THIS ALL CAME TO AN END IN 1152, FIFTEEN YEARS BEFORE THE PRESENT MANUSCRIPT WAS COPIED, WHEN THE ALMORAUB TOOK THE CITY AND, AS WAS THEIR CUSTOM, INSTIGATED A NEW ERA OF AUSTERITY.

FOR FURTHER REFERENCES SEE:


E.I. (2nd ed.), entries on Bijaya and Ibn Jinni.

Fakhr al-Din Abu Abdallah Muhammad bin Umar al-Razi (died 1299) was an important scholar of the late twelfth century who was well known for his work on philosophy and the religious sciences. He was born in Rayy in 1149 and during his life was resident in Bukhara, Samarkand, Ghazna and Hind. He finally settled in Herat, where he died in 1299, apparently poisoned by members of the Karawanserai sect. He was an Asha’ite scholar whose main intellectual exertions were devoted to a synthesis of philosophy and theology. But his mind was very fertile and his knowledge of both Islamic and non-Islamic literature and religion was wide-ranging. Even in his theological texts, such as his Tafsiir, he includes discussions of astrology, physics and medicine.

For further references see:


£800-1,200

£800-1,200
The Caliph Abu Bakr's letter to the Arabian tribes, Arabic manuscript on vellum, Syria or Arabian Peninsula, perhaps eighth century or later

7 leaves, 17 lines or less to the page written in primitive-looking Arabic script on thick parchment, no signatures, orthographical or orthographic, parchment dry and slightly buckled, leaves sewn together in single sheets, 197 by 138mm.

This is a good example of a small group of manuscript documents which are among the most tantalising in the history of Islam. The Prophet himself is said to have written letters to the rulers of Byzantium, Alexandria, Abyssinia, and elsewhere, exhorting them to embrace Islam. The Prophet's immediate successor, the Caliph Abu Bakr (d.634), is said to have written to the apostatising Arab tribes during the wars of the Rida. The texts of such letters are preserved in early Islamic histories, particularly the Tarikh of Tabari (d.923/4). By the late eighth century a number of manuscript documents were in circulation which claimed to be the actual originals of such letters. Some Christian writers, including St. John of Damascus (c.705-c.749), had questioned the universality of Muhammad's mission, but such charges were vigorously denied by exhibiting letters addressed by the founders of Islam to the rulers of the world.

A number of such ancient-looking letters are recorded (see S. Al-Munajjid, Études de Paléographie Arabe, Beirut 1972, ch.3-4, figs.17-18), including at least two in the name of the Prophet himself, addressed to Muresim in and the the Maragwis of Egypt. Scientific analysis of the vellum of one such letter in 1974 revealed nothing inconsistent with a date in the earliest centuries of Islam, but the need for such documents must have continued for very many centuries after their putative dates. One, discovered in Beirun, is demonstrably not of early medieval origin (D. Cohen. 'Un manuscrit en caractères sudarabiques d'une lettre de Muhammad', Comptes rendus Congrès linguistique d'Études chinois-éthiopiques, XV, 1970-71). We know of no recent study of the surviving letters as a group, or of any being offered by public sale in recent years. The present manuscript is written on thick vellum but not on bifolia, like a codex, but on single upright sheets tied together through four stab-holes on their inner edges, similar to the manner of the early eighth century Qur'an leaves sold in these rooms, 22nd October 1965, lot 34. The script is in brown ink in an ill-formed primitive-looking Arabic script. The whole manuscript has (or has been given) the appearance of cockling and staining from great age.

The present manuscript is very much part of the group as a whole and is close in terms of the primitive-looking script and the stiff parchment, but the text is that of a letter from the Caliph Abu Bakr to 'those whom it may reach' of the apostatising Arab tribes of the wars of the Rida. This letter is recorded by Tabari in his Tarikh (Leiden 1882-4, and later editions, pp.1881-5) as having been sent in the eleventh year after the Hijra. The present manuscript follows the text quoted by Tabari, but not so exactly that it is self-evidently copied from his account. The letter exhorts the tribes to re-embrace Islam, pointing out the blessings that await them if they do, but also pointing out the punishment which awaits them if they do not. The differences between Tabari's record and the present text do not affect the general theme of the letter. One more notable difference is that the present manuscript ends with the mention of Khalid bin al-Walid, the famous commander of the Muslim armies, which Tabari's account does not include. Khalid bin al-Walid had fought against the Prophet at Uhud, but converted to Islam in 6/627. When the wars of the Rida broke out, Abu Bakr sent him against the rebellious tribes. The idea that Abu Bakr sent with him a letter exhorting the tribes to return to Islam is certainly plausible, and would have had less political significance in the eighth century, when other survivors of this group of letters are thought to have first circulated. The present letter is therefore even more tantalising than others of the group. At very least such manuscripts are echoes of religious moments of supreme importance in the very early history of Islam.

