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- New Lights on Block Printing in Medieval Islam

عالم المخطوطات والنوادر

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في العدد

New Lights on Block Printing in Medieval Islam

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Abstract

Great efforts were made by scholars who highlighted the history of block printing in Medieval Islam. But more can be added, depending on any new items which can come up at any time. This humble paper tries to contribute to the subject by presenting the following items:

1 - Correction of misunderstanding Ibn al-Abbār's statement.

2 - Correction of an erroneous statement in *al-Iḥāṭah* by Ibn al-Khaṭīb.

3 - If we exclude the previous statements of Ibn al-Abbār Ibn al-Khaṭīb, we still have clear uncontroversial statements from medieval Islam about block printing. The word *ṭirs* or *ṭarsh* in two poems and explaining its meaning by medieval Arab authors,

and the event of printing paper money in Tabriz, Persia in 1294, are examples. Here I present a new statement for the first time, from a *ḥisba* (market inspection) treatise.

4 - Another new statement is presented from a treatise on sleight of hand.

5 - The words *ṭirs* and *ṭarsh* and which one of them is related to amulet block printing?

6 - Two events of paper money in Damascus, one century before the Tabriz event.

7 - Schaefer (2014) presented a metal amulet or Arabic printing block, which is now in Glasgow Museum Resource Centre, as a single artefact on this subject. I add to that three pieces made of steel.

8 - A fine and complete amulet scroll with polychrome block print is kept in the David Collection, which was not mentioned in the Schaefer's (2006) thorough list.

Introduction

Great efforts were made by scholars who highlighted the history of block printing in Medieval Islam. Schaefer[1],[2] gave a thorough review of the works written by several scholars since the 19th Century, including Hammer-Purgstall, Karabacek, Carter, Bosworth, Bulliet, Roper and Milstein, to name just a few. The research is still being pursued; papers like the one of Muehlhaeusler[3] are adding new important information to the subject.

But more can be added, depending on any new items which

can come up at any time. This humble paper tries to contribute to the subject by presenting a few items.

Ibn al-Abbār's Statement:

Ibn al-Abbār (1199–1260) was a historian and poet who served various rulers in Islamic Spain and North Africa. In his book titled *al-Ḥullat al-Siyarā'*, under a biographical entry for the vizier Badr ibn Aḥmad, he states[4]:

"Then (the Caliph) al-Nāṣir appointed him to the vizerate, the office of gatekeeper, the military command, the horses and the mail. He was without equal in the provinces. The official edicts were written in his house. Then he sent them *liṭ-ṭab' fa tuṭba'* للطبع فتطبع (interpreted by Hammer-Purgstall[5] and Schaefer[6]

as: to be printed)".

The editor Hussain Monés explained the statement correctly as follows[7]:

أي يرسلها إلى باب السدة، لتختم بخاتم الدولة

(Means that he sends them to the Caliphate's Court, to be sealed and stamped with the official state's stamp).

As Monés correctly explained it, the word *ṭab'* **here** means "sealing and stamping". This meaning is found in comprehensive reliable (Arabic-Arabic) dictionaries like ***Tāj al-'Arūs***, which says[8]:

"الطابَع كهاجَر (وتُكسَر الباء): ما يطبع ويختم .. ... مثل الطابع على الصحيفة، أي الخاتم، يريد أن يختم عليها".

"*ṭāba'* (or *ṭābi'*) is what impresses and stamps ... ...like *ṭāba'* (stamping) on a sheet; he

means: stamps and seals it".

Also we read from the same source[9]:

"الطابِع كصاحِب: الناقِش .. رأيت الطابَع في يد الطابِع".

"the *ṭābi'* is the inscriber.. .. (A proverb says:) I saw the *ṭāba'* (the stamp) in the hand of the *ṭābi'* (the inscriber)".

Dozy also gave the same meaning for *ṭab'* (i.e. sealing and stamping), in a lengthy entry with quotations from Arabic Sources[10].

Schaefer said already that the upcoming Ibn al-Khaṭīb's statement is "a puzzling passage" [11]. This is also true about Ibn al-Abbār's statement.

