Abstract

The paper aims at analyzing the contents of some Arabic letters, written and received by S. Assemani, preserved in the library of the Museo Correr in Venice. Assemani’s correspondence in Arabic is a rich source for various domains. This contribution focuses on a choice of documents in which mention is made of seals and ancient scripts. Through these selected letters it was possible to address the theme of the reuse and perception of Arabic artefacts, particularly inscribed gems, in Europe.

Keywords

Simone Assemani, correspondence, seals, scripts
«To You Sir, dear brother, the most noble, the Master Olaus Gerardus Tychsen – God the greatest
keep him, amen» / ilà ğanāb ḥaḍara al-akh al-‘azīz al-akram al-mu’allīm Ūlaws Ğirādūs Tiksin
al-mukarram ḥafażahu Allāh ta’ālā amīn.

This is the heading of a letter preserved as a draft (fig. 1) addressed by Simone Assemani to the famous German numismatist Oluf Tychsen (1734-1815). This manuscript belongs to the Moschini file, in the library of the Museo Correr in Venice. The so-called “Epistolario Moschini” contains 35 documents in Arabic, dated between 1785 and 1816: letters written by Simone Assemani, translated by him, and sent to him\(^1\). I will concentrate here on just a few letters\(^2\): even if there is in fact little evidence of Assemani’s numismatic interests in his Arabic correspondence, these letters allow us to enlarge the scope of this contribution to the fields of Palaeography and Sphragistics – disciplines that are both traditionally related to Numismatics, and especially to Islamic Numismatics\(^3\). I will end with some considerations on the significance of the reuse of Islamic artefacts in Europe\(^4\).

The draft we are referring to is undated but the final letter, preserved in the archives in Rostock, bears the date of August 18, 1791\(^5\). Near the end of this draft letter to Tychsen, Assemani writes: «ṣaḥḥa al-khātim al-kūfī fī-l-bunduqiyya wa li-aġl ḍālika lam aqdir akhtimu bihi wa-lā ursilu lakum ṭab‘atahu» (“The Kufic seal in Venice is authentic this is the reason why I could not seal with it or send you an impression of it”). We do not have elements to identify this seal but if it was not one of the

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\(^1\) For a list of these materials in the Moschini file, cfr. A. D’Ottone, Le «lettere arabe» di Simone Assemani alla Biblioteca del Museo Correr di Venezia: regesto, «Quaderni per la storia dell’Università di Padova» 46 (2013), pp. 105-122 and plates I-II.


\(^4\) The topic has been recently addressed in the volume Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World: Trade, Gift, Exchange and Artistic Transfer, edited by C. Schmidt Arcangeli-G. Wolf, Venezia, Marsilio Editore, 2010 (Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz, 15). «The migrating artefacts studied in this volume are not considered as “pure” objects […], rather the essays collected here concentrate on processes of reuse, reframing and transforming “Islamic” object in Christian context […]. Even if an object remains physically intact or unaltered, it can become “different” in a new setting and the way it has been observed», G. Wolf, Migration and Transformation. Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World, in Islamic Artefacts, cit. supra, p. 7.

Kufic ones from the Nani collection in Venice, which Assemani had catalogued and published three years earlier (fig. 2)\(^6\), it seems likely to have been a new acquisition.

These lines point out to an exchange between the two scholars, not just of handwritten letters, but of objects too: namely of gem-impressions, but also – as we know from other documents – of coins and glass jetons\(^7\). Such practice of exchanges is well attested with other erudite correspondences, and I must mention here the case of the famous Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637), whose network spanned across a wide range of contacts – including, for example, the Arabist Thomas van Erpe (a.k.a. Thomas Erpenius, 1584-1624). Peiresc had been disappointed by maronites who had attempted to read some Arabic coins for him, and was then willing to obtain van Erpe’s help for their reading and identification by sending to Leiden the casts of some, or all, his Arabic exemplars, or even the original themselves\(^8\).