An interesting discussion of these letters, with further references, can be found in Beeston, Johnstone, Sergeant and Smith, Arabic Literature to the end of the Umayyad Period, CUP 1983, pp.131-42.

£10,000-15,000
Abu’l Qasim Mahmud bin Umar al-Zamakhshari, Kitab al-Mufassal, Arabic manuscript on paper, Levant or Iraq, dated A.H.651/A.D.1253

188 leaves, 13 lines to the page written in a neat cursive script in black ink, marginal commentaries in several hands in black or brown ink, some slight discoloration, later paper covered boards, with flaps, 195 by 155mm.

Al-Zamakhshari (1075-1144) was one of the great scholars of the eleventh century. He is best known today for his work on Arabic grammar, but was equally famous in his own time for his theological writings. He also wrote poetry and produced a volume of literary sayings which enjoyed great popularity even during his lifetime. His genius lay in philology and his fame as a theologian derived mainly from the application of his philological skill to the Qur’an and its exegesis. He was the first of the four great masters of Arabic grammar who, during the eleventh century, amalgamated and refined the debates of previous centuries and produced the most influential grammars. Al-Zamakhshari is particularly popular among Eastern and Western scholars for his very orderly arrangement of ideas. He was born and died in Kharazm, but spent many years in the Arab lands. The great fourteenth-century traveller Ibn Battuta records that he visited Al-Zamakhshari’s tomb during a sojourn in Kharazm.

The present text, his Kitab al-Mufassal, written in 1119, is probably his most famous and respected work on Arabic grammar. The four sections of the work - nouns, verbs, particles and phonology - and the numerous subdivisions (fusul) are so skillfully linked that the text as a whole has received almost universal praise in the eight and a half centuries since it was written. The Kitab al-Mufassal also forms the basis for M.S. Howell’s Grammar of the Classical Arabic Language.

For further discussion see:

£4,000-6,000

Abu’l Tahir Muhammad bin Yaqub al-Firuzabadi, Al-Qamus al-Muhit, illuminated Arabic manuscript on paper, Ottoman, c.1550

431 leaves, 35 lines to the page written in small neat naskhi script in black, headings and significant words written in larger thuluth in red or black, opening double page with significant words picked out in gold, text interspersed with gold medallions, margins ruled in colours and gold, one finely illuminated headpiece in colours and gold, decorated and ruled text, later red morocco binding with gilt-stamped central medallion and cornerspieces of scrolling floral motifs, rebacked, 235 by 190mm.

The Qamus al-Muhit of Firuzabadi is one of the central reference works of Arabic language. Numerous commentaries were written on it and in Europe the Thesaurus Linguae Arabicae by A. Giglius, printed in Milan in 1538, was based on it. It was written while the author was living in Mecca between 1560 and 1592. Firuzabadi also wrote works on Hadith, Tafsir and history and was a great traveller. Born in Kazerun, near Shiraz, in 1529, he later lived for extended periods in Jerusalem, Mecca and Yemen (where he was appointed chief Kadi and married the daughter of Sultan al-Malik al-Asra’ir Isma’il bin Abi’isha). He also visited Medina, Baghdad, Damascus, Cairo, Anatolia and India. He died in 1415.

The provenance of the present manuscript is particularly interesting. The earliest ownership inscription on folio 16, belongs to Yahya bin Muhammad al-Mala and is dated 986/1578, giving us a terminus date for the production of the manuscript, but more interesting are the seal impressions which occur on several pages and which tell us that the book once belonged to the mother of the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed IV (reigned 1648-87). The seal is dated (10)72 (A.D. 1662) and appears fourteen times throughout the manuscript. The Ottomans often used seal impressions not only as stamps of ownership, but also as bookmarks. We can therefore imply that Sultan Mehmed’s mother completed the book in fourteen readings, which vary in length quite considerably. One sitting consists of 130 pages, whereas another is only 38.

£2,000-3,000
AN UNRECORDED TWELFTH-CENTURY TREATISE ON MATHEMATICS

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53

The manuscript was copied from one of the hand of the author in 1180, that is, during his lifetime, possibly in Baghdad, although later remarks on the title folio indicate that the manuscript passed through Damascus.

It is a remarkable specimen of an extremely rare genre of Islamic literature, namely, a scientific commentary on sections of a treatise dealing with the Hadith (sayings) of the Prophet Muhammad. The full title of the treatise is Kitab fi'li (??) Shuhra ma samsa'abu al-Wazir 'Azm al-Din Abu' Mus'afar Yahya Ibn Muhammad Ibn Hubayya ma samsa'at al-hijasah al-'ilm Barberan abDin Abu' Hashid Mubashshir Ibn Ahl 'Azm Ahmund Ibn Ahli al-Razi al-Hijasah. That is:

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The book containing the commentary on those parts of the applied science of arithmetic that the author ... dictated (for his major work), compiled by the scholar ... Mubashshir Ibn ... al-Razii the mathematician ... (more usually in medieval Arabic the astronomer).