Ibn al-Khaṭīb's Statement:

Hammer-Purgstall[12] presented a passage from the book *al-Iḥāṭah fī Akhbār Gharnāṭah* (acquaintance on Granada events) by Ibn al-Khaṭīb (1313-1374). He was using a copy of a manuscript, despite that he did not say it clearly. But we know that the book was not printed when he published his article[13]. Throughout his article he was doubting about the correct reading of some words, and saying that any erroneous reading is from the copyists' mistakes. The statement on Purgstall's article was about the biography of Abū Bakr al-Qalalūsī (1210-1308). It states:

ورفع للوزير الحكيم كتاباً في الخواص وصنعة الأمدّة وآلة طبع الكتاب، غريب في معناه.

[He raised to the vizier al-Ḥakīm a book on properties (of materials), manufacturing inks and the device for impress-

ing or printing the book, which (the book) was singular in its content].

Purgstall himself was "taking into account some uncertainty about the reading of one particular word in the relevant passage of *al-Iḥāṭah*" [14]. He said that the correct statement should have been: وآلة طبع الكتب (the device for printing books, in plural tense)[15].

Purgstall did not specify which manuscript he was using. He mentioned that he tried to get copies of the same book from various libraries in Europe; but he could not[16].

The statement in recent editions[17] of *al-Iḥāṭah* is as follows:

ورفع للوزير ابن الحكيم كتاباً في الخواص وصنعة الأمدّة والتطبع الشاب، غريباً في معناه.

The literal meaning for this text is: [He raised to the vizier Ibn al-Ḥakīm a book on properties (of materials), manufacturing inks and the young accustoming, which was singular in its content]. Needless to say that these words (young accustoming) are meaningless.

In order to know the correct statement of Ibn al-Khaṭīb we need to review the book itself, which was published in 2007[18]. The book subjects include: recipes for inks, writing on metal, unseen writing for encryption, clays for sealing and stamping, covering the writing with pastes, designing the page lines and dimensions, spot removal, coloring fabrics and other material like wood & hair coloring.

Therefore, the following reading is recommended as the correct one:

ورفع للوزير ابن الحكيم كتاباً في الخواص
وصنعة الآمدّة وقلع الطباع من الثياب، غريباً
في معناه.

[He raised to the vizier Ibn al-Ḥakīm a book on properties (of materials), manufacturing inks and removal of spots from fabrics, which was singular in its content].

The words: *Qalʿ aṭ-ṭibāʿ min al-thiyāb* قلع الطباع من الثياب (removal of spots from fabrics) are the exact words on the Rabat (Morocco) manuscript copy of the book[19].

One of the meanings of the word *ṭabʿ* (plural: *ṭibāʿ* or *ṭubūʿ*) is the impressed spot on fabrics and writing material. In my paper on spot removal I mentioned a number of treatises which use the words *ṭabʿ* or *ṭubūʿ* for unwanted spots[20].

Schaefer says that this book "*contains a brief account of printing or a printing device*"[21]. He did not mention on which page we can find such an account. Now this is ironic, because the book has not mentioned this subject at all!!

Ibn 'Abd-Ra'ūf's Statement:

If we exclude the previous statements of Ibn al-Abbār Ibn al-Khaṭīb, we still have clear uncontroversial statements from medieval Islam about block printing. The word *ṭirs* or *ṭarsh* (printing block) in two poems and explaining its meaning by medieval Arab authors[22],[23],[24], and the event of printing paper money in Tabriz, Persia in 1294, are examples.

In this paper I present a new

statement for the first time. In his *ḥisba* (market inspection) treatise, **Ibn 'Abd-Ra'ūf** (died 1033 CE)[25] states the following[26]:

فأما أهل الأحراز فيؤمرون أن يكتبوها بأيديهم، ولا يكتبوها على القالب، فإنه ليس بمخطوط. وينهون عن الكلام عليها بتلك المساطير التي لهم.

[Regarding the amulet sellers: they should be told to write them with their hands. They should not write them on a mold; it is not a handwritten manuscript[27]. They should not try to market them with the predesigned templates that they possess].

Al-Zarkhūnī's Statement:

Here is another account about block printing of amulets, presented for the first time. Al-Zarkhūnī (died ca. 1406) was a master on sleight of hand. In his book *Zahr al-Basātīn fī 'Ilm al-Mashātīn* (garden flowers on "sleight of hand" knowledge) we read[28]:

ومنهم السرماطية أعظمهم حيلاً ومكراً. ولهم طرايق كثيرة، منها أن الهياكل الذي[29] معهم مكتوبة فإنها بغير القلم، إنما هي بالقوالب الخشب المحفورة، ويسمونها المعاريض. والطرش بها عبارة عن الكتابة.

