ELEVEN MEDIEVAL ARABIC BLOCK PRINTS IN THE CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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Among the items in two collections held by the Cambridge University Library are eleven medieval Arabic block prints. Six of these block prints are in the Michaelides collection; the remaining five are found in the Taylor-Schechter collection. Together, these eleven items comprise the second largest assemblage of such block prints to be found, to date, in any single European or North American institution.1 The Cambridge block prints came to my attention as I was in the process

1 The largest such collection, with twenty-four known block prints, is to be found in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek (ÖNB). Most of those examples were purchased from dealers in Cairo in the 1880’s. They, along with numerous written textual fragments, had been unearthed by farmers mining a rubbish heap for compost in a village north of Madīnat al-Fayyūm. (See Adolph Grohmann, Allgemeine Einführung in die arabischen Papyri, Wien, 1924.) An exhibition of some of the discoveries was mounted in 1894; several block prints were featured.

The exact number of block printed items held by the ÖNB seems to be a matter of some disagreement. Josef Karabacek, the scholar who first discovered the block prints and who authored the guide book for the exhibition of the collection (Austrian National Library. Papyrus Erzherzog Rainer. Führer durch die Ausstellung (Vienna, 1894), p. 247) says that twenty examples of Arabic block printing were on display. Thomas F. Carter, in The Invention of Printing in China and Its Spread Westward (2nd ed. New York, 1955), p. 176, says that there are fifty examples in the Rainer collection. However, in a letter to me dated September 10, 1996, the current director of the papyrus collection in the Österreichische Nationalbibliothek, Dr. Hermann Harrauer, says that the number fifty appears to be incorrect, although he himself gives no figure. Miroslav Krek, who, in 1984, was able to peruse some six thousand uncatalogued “manuscript scraps” in the Austrian National Library (“Arabic block printing as the precursor of printing in Europe,” ARCE Newsletter 129 (1985) p. 16, note 1), says he found six block prints among those materials. Since I have slides of twenty-four block prints provided to me by the ÖNB, we know that there are at least that many pieces. All this would suggest that more Austrian examples may await (re-)discovery.
of publishing one such item held by the Scheide Library at Princeton University. Dr. Geoffrey Roper of Cambridge Library’s Islamic Bibliography Unit had tried unsuccessfully for years to interest scholars in Cambridge’s collection of Arabic block prints. After he read my article on the Scheide example, he encouraged me to expand my study to include the block prints at Cambridge. To this end he provided me with slides of them; his courtesy allowed me to gain some appreciation of the value of the collection and to begin to work on the texts. Subsequently, in the Summer of 1998, I had the opportunity to study the objects themselves during a research visit to Cambridge.

Cambridge Library’s Arabic block prints are deserving of serious investigation for several reasons, not the least of which is the relative rarity of examples of medieval Arabic printing. The existence of approximately sixty such items scattered throughout a dozen European and American institutions suggests the paucity of their overall numbers, while the almost complete lack of duplicates speaks to the variety and range of their styles and textual content. The concentration in one library of nearly twenty percent of the known examples offers the researcher a splendid opportunity to study the wealth of invention and the levels of craft involved in their execution.

The use of ink and carved blocks made from wood, metal or stone to print images and characters on flat surfaces pre-dates the rise of Islam by more than 3000 years. Archaeological evidence indicates that in ancient India wooden blocks were used to print designs on cotton fabric. This Indian block-printed cloth is known to have been traded

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