Raphelengius’s Naschi and Maghribi
Some reflections on the origin of Arabic typography in the Low Countries*

In 1595 the printer to the University of Leiden, Franciscus Raphelengius, produced a type specimen of Arabic: *Specimen Characterum Arabicorum*. Its publication signalled the birth of Arabic typography in the Low Countries.

Raphelengius was the famous Antwerp printer Christopher Plantin’s son-in-law, but he had made a name for himself, not only by the manner in which he made the important scholarly works of others available to a wider public, but also by his linguistic skills. He was particularly adept in oriental languages and was instrumental in furthering their study, at that time still in its infancy. Besides Latin and Greek, he was fluent in Hebrew, Syrian, Chaldean, Aramaic and Arabic.

Raphelengius had been studying Arabic for at least twenty-five years before the *Specimen* appeared: Voet tells us that he had certainly started learning it by 1570, and on 22 November 1572 Plantin wrote to De

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* I should have been unable to make these considerations without the help of Mr. S. van Koningsveld, sometime Keeper of Oriental Manuscripts at Leiden, University Library, in matters concerning Arabic. He pointed out the identity between the smokeproofs I found in Cod.Or.228 and the Magiribi type in Raphelengius’s *Specimen*. He provided me also with the general picture of Arabic types in the relevant period and furnished material on Raphelengius.

1 *Specimen Characterum Arabicorum Officinæ Plantinianæ Fra. Raphelengii* (Lugd. Bat. 1595). The only known copy of this *Specimen* is in Leiden University Library under shelf-mark 846D11.


3 *Golden Compasses*, p. 148.

4 *Golden Compasses*, p. 171.
Çayas that Raphelengius was not unversed in the language. In 1576 Plantin wrote a certificate which again shows that Raphelengius was familiar with Arabic. At the beginning of his Arabic studies Raphelengius had 'a grammar' and a Latin-Arabic dictionary, both of which had been given to him by Andreas Masius, the scholarly chancellor of the Duke of Cleves. He also had a number of Arabic manuscripts, sent to him from Rome by Arias Montanus, who took a particular interest in his Arabic studies and firmly encouraged him to continue them.

The name of Arias Montanus brings us to an ambitious project in which he and Raphelengius had collaborated: Plantin’s Polyglot Bible. Raphelengius was not only academically involved in the gigantic work; he had also maintained contact with Guillaume le Bé in Paris, who cut the Hebrew for the book.

In April 1583 Plantin took all the type-material for the Polyglot to Leiden. On 26 November 1585 it was ‘sold’ to Raphelengius. Having returned to Antwerp sometime in the second half of October, Plantin found himself obliged at least outwardly to break off direct relations with his northern branch. The Polyglot material must therefore have

5 Golden Compasses, pp. 148, 150: ‘Quant à mes gendres le premier n’a oncques rien prins à cœur que la cognoissance des langues latine, grecque, hébraique, chaldee, syrienne, arabe (esquelles chacun qui familierement confère avec luy afferme qu’il n’y est pas mal versé) et des lectres humanes’.
7 These details are taken from W. M. C. Juynboll, Zeventiende-eeuwse beroepenaars van het Arabisch in Nederland (Utrecht 1931), pp. 39-40. Juynboll takes his information from Corresp. de Plantin III, p. 54 and IV, pp. 14, 16 and 129. Juynboll notes that the manuscript dictionary was presented to Masius by Postellus and that after Raphelengius’ death it came into the possession of the University of Leiden by way of the Scaliger legacy. The manuscript is to be found in Leiden University Library as Cod.Scal.231.
9 For the type of the Polyglot Bible see Harry Carter, ‘Typographia Plantiniana II. Early inventories of punches, matrices and moulds in the Plantin Moretus Archives’, De Gulden Passer 38 (1960), p. 38 (St. 57), p. 42 (MA 18) and p. 43 (MA 40).
10 Plantin’s name is written in the Album Civium Academicorum of Leiden University on 1 May of the same year. In De Gulden Passer (1931), pp. 83-90, in his article ‘De herkomst van het typografisch materiaal van T. Erpenius’, L. Willems writes that the date was 7 May and that the official order was signed on 14 May 1584 (note 2, p. 85). That all the Polyglot material was taken to Leiden by Plantin is stated by Willems on pp. 85-6 of the same article.
11 The transaction is mentioned in Golden Compasses, p. 116. The same source informs us on p. 113 that Plantin returned to Antwerp in the second half of October 1585.