[Among those (tricksters) are the amulet writers (*surmāṭiyyah*)[30], with the strongest tricks and foxiness. They have several methods; one of those is that the magic formulae (*hayākil*)[31] in their possession are not written with a pen. They are made of inscribed wooden molds; they call them exhibited sheets (*ma'ārīḍ*). The *ṭarsh* on them is the written text].

ṭirs or ṭarsh?

Muehlhaeusler[32] had a lengthy

and fruitful discussion about whether the correct term, in Medieval Arabic sources is *ṭarsh* طَرش or *ṭirs* طرس. Here are the main points in his discussion:

1- Some scholars use the word *ṭarsh* to refer to Arabic block prints. Others argue that term means the printing block itself, which was used to produce amulets.

2- The word *ṭirs* طرس (instead of *ṭarsh*) is used in some manuscript copies of the two poems that mention amulet printing block making[33]. The author gave several citations, from Medieval Arabic sources, which prove that *ṭirs* means the writing sheet.

3- The root ṭ-r-š(sh) "*is associated exclusively with deafness; and it would be futile*

to discuss its many manifestations in the literary corpus at this point"[34].

4- It appears, according to the author, that the term *ṭirs* or *ṭarsh* are used in connection with amulets and printing *only in the mentioned two poems*.

5- "Given the variants in the texts, one cannot say with certainty how the term was pronounced". Consequently he recommended to use the modern term "block printing amulets" instead of neither *ṭirs* nor *ṭarsh*.

But more can be said about the subject. According to Dozy, one of the various meanings of the word *ṭarsh* was "*encrusting*"[35]. Al-Zarkhūnī's statement above says: "*The ṭarsh on them (i.e. on the wooden molds) is*

the written text". These two accounts can be interrelated to give the exact meaning of *ṭarsh*.

Furthermore, this shows that the root ṭ-r-š(sh) is not associated <u>exclusively</u> with deafness; and it is not futile to discuss its many manifestations in the literary corpus.

Al-Zarkhūnī's statement also shows that the word *ṭarsh* was found in another source, in addition to the mentioned two poems.

Paper Money in Damascus, before Tabriz

Researchers mention the production of printed paper currency in Tabriz by the Ilkhanids, in 1294, as the only event of its kind throughout Medieval Islam. But we find two more events in Damascus, both were about one century before the Tabriz event. So far the text accounts about these two events are short and lack details. More text material is waited for to shed light on them.

For the first event we read that Nuredin, or Nūr-ad-dīn Maḥmūd ibn Zangī, who reigned during (1146-1174) met with Damascus merchants who complained to him about the paper money's value fluctuation with respect to the golden dinar. Some times each *qirṭās* قرطاس (piece of paper) was worth 1/60 dinar, and on other instances it was equal to 1/67. They asked Nuredin to nullify the paper money and issue golden dinars instead. But Nuredin refused the idea, not because of the Cabinet's wel-

fare, but because the populace (*al-sūqah*) had large numbers of those pieces. Nullifying the paper currency without compensation or reimbursement would cause terrible harm to them[36].

The same source tells a story about the son of a religious poor person who reported to Nuredin that his father was jailed because he was not able to pay the rental of his leased house. When Nuredin asked about the annual rent value, the answer was: 150 *qirṭās*[37].

Other sources tell us that King al-'Ādil[38] (in 1215) issued black paper money (*al-qarāṭīs al-swadā'*)[39]. But he faced a strong opposition from an influential religious leader named 'Abdallāh al-Yūnīnī who let him cancel his project and withdraw his paper currency,[40].

If we may compare the events of Damascus and Tabriz we find that the Tabriz rulers were dictators who tried to force their paper currency through death penalty. But the two Damascus rulers had peaceful communication with their people, and acted in the favor of the latter. The metal currencies were not outlawed at all while using the paper one. Although the available sources do not add any information about how and why the paper currency was issued during the reign of Nuredin, most probable that it was treasury bonds. This can be deduced from the character of Nuredin, as we know it from his biography.

New Printing Blocks to be Studied

Schaefer presented a metal

amulet or Arabic printing block which is now in Glasgow Museum Resource Centre, as a single artefact on this subject[41]. I add to that three pieces from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Their approximate dimensions and inventory numbers are given in the caption of each plate below. The exact size and the precise date of each one need to be pursued in future research.

