THE (RE)DISCOVERY OF ARABIC BLOCK PRINTING

As a locus of cultural synthesis in the pre-modern era, the Middle East has few, if any equals. The meeting and melding place of numerous societies over long spans of time, the region has served as both crucible and conduit for a variety of inventions and innovations—intellectual as well as material. One need only consider the numerous arenas of human thought to realize that advancements in philosophy, mathematics, medicine, literature, music, art or religion cannot properly be appreciated without giving careful consideration to their evolution in this part of the world where, among many other endeavors, abundant archaeological evidence speaks to continual—if occasionally erratic—advances in urban design and development, textiles, architecture, engineering, ceramics and glass production.

Such synthetic processes seem to have been at work in the realm of printing as well, but awareness of the role played in the development of this craft by medieval Arabic speakers—and possibly its transmission to Europe—has long been limited to specialists in Arabic paleography and historians of printing. Even among such specialists, evidence for the existence of printing in the medieval Islamic world has long been treated either as—at best—an oddity, a curiosity, or—at worst—as so unlikely a concept that alternate explanations had to be found for the rare, puzzling textual references to it. Despite the existence of a considerable number of allusions—some tantalizingly vague, others admittedly dubious—to the practice of printing in the Arabic historical and literary record, no systematic investigations of the Arabic block-printing phenomenon have materialized. The history of typography in the Middle East has received much greater attention and such studies have overshadowed the more modest investigations of earlier Middle Eastern printing techniques.

Several Arabic texts written between the tenth and fourteenth centuries contain passages which can be understood as referring to a process which, I would argue, is block printing. Perhaps the earliest and certainly one of the more obscure and more suggestive passages of these appears in the *Fihrist*, a bio-bibliographic work composed in Baghdad at the end of the tenth century by Ibn al-Nadm (d. 385/995 or 388/998) and constituting a catalog of books known (by its author) to have been written in Arabic up to his time. In chapter (*maqalah*) eight, devoted to magicians and sorcerers, Ibn al-Nadm relates that he received a report about certain

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magicians (sāḥīrūn) in Egypt who had, among the tools of their trade, stamps (khawātīm). Given the lack of any meaningful description of them, the precise nature of these stamps cannot be determined but in light of what we now know about medieval Arabic block printing, statements such as Ibn al-Nadīm’s may warrant closer scrutiny by present-day scholars.

Roughly contemporary to Ibn al-Nadīm was Miṣʿar ibn Muḥāhil al-Khazrajī al-Yanbūʿī, known as Abū Dūlaf (fl. ca. 952 CE). A poet familiar with an amorphous community of petty thieves, magicians, professional beggars and practitioners of the shady arts known collectively as the Banū Sāsān, Abū Dūlaf composed a panegyric poem on that group. The text of the poem and a translation into English were published in a study of the Banū Sāsān by C.E. Bosworth. In his ‘Qaṣīdah Sāsāntīyā, Abū Dūlaf, too, alludes to the production of amulets or charms that involves carving (ḥafīr) a matrix of some sort. He writes, “And of our number is the one who engraves a pattern [tārsh] for mass-producing amulets, without shaping them individually and without smoothing them down.” These matrices—‘tārshes’—were used to create the amulets.

Again, however, Abū Dūlaf does not reveal to us the precise nature of the ‘tārshes,’ and Bosworth’s gloss on the phrase “ḥafīr al-ṭarsh” provides little clarification:

This is the person who hollows out moulds for making amulets, and then ignorant and illiterate people buy them from him. The vendor has kept back the matrix with the pattern engraved in it, and he then sells the amulets to the common people, letting them think that he has written them out individually himself. This mould or pattern is called aṣ-ṭarsh.

Bosworth apparently misconstrued Abū Dūlaf’s meaning altogether, explaining that the poet was referring to the manufacture of an object—a charm, perhaps—something like a pendant or a piece of jewelry with some design inscribed on it. Bosworth’s use of the terms “mould” and “pattern” when referring to these amulets suggest that he had in mind designs rather than texts. That he also refers in the same sentence to amulets written out does little to clarify the matter, although his reference to “illiterate” customers indicates that he thought of the amulets as having textual features. However this may be, Bosworth makes no mention of that assumption in his study of the Banū Sāsān.

Writing a little more than a decade after Bosworth, Richard Bulliet offers a re-evaluation of the poem in question. Taking issue with Bosworth’s interpretation of the passage cited above, he contends that the word ‘matrix’ (tārsh) does not refer to some device for creating a “three-dimensional object,” as Bosworth concludes, but rather to a printing block for mechanically

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3 C.E. Bosworth has edited this and a later poem on the same topic in The Mediaeval Arabic Underworld: the Banū Sāsān in Arabic Literature and Society, (Leiden, 1976). References here and elsewhere in this work to these two poems are taken from Bosworth’s editions of them. See also Bosworth’s article “Sāsān” in EF, Vol. 8, p. 70.

4 C.E. Bosworth, Mediaeval Islamic Underworld, pt. 2, p. 201. The translation is Bosworth’s.

5 C.E. Bosworth, Mediaeval Islamic Underworld, pt. 2, p. 201.

6 This line of reasoning has been proposed by Bulliet, “Medieval Arabic tārsh,” p. 430.

7 Bulliet, “Medieval Arabic tārsh,” p. 430. Strictly speaking, the paper text is a three-dimensional object and Bosworth’s explanation, cited above, does little to dispel the confusion.