Despite the obvious chronological gap, and the unavoidable biographical discrepancies, it is worth noting several common points between Peiresc and Assemani: they both lived in Padua – a university town where Peiresc briefly studied law\(^9\) and where Assemani taught Arabic most of his life\(^10\); they both left a large correspondence – still not fully published\(^11\) – which encompasses not only Europe but also the Mediter-

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\(^7\) For a letter attesting Assemani’s shipping of kufic coins to Tychsen, cfr. A. Pontani, *“Or vedete, amico carissimo….”*, cit., p. 327.


\(^11\) For Peiresc correspondence it seems useful to refer to the project “Nicolaus-Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637). Correspondence network”: http://users.clas.ufl.edu/ufhatch/pages/11-Research

**THE ARABIC SCRIPT IN ASSEMANI CORRESPONDENCE**

Another passage of Assemani’s draft to Tychsen (fig. 1), deserves attention: «The letter (al-khiṭāb)\footnote{Considering the anonymous funeral oration for S. Assemani appeared on «Giornale dell’italiana letteratura», see \textit{ultra}, I translate here the word \textit{khiṭāb} with “letter” (it. «discorso, allocuzione […] lettera, missiva, messaggio») and I do not think it can be rendered with “book” as previously suggested by M. Khairallah, cfr. A. Pontani, \textit{Dall’archivio di Simone Assemani (1752-1821): documenti e carteggi}, «Quaderni per la storia dell’Università di Padova» 40 (2007), p. 3-66: p. 28.} you wrote in Arabic and that was sent to us printed by a print house (matba’a) of your country made us very happy. As far as the text, its meaning and the order of the words go, we find that these follow the French grammar rather than the Arabic one; concerning your reading of the Kufic script (al-kitāba al-ḵūfiyya), this is clear-cut (‘alā al-ḥarf) – praise be to the One who gave you the gift of reading the ancient script {you do not have rivals in this}. […] As for us, we wrote you in Arabic {in the language spoken and written by the common people not according to the grammar}».

One must put aside the uncertainty in the writing and in the conjugation of the verbs, as this is a draft, and it clearly shows second thoughts and afterthoughts. But it is noteworthy that Assemani finally chose to delete his last words – that is “in the language spoken and written by the common people not according to the grammar”. The final letter does not insist anymore on the language Assemani employs in his correspondence, though he admits that he writes in dialect, in the language

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of the common people, bi-lisān al-‘āmma\textsuperscript{14}. This detail helps us to put Assemani’s knowledge of Arabic in perspective\textsuperscript{15}: he was – after all – born in Rome, he studied in Rome, and he lived most of his life in Padua. Whether or not he was a dialectal Arabic mother-tongue speaker and he had to study classical Arabic, what always remained a work-tool for him. Moreover Simone Assemani always published in Italian and Latin, which suggests that these languages were easier for him and more familiar to him\textsuperscript{16}.

On another subject, my attention was caught by the mention of a “printed letter” in which Tychsen discussed a Kufic inscription. Most likely, this document is linked to Tychsen’s reading and interpreting of the Arabic inscription carved on the so-called “throne of St Peter” in Venice. Tychsen dedicated several publications to this subject, between 1787 and 1790, and he is actually considered to be the first scholar to have attempted a scientific study of the throne\textsuperscript{17}. Tradition had it that this throne had been used by St Peter in Antioch, and had then been offered to the Doge (chief magistrate) by a Byzantine emperor – whose name varies according to the sources. As other scholars already pointed out, this is a made-up story and the throne is a confection made of various pieces of marble of different dates, origins and functions – a pot-pourri so to say\textsuperscript{18}.

\textsuperscript{14} The word al-‘āmmiyā indicates, in fact, the spoken language.


\textsuperscript{16} For a list of Simone Assemani’s unpublished works, according to an autobiographical note integrated with other titles taken by various other documents, cfr. A. Pontani-B. Callegger, \textit{Un orientalista a Padova: primi appunti su “l’arabo Assemani” (1752-1821)}, in \textit{Simposio Assemani sulla monetazione islamica}, Padova, Esedra, 2005 (Numismatica Patavina 7), pp. 11-29: pp. 17-19. Despite the fact that the titles listed are in Latin, the real works were written in Italian by S. Assemani who choose Italian also for his autobiography entitled: \textit{Memorie per servire alla vita del sig.r Simone Assemani scritte da lui medesimo}, cfr. Pontani-Callegger, \textit{Un orientalista a Padova.}, cit., p. 16, footnote 22 and p. 17, footnote 24. A comprehensive bibliography of the works by S. Assemani remains a desideratum.