All three are made of steel, with wood foundations. The Museum attributes them to North-West Africa, and estimates their date to be the 17th to 19th Centuries. These three blocks, and the one presented by Schaefer, outdate the claim that the block printing of amulets stopped after 1400 CE.
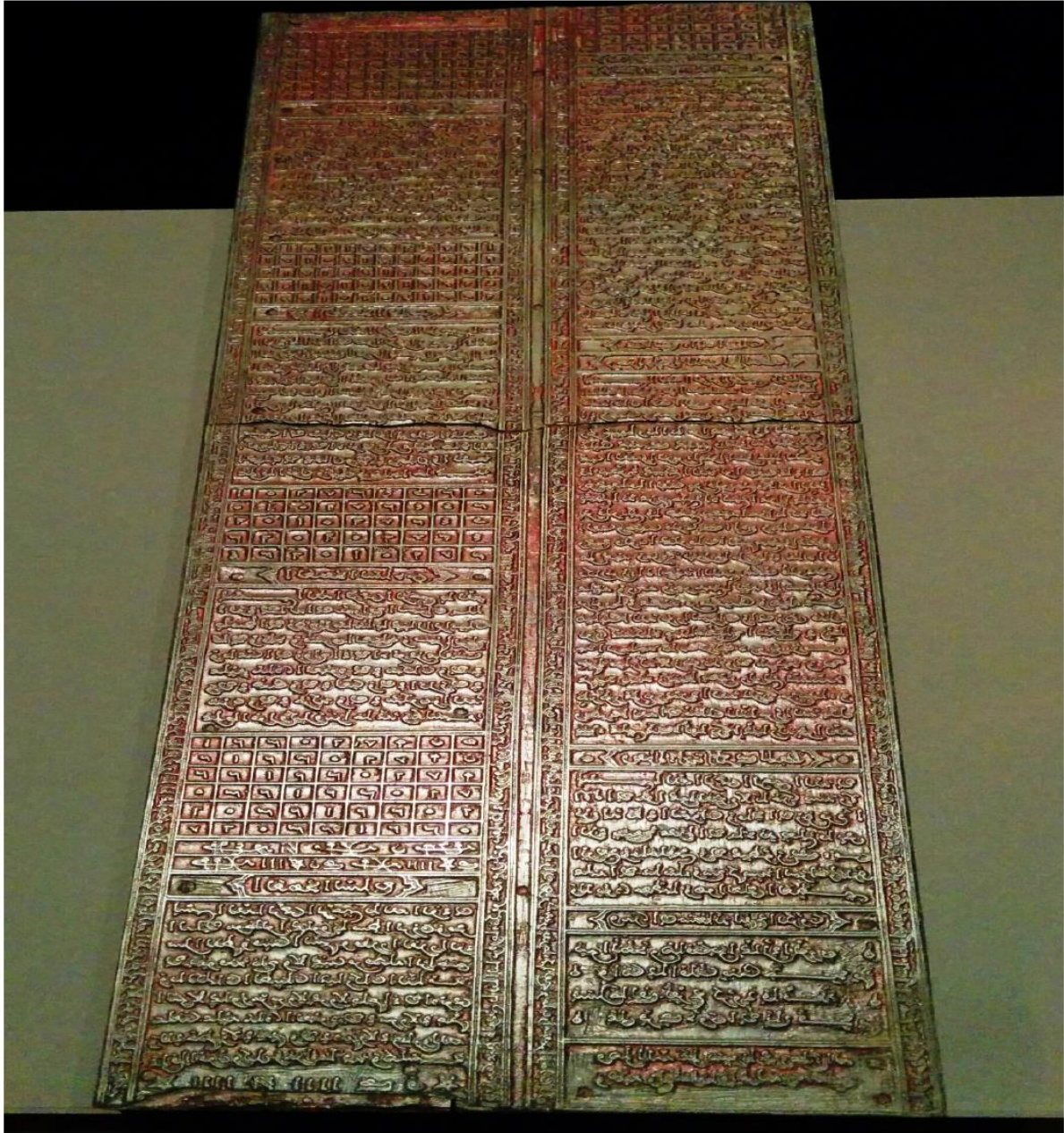
An Amulet from Copenhagen

A fine and complete amulet scroll with polychrome block print is kept in the David Collection, a museum in Copenhagen (Inv. no. 85/2003). The museum attributes it to "*Egypt, or perhaps Iran; 10th-11th century*". Its height is 86.6 cm and the width is 4.5 cm.