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The author of this treatise, Mubashshir Ibn Ahmad al-Razi, was born in Baghdad in 1155/6 and spent most of his life there. His life was distinguished by the rule of the Abbasid Caliphs at al-Mustadi (reigned 1160/6-1193/4) and al-Mustadil (1170- 80), and Nasir ibn al-Din Allah (1180-1225), of whom the latter succeeded in restoring Abbasid sovereignty despite centuries of restrictions and despite the dominance of the Buyids and Seljuks. Baghdad at the time could boast some 50 madrasah, all housed in excellent buildings and with generous endowments. According to the early thirteenth-century historian of science Ibn al-Qifti, Mubashshir al-Razi was unique in his time in arithmetic, number theory, algebra, the laws of inheritance and astronomy, and had many students. The Caliph Nasir ibn al-Din Allah asked al-Razi to choose which books he should donate to the famous Nizamiyya College and which he should acquire for his own library. Al-Razi died in Nasibin or Damaskus in 1198 whilst working as an emissary of the Caliph to the Ayyubid Sultan al-Malik al-Afdal.

The present work is not mentioned in Ibn al-Qifti’s biographical notice on al-Razi. Indeed, al-Razi’s interest in mathematics was previously evident only from a treatise in about 60 folios on various aspects of arithmetic, number theory and geometry, extant in a unique manuscript preserved in Bursa (Ms. Haracizade hecho yevec Hikmet 17). The titles of the chapters in the Bursa manuscript indicate that the contents constitute some kind of abridgment of the present work. Al-Razi is otherwise known only for a non-scientific work entitled al-Rasul al-Amiriyavi fi'tanb al-ru'aa al-haqiqiyah, extant in Ms. Leiden 1495.

The author of the original text on which al-Razi wrote the commentary is best known under the name Ibn Hubayya. He lived from 1105/6-1165, and was vizier for sixteen years to the Abbasid Caliphs at al-Mustadi and al-Mustadil. He was a staunch adherent to the Hanbal school of law, whose forces had triumphed in Baghdad in the twelfth century. He had many enemies and was poisoned by his own physician, Ibn Hubayya’s major contribution to Islamic scholarship is his al-hikah ‘an ma'ani al-Hadith al-Salih, an extensive commentary on some of the sayings of the Prophet. This is not specified by his biographers on the Hadith in two of the six canonical collections, namely those of al-Bukhari and Muslim. The basic materials were first gathered by Ibn Muslim at al-Furat al-Hamadi (Mayraj, an eleventh-century scholar of Majoris in his al-jum'a al-sudayya, to which Ibn Hubayya’s fats is itself a commentary.

Part of the fath, namely an extensive section dealing with differences of the legal schools on all of the standard topics of Islamic law, was so popular that it was copied separately and distributed to, and studied by both schools of the Islamic world. The extract exists in several manuscripts, of which seven are preserved in Damaskus alone. Other known manuscripts of the rest of the text of the fath are fragmentary: Leipzig UB 313 (vol.1), Berlin UB 1192 (vol. IX) and Paris BN ar. 607 (vol. XIII), dealing with aspects of the Qur'An. Further research would be necessary to establish whether the remarks on arithmetic by Ibn Hubayya are to be found in any of these three manuscripts.

A biography of Ibn Hubayya by Ibn al-Marrapaniy (d.1192) has not survived; it might have told us something about his interest in mathematics. A fairly detailed biographical account excerpted from this by Ibn Bahaj (d.1192) is, however, altogether silent on this activity and consists mainly of anecdotes about his interpretations of various Hadith and verses of the Qur'an. One of these Hadith (Ibn Bahaj, p.25) is the one that seems to have sparked Ibn Hubayya’s digression on numbers. This concerns the relative value of prayer performed in a group (salat al-jum'a) as compared with an individual prayer (salat al-salatleh), namely, 55 or five squared, as opposed to 25 in one version deemed defective by Ibn Hubayya.

Although the phrase ‘may God have mercy on him’ on the title page of this manuscript implies that Ibn Hubayya had already died (which is the year 1198, when the title page was written, was indeed the case), the treatise itself was written during his lifetime – the phrase ‘may God secure his everlasting power’, occurs in the introduction (fol. 1b) and the phrase ‘may God prolong his life’ often occurs after the mention of his name (see folio 26b and passim).

The use of the expression ‘dictated’ in the title is unusual, but not unknown, in medieval texts, and here gives us a glimpse of the remarkable scholarly activities in the madrasah of the twelfth century. The title of Book I of the fath in Ms. Leipzig UB 313 indicates that Ibn Hubayya ‘dictated’ the whole book. This means that he sat with a circle of colleagues and students and dictated to them the equivalent of several thousand pages of text, a monumental achievement. That same manuscript informs us that a copycat version by Nast al-Hamani heard the entire text of the book in the Citadel at Aleppo from the Prince Majd al-Din Abu Bakr Muhammad Ibn Ali, who had heard it from the author.