\textsuperscript{18} The seatback is a 11\textsuperscript{th} century Seljukid stele whilst the rest of the seat is older, cfr. Strika, \textit{La «Cattedra» di S. Pietro}, cit. Interesting parallel is the reuse of Coptic and Byzantine tables mainly as funerary steles in Islamic context, cfr. F.B. Flood, \textit{The Medieval Trophy as an Art Historical Trope:}
Before discussing again the throne, I would concentrate, for the moment, on the existence of printed letters: the detail is interesting as they form a type of enlarged correspondence of public nature. Relevant to our theme, we illustrate here one example - in Latin and dated 1787 – addressed by Tychsen to the famous Maltese abbot Giuseppe Vella (1749-1814). In this example (figg. 3-4), preserved in the British Library, Tychsen thanks Vella for his \textit{placet} to his interpretation of the inscription on the throne\footnote{On Tychsen approval of the authenticity of the Arabic-Sicilian codex forged by Giuseppe Vella, cfr. Pontani, \textit{Dall’archivio di Simone Assemani}, cit., p. 29.}: \textit{“Nothing could be more pleasant for me than your very important agreement on my interpretation of the Kufic inscription on the throne of St Peter, falsely attributed. The famous Assemani [i.e. Giuseppe Assemani] was not able to read it [...]. I received your gentle letters with great pleasure and I read them again and again with undiminished profit”}\footnote{“Quod tuo gravissimo assensu meam interpretationem inscriptionis cuficæ in cattedra S[ancto] Petro falso adscripta probes, nihil mihi potuit esse dulcis. Assemanum V[irum] C[larissimum] cufica legere non potuisse [...]. Litteras tuas humanissimas [...] mihi redditas summa voluptate, nec minori cum fructu legi relegique”, O. Tychsen, \textit{Summe Reverendo … J. Vella … S.P.O.D.G. Tychsen}, [s.l. s.d]. My colleagues Anna Pontani and Bruno Callegher recently re-published a funeral oration from 1821 in which it is mentioned that Assemani had received printed letters from Tychsen and possibly the same one addressed by Tychsen to Vella: “[…] ed in quell’anno medesimo [i.e. 1790], il suo amico Olao Gherado Tychsen, professore di lingue orientali nell’università di Rostoc, vi stampò alquante lettere di lui intorno ad un cippo sepolcrale di un maomettano che, in Venezia nella chiesa di san Pietro, si guarda da molti come la cattedra di quell’apostolo», cfr. A. Pontani-B. Callegher, \textit{Un orientalista a Padova: primi appunti su “l’Araboico Assemani” (1752-1821), in Simposio Simone Assemani sulla monetazione islamica} (Padova 17 maggio 2003), Padova 2005, pp. 11-29, sp. pp. 21-24. This, anonymous, oration had appeared in the «Giornale dell’italiana letteratura», issue 53.}. Printed letters must, therefore, be taken into account by whoever tries to reconstruct the private library of Simone Assemani, which contained such documents as well as books and manuscripts.

