It has taken somewhat more than a century, but awareness of mediæval Arabic block printing is finally gaining traction in the broader academic community. This is to say that scholars of the Middle East beyond the circle of those who specialise in this rather arcane field have begun to take note of the phenomenon, and to include the fact of its existence in the calculi of their respective interpretations when they write about the social, artistic, economic, scientific, technical, cultural, and historical aspects of life in the mediæval Islamic world. While much work has been done over the past twelve decades or so to increase our knowledge and understanding of mediæval Arabic block printing, much remains to be done. Our appreciation of this aspect of mediæval Islamic cultures will no doubt deepen as new discoveries are made and a clearer picture of the practice is brought into focus.

The function of the present essay is to provide an overview of the state of our knowledge about block printing in the mediæval Islamic lands of the Middle East. To this end, I review significant contributions of scholars in the modern period, including important treatments of individual examples and collections, a brief review of the historical evidence for printing in Arabic writings of the mediæval period, and more recent efforts to expand our knowledge of the scope and breadth of mediæval block printing. Finally, I attempt to consolidate the present state of that knowledge into a coherent, meaningful narrative. Above all, the thrust of this discourse is to promote and encourage more scholarship on the issue, leading, one hopes, to an even clearer understanding of the phenomenon.

We owe much of our current knowledge of mediæval Arabic block printing to a fairly recent development in the larger field of Middle East studies, one that has drawn together a cadre of people interested in all aspects of printing in the Middle East. It is within this intellectual environment that expositions of the block printing phenomenon have found an appreciative audience, thereby serving to broaden awareness of the subject.

* This project has been supported in part by the Center for the Humanities at Drake University.
Any account of our present state of knowledge about mediæval Arabic block printing specifically must take into consideration the fact that its rather specialised nature has influenced its development (and perhaps its appeal) as a field of intellectual enquiry. The history of modern investigations into mediæval Arabic block printing is characterised, even to the present time, by a piecemeal approach. Until quite recently, nearly all of the published research focused on individual examples of the craft. This is not to say that the study of the subject is inchoate in any sense. Examples of the phenomenon have been known since the mid-1800s and the bibliography of studies on block printing in the mediæval Muslim world is quite extensive.\(^1\) However, as I hope to show in what follows, the development of critical scholarship about mediæval Arabic block printing as a cultural phenomenon has really just begun.

The first published notice on Arabic block printing that I have been able to find is a case in point. In the year 1852, an article by Joseph Hammer-Purgstall (1774–1856) appeared in *Journal asiatique*.\(^2\) In that brief piece, Hammer-Purgstall discusses a puzzling passage in an Arabic work dating to fourteenth-century Islamic Spain,\(^3\) which seems to refer to some sort of printing activity. To support this reading of the work in question, he reproduces the image of a text printed from a wooden printing block sent to him by a Spanish colleague. The printed text is contained in a circular field surrounded by a scallop design. The content indicates that the stamp was used by a *qaysarıya*, a kind of depot or warehouse (in this case one apparently operated by the government of a city, Almería) where goods being brought into a city for sale in the marketplace would be safeguarded, inventoried and, most likely, have their value assessed for tax purposes. The print bears a *hiǧrī* date: 750 (=1349/50 CE), thus informing us of the precise year of its use.

In truth, this example of printing is simply an official stamp, and to adduce it alone as evidence for the existence of *printing* in the mediæval Islamic world could be seen as a bit of a stretch. Indicating little more than its function (*ṭab’*), its origin, and the date, the text is no literary opus,

---

1. See the bibliography in my work on mediæval block printed amulets, *Enigmatic Charms* (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 235–240, for an extensive listing of books and articles on Arabic block printing up to the publication of that volume.