An attempt to read the marble inscription of the so-called throne of St Peter (fig. 5) was made before Tychsen’s. The very famous great-uncle of ‘our’ scholar, Giuseppe Assemani (1687-1768), had indeed tried but failed. Unluckily he did not study it in a philologically way, as he was instead trying to decipher what traditionalists wanted to read: that it was from Antioch – detail that implicitly validated the “tradition” according to which it was the throne of St Peter in Antioch\footnote{Cfr. G. Moschini, \textit{Guida per la città di Venezia all’amico delle belle arti}, Alvisopoli 1815, vol. 1, pp. 4-5; M. Lanci, \textit{Trattato delle simboliche rappresentanze e della varia generazione de’ musulmani caratteri sopra differenti materie operati}, Parigi, Dondey-Dupré, 1846, vol. II, p. 26 e tavv. XVII-XVIII; G. Secchi, \textit{La cattedra alessandrina di S. Marco evangelista e martire conservata in Venezia entro il Tesoro Marciano delle reliquie}, Venezia, P. Naratovich, 1853, pp. 9-10.}. In 1787, Simone Assemani referred himself to the reading by his great-uncle, and wrote in
his Museo Cufico Naniano: «Eventually I consider very difficult to read that Arabic script called ‘Qarmatian’: in this script is written the inscription on the marble throne that the common people think to be that of St Peter and that is found in the Patriarchal church in Venice. The already mentioned […] Flamminio Corner in his work published it [i.e. the inscription] with the reading of my great uncle Giuseppe Simonio Assemani»23.

Assemani’s mention of a “Qarmatian script” must be noticed, considering some recent interest given to the subject. The only contribution to this subject to have used Arabic sources is a very old one, from 1828, when the well-known numismatist Christian Martin Joachim von Frähn (1782-1851) published an essay in the first volume of the «Journal Asiatique». In his text, entitled “On the Arabic script called Qarmatian. Essay in which it is proven that it never existed”24, Frähn pointed out that the belief in the existence of a “Qarmatian script” could only originate from a misunderstanding: the miscomprehension and incorrect translation of a passage in the lexicon al-Qāmūs al-muḥīṭ by al-Fīrūzābādī - a lexicon still only available in manuscript form at the time25. I wish to quote here the entry on “qarmaṭa”, after Frähn’s reading: «kirmetet defines small characters and small steps and a man (who realises small characters or small steps) is called karmetti». No need here to go into more lexicographic explanation26. Frähn also rightly noticed that no Arabic source suggests that the Qarmatian sect had a specific way of writing, and he begged to stop believing in the existence of such a “Qarmatian script” : what the Arabic lexicographers meant

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26 Frähn also cites al-Jawhari (d. 1002 or 1008), the author of the dictionary Tāq al-luqā wa ṣīḥāh al-‘arabiyya (“The crown of the language of correct Arabic” commonly known as al-Šīhāḥ or al-Ṣahāḥ). Cfr. L. Kopf, al-Djawhari, in E.I.², II (1965), pp. 495-497.
with the word _qarmaṭa_, when applied to a script, is a basic way of writing – which can be found in every languages and scripts27.

REUSE AND PERCEPTION OF ARABIC ARTEFACTS

Let’s return to the throne in Venice, and to Simone Assemani who corresponded with an otherwise unknown Rafā’il Khubia28, a missionary of Damascene origins (al-Dimašqī) who met Simone in Padua and then wrote to him from both Venice and Rome. As already mentioned, the traditions relating to the origin of the throne vary, though most say that it was a gift from Michael VIII Paleologus (1223-1282), son of Andronicus and Theodora. Anyhow, Assemani’s correspondent refers in his letter to an older theory, transmitted by Andrea Dandolo (1306-1354), according to which the donor was Michael III Comnenus (840-867), son of Theophilus and Theodora. Indeed, in a letter dated 26 January 1805 Rafā’il Khubia writes as follow: “So, after we left you, we headed to Venice, the well preserved, to go then to Rome. We visited the church of the most important of the apostles – and their chief – praise be on the venerable Peter, that is located in the area called “Castello”. There we have seen a throne in marble carrying inscriptions difficult to understand (kitābāt ḡarība) that, as far as I could see, are in Kufic (kitābāt kūfiyya). Someone says that this throne is the throne of the head of the apostles and that he was sitting on it in Antioch. The king (malik) Michael, son of the king Theophilus, offered it to the Doge (Ar. ḥākim) of Venice 500 years ago. I am sorry, but I doubt of this. First of all, according to what I heard, the throne of Peter the apostle in Antioch was in wood, whilst the above mentioned is in marble. Secondly, if it were the throne of the apostle Peter, then the inscription should be in Greek, Syriac or Hebrew – because these were the languages employed at that time in that place. As far as I have seen the script looks like Kufic. Hopefully his lordship would like to inform us about the ground of this matter […]”29.

An analysis of the throne, and of its inscriptions, is not my topic here. But it is most interesting that this throne – despite its unmistakably Arabic inscriptions – was


re-used in a Christian context and registered among the relevant monuments of the town of Venice. As early as 1583, in the chapter dedicated to the church of St Peter in his book entitled *Venetia, città nobilissima et singolare*, Francesco Sansovino referred to the throne of St Peter: «There you can see also the marble throne that St Peter was using when he was Bishop of Antioch and that was donated to the [Venetian] Republic by Michael Paleologus, emperor of Costantinopoli30. In a revised edition, enlarged by Giovanni Stringa who was canon of the church of St Marc, an additional piece of information can be found: the throne was “Revered and kissed by pious and devoted people, especially during the feast day of St Peter to receive the indulgence”31. And so Michelangelo Lanci writes, recalling the effect that Giuseppe Assemani’s reading of the inscription had on the common people, who: «Believing to such an authoritative testimony [...] more frequently and with more enthusiasm than before pious people were kissing the letters and were rubbing their rosary beads on it - praying»32.

Such “special properties” attributed to the throne are very meaningful 33, but it is not the only case of an Arabic-Islamic artefact re-used in a Christian context34. I can give here as example the Fatimid textile known as ‘the veil of St Anne’, which was originally a honorary robe given by the caliph to one of his favorite but became a


33 Unluckily they are not recorded in later reprints of Sansovino’s work, cfr. *Venetia, città nobilissima, et singolare descritta dal Sansovino con Nove e copiose aggiunte di D. Giustiniani Martinoni*, Venezia 1683, I p. 10.

34 For parallel cases of classical or Byzantine monuments, some of them inscribed in a script different than Arabic (possibly Greek, Hebrew or Syriac), to which talismanic powers were assigned in medieval Syria, cfr. F. Barry Flood, *Image against Nature: Spolia as Apotropaia in Byzantium and the dār al-Islām*, «The Medieval History Journal» 9, 1 (2006), pp. 143-166: p. 148. As well as in Giovanni Stringa’s version of the description of the city of Venice, these classical monuments were registered in the description of the Islamic cities: «By the twelfth century apotropaia and talismans were considered a sufficiently significant part of the urban topography and sacred geography to merit a specific chapter in histories of major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, and key public monuments within them», Barry Flood, *Image against Nature*, cit., pp. 148-149.
relic of the Saint\textsuperscript{35}. The Pisa Griffin – now in the Museum of the Opera del Duomo, but originally installed on the top of the cathedral – the original position of which might be linked to the transfer of its apotropaic powers to the church\textsuperscript{36}. The Ballycottin brooch is also a well-known case of an Arabic object being re-used (fig. 6): this Carolingian cross is set with an Islamic seal in black glass\textsuperscript{37}, and the fact that it was discovered in Ireland has been explained in light of the Viking trade with the Islamic world\textsuperscript{38}. Considering that the Ballycottin brooch is a Christian symbolic object, which contains a Muslim artefact, and was in possession of pagans, hypotheses have been made as to the item having been attributed magical properties\textsuperscript{39}.

I must express here the wish for a comprehensive census of Arabic spolia (whether marbles, textiles, gems or other artefacts) which have been re-used in the medieval West (whether in reliquaries, crowns, \textit{et similia}), as it seems to be a pre-requisite for an understanding of how widespread these “exotic” objects were in Europe and how they were perceived and re-used\textsuperscript{40}.


\textsuperscript{36} Cf. E.R. HOFFMAN, \textit{Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian interchange from the tenth to the twelfth century}, «Art History» 24, 1 (2001), pp. 17-50: p. 23 and footnote 25, p. 45; A. CONTADINI, \textit{Translocation and Transformation: Some Middle Eastern Objects in Europe}, in \textit{The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations. Art and Culture between Europe and Asia}, edited by L. E. Saurma-Jeltsch and A. Eisenbeiß, Berlin-München, Deutscher Kunstverlag, 2010, pp. 42-64 and plates pp. 25-27: pp. 53-57. The significance and symbolism of the griffin are not yet clear, as Anna Contadini reminds: «[…] griffin were used and understood as royal symbols. In the religious sphere, on the other hand, they were used and understood as apotropaic symbols, so that the Pisa griffin might have been thought to have value as a guardian figure», CONTADINI, \textit{Translocation and Transformation}, p. 54. Anna Contadini provides also other examples of Islamic objects that had an “afterlife”, particular interesting is the Reliquiary of the nails of Saint Clare, for which a Fatimid rock crystal vessel was reemployed.


\textsuperscript{39} Cfr. PORTER-AGER, \textit{Islamic amuletic seals}, cit.

\textsuperscript{40} For Britain, cfr. A. PETERSEN, \textit{The Archaeology of Islam in Britain: recognition and potential}, «Antiquity» 82 (2008), pp. 1080-1092. For some thoughts on the different identities an object experiences, see HOFFMAN, \textit{Pathways of Portability}, cit., p. 42. The number of Islamic objects in the Treasuries of churches in the Latin West is far from being irrelevant considering that it includes: «circa eighty Islamic rock crystal objects, thirty cut- and enameled-glass vessels – the so-called bacini […]» to these (incomplete) figures one has to add the number of objects known through inventories and today lost as well as that of objects nowadays in public and private collections but originally kept in church
I will limit myself to point out here some examples of engraved Arabic gems re-used in a western, particularly Christian, context: a garnet in the reliquary of St. John’s tooth (Treasure of Monza Cathedral), another garnet in the crown of the Holy Roman Empress Constance of Aragon (Palermo Cathedral); a black glass bead in the reliquary of St. Maurus (now in the Czech Republic) (fig. 7); a carnelian with an Arabic inscription formerly set in the front of a Romanesque altar (Treasure of the Gerona Cathedral) (fig. 8). Such pieces deserve separate studies, because of the regional and chronological differences of their contexts, but they all belong to the Islamic gems used in medieval Europe, and they contribute to the study of their circulation, their re-use, and their perception. Moreover, as it has been already


44 Completed for the Benedictine Abbey in Florennes in the first quarter of the 13th century; cfr. the website http://www.svatymaur.cz (last access: September 2014).

45 Cfr. F. de Sagarra, *Sigillografia catalana. Inventari, descripció i estudi dels segells de Catalunya*, Barcellona, Estampa D’Henrich I C., 1916-1932, 5 vols: vol. I (1916), p. 4; E. Girbal, *Sellos árabes de la catedral de Gerona*, «Revista de Ciencias históricas» I (1880), p. 388. The gem inscription, according to Martí Aurell, would read: «Ô unique par tes dons et juste par tes décrets, augmente ma chance, le matin et le soir». The owner of the ring in which the seal was originally set is discussed, cfr. M. Aurell, *Les noces du comte: mariage et pouvoir en Catalogne* (785-1213), Paris, Publications de la Sorbonne, 1995 (Histoire ancienne et médiévale, 32), p. 240. The chalcedony, inscribed in both Latin and Arabic, that it is said to have been originally set in the signet ring of countess Ermessenda (ca. 975-1058), represents another case: it was made bilingual on purpose to be understood by all the component of her lands. Though the fact that both inscriptions are in positive, suggests that the stone was not meant to be used as a seal. For a recent picture of the gem, cfr. M. Sureda i Júban, *Girona Cathedral. Guide*, Madrid, Ediciones Palacios y Museos, 2013, pp. 83-84, where the photo of the gem – p. 84 – is, though, inverted.

stressed, engraved gems are unique documents and it is important to publish them all – reused or not.

The marbles in the throne of St Peter, the Fatimid textile known as veil of St Anne, the Pisa Griffin and the Arabic paste in the Ballycottin brooch, are all examples of Arabic artefacts in the West. Marbles, textiles, bronzes, crystals and gems inscribed in Arabic were mounted, or integrated, within a new context – seemingly often religious. In their medieval western context, these Arabic elements had acquired magical properties – or at least properties linked to some form of religiosity or superstition. Rewording what has been written for the Byzantine or classical elements re-used in the Dār al-Īslām, Islamic artefacts in the West were rare fragments of a different culture imbued with supernatural powers. This “exotic effect” is palpable in the ascription of talismanic value.


47 Cfr. L. Kalus, Objets islamiques de la collection Sarour Nasher (aiguière en métal, sceaux, talismans et bagues), «Archéologie islamique» 1 (1990), pp. 169-181: p. 169. The increasing number of published collections contributes to our understanding of these materials, cfr. V. Porter, Arabic and Persian Seals and Amulets in the British Museum, London, The British Museum, 2011 (British Museum Research Publication, 160), and on-line: http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/search.aspx?bibliography=157 (last access: September 2014). But one must deplore that, in addition to engraved gems understudied or lost amongst large number of other materials, many seals matrices in Arabic characters are still unpublished. Some eight seal matrices in Arabic characters are listed, for example, in the collection of more of 900 items of the Coin Cabinet of the Romanian Academy, cfr. M. Gramatopol, Les pierres gravées du cabinet numismatique de l’Académie Roumaine, Wetteren, Universa, 1974 (Collection Latomus, 138), p. 109, nrs 954-961 and pl. XLV. The catalogue does not give any reading for these seals and the illustrations, even if useful to get an idea of the materials, do not allow, unluckily, a clear view of the inscriptions. Other eleven rings with inscribed gems were in the collection of Ernest Guilhou (1844-1911), cfr. S. de Ricci, Catalogue of a collection of ancient rings formed by the late E. Guilhou, Paris, 1912, nos 1320-1331. For only one of them a tentative reading is given in the catalogue of the sale, cfr. Superb Collection of Rings formed by the Late Monsieur E. Guilhou; Sotheby’s, London, 9-12 November 1937, nos 612-616: nr 614. Six engraved gems «from the Iranian-Afghan plateau» are illustrated in M. Mitchiner, The World of Islam. Oriental Coins and Their Values, London, Hawkins, p. 477, nr. 3999-4004. Unpublished seals are also mentioned in the Dār al-āṯār al-islāmiyya collection in Kuwayt, cfr. Porter, Arabic and Persian Seals, cit., p. 62.


49 On the arrival in Venice of Islamic objects not on a regular basis but as curiosities and rarities, cfr. G. Curatola, Venezia e il mondo islamico da documenti d’archivio, in Venezia e l’Islam 828-1797, Catalogue of the exhibition (Venezia, Palazzo Ducale 28.7/25.11.2007), edited by S. Carboni, Venezia, Marsilio, 2007, pp. 69-77: p. 74. A mysterious exoticism is evoked also by Oleg Grabar for the double inscription, in Latin and Arabic, of a bronze peacock in the Louvre: whilst the Latin text would have been meaningful for a Western owner, the Arabic text – according to Grabar – would have been a fascinating enigma, cfr. O. Grabar, About a Bronze Bird, in Reading Medieval Images: The
Still nowadays, the western perception of the Arabic script seems to be associated to magic\textsuperscript{50}: in the catalogue of the Egyptian and Roman magical intaglios from the Paris coin cabinet, one could find, under the “symbols” section, a gem (fig. 9) described as «a line of signs between a moon-crescent and a six-ray star»\textsuperscript{51}. In fact, the inverted photograph shows the Arabic inscription: “\textit{In God Muḥammad trusts}” (“\textit{billāh yaṯiqu Muḥammad}”)\textsuperscript{52}.

Is it magic? No, Arabic.

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\textsuperscript{50} The theme of the apotropaic function of Arabic inscriptions is approached by Eva R. Hoffman discussing the the mantle of Roger II, cfr. Hoffman, \textit{Pathways of Portability}, cit., p. 32 and footnote 61, p. 48.


\textsuperscript{52} Cfr. Porter, \textit{Arabic and Persian Seals}, cit., pp. 50-55.
Figure 1 – Venice, Museo Correr, Epistolario Moschini, S. Assemani to O.G. Tychsen, draft
Figure 2 – S. Assemani, Museo Cufico Naniano, Padova, Stamperia del Seminario, 1788, vol. II, pl. IX: Sigilli Cufici
JOSEPHO VELLA
Hierofol. Reg. Ordinis Fratri Cappellano in Academia Panormitana L. Arab. Professori
S. P. D.

OLAUS GERHARDUS TYCHSEN
Ser. Duci Regn. Megalopolisae a Comitis Aula LL. 00. in Academia Batavensi Professor & Bibliothecarius

Litteras cum humanissimas LV. Non. Od. datas, & mediunctas mihi reddi-
tos nonum volubatque, nec manus cum scufla legi, reliquique. Quum pro-
dolor amplius mihi non contingat esse ram felici, ut hange, itaque peregr-
abam subarem Virum, qui & meritarum in Republicam litterarum, & erud-
itionem hanc excelli, per litteras facere, quod coram non possum, in delicitis
mibi est. Dodum te, tamen te, raram eruditionem armeniam mansi, & adiama-
vit, mihi tuum quam humanitarum, que veres eruditionem commis in, etio-
cis perspectam habeo, quod ulter me amicitiam tamen, sande a me semper colon-
dam, admissum, haud volgari modo me titi officiuis reddishelli.

Postis meum, super explicatis a te manuis Emirorum Societis anecdotis, 
judiciorum, magnae moderationes ous. Facilitatem enim eft de re san 
judicifca, quum ipsam rei scire efficer. Ut tamen adpateae me tuam 
biborum nummorum, interpretationem autem considerare, diuam, 
quod sola veritas me dicere jure, Tu ccei alter Ordinis communitia, & 
seroque tua condigna, his omnium occupasti, ut eum nonnumquam 
manipula, quern sua ad me pervenit, mitem quantum recedunt, 
umnum aequatio translatas esse, plane mihi pervenit abhacem. Que
omnibus et omni in hoc genere nihil magis lineasum, & consuetudinem me videlic 
here proficere, ipsa exemplum ad instarcum iste possum, qui illetis, ut sunt, 
manusque sacra tractare audient, indeque pertinuo ad actiones dialectismi
i cogitatione, quos auctori locutionem exemplum efficit. Gl. Millianos Apo-
logeticus & Juturna Pota, della Venezia, qui duos denarios, scilicet unum 
Consiliarii suos, in Mensisio, S. Laurentii Venetus auctores interpre-
taturos verba, in nomen
mine Dei nimis est hic Denarios anno 1553. hunc in modum transforma-
vit: Non pax illi proprio, non est ipse Deus. Ducis reducendo eum, qui a sua esse
obcurrent. Vide Flaminii Consili. Ecclesiae Venetiae antiqua Mantuana Dic-
aria XX. Paro polutiuri pag. 65.
Pauca hae Suppositione in tua interpretatio detecte emendanda.

In summi XV. aera partis antiquie lineae V. numen 3° quattiu sits. In summis
Childeburns Regalium eodem modo nomen Province Gubernatoris, qui hos
numinos cuedi cedentem, etiam suam curam, ut esse cedere in nostrum numen eadem
plane ratione pro nomine cæsardam Province Prefelli habet poste, nihil e numino
XXI. & XX. Itemque ex initio specimen Cordis Mantuiani augment, hoc una

Figure 3 – O. TYCHSEN, Summe Reverendo … J. Vella … S.P.O.D.G. Tychsen
Figura 4 – O. TYCHSEN, Summe Reverendo … J. Vella … S.P.O.D.G. Tychsen
Figure 5 – Venice, St Peter church, throne of St Peter
Figure 6 – London, British Museum, Ballycottin Broach, Inv. No. 1875.1211.1 (photo © Trustees of the British Museum)

Figure 7 – Bečov nad Teplou, reliquary of St. Maurus, detail of the black glass bead
Figure 8 – Gerona, Treasure of the Cathedral, cornaline engraved in Arabic
(photo © A. D’Ottone)

Figure 9 – Paris, Cabinet des Médailles de la BnF, Inv. No. Collection Froehner 2824
(photo © A. Mastrocinque)