Its top portion has attractive decoration with Qur'anic verses. The rest has God's 99 names. The text at the top – "God's support and a speedy victory" {نصر من الله وفتح قريب} – is known from Islamic armor, indicating that the scroll was intended for a warrior.

The amulet was not mentioned in Schaefer's list[42].
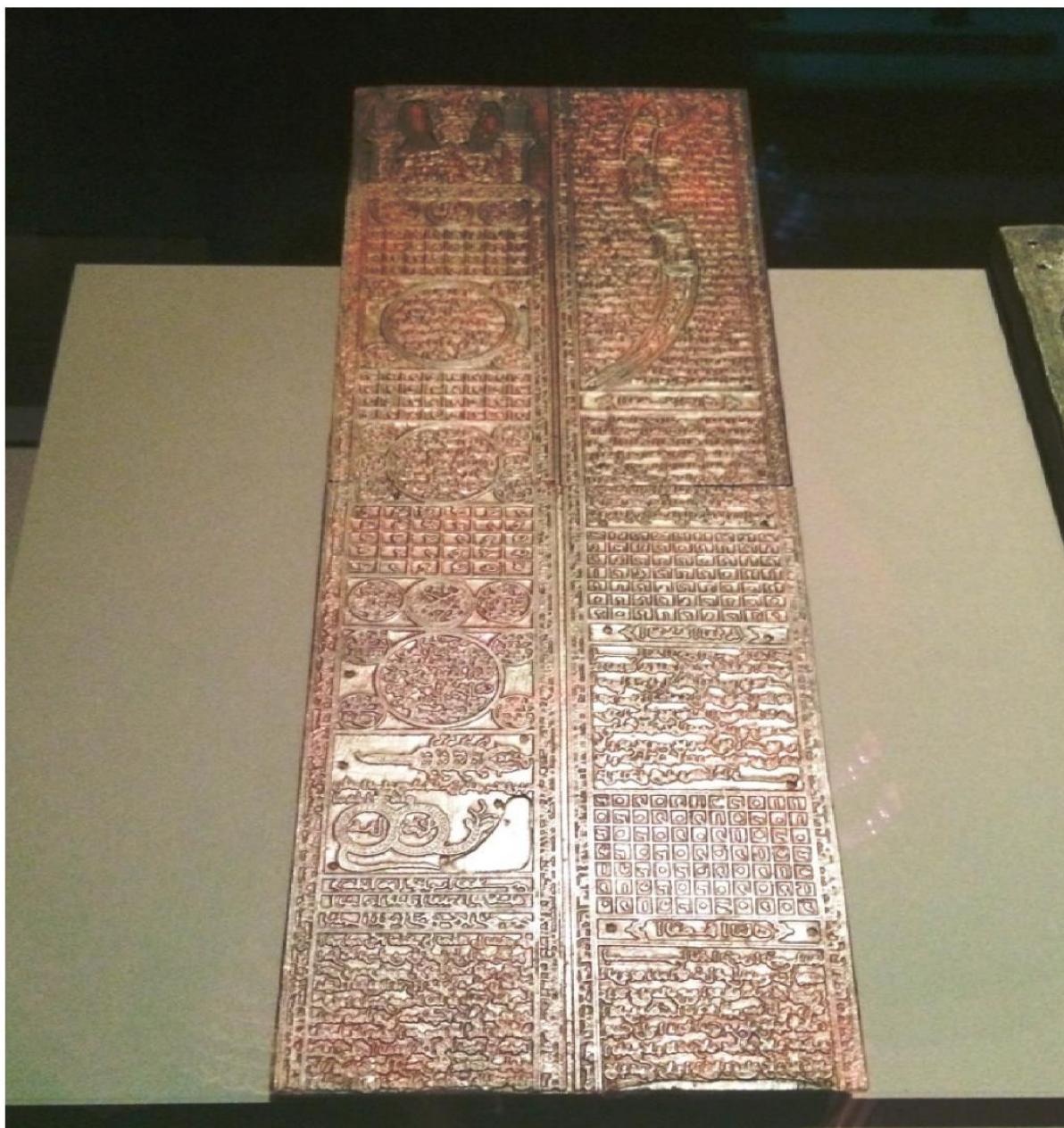
Plate 1: a metal amulet printing block from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Inventory number: (MW 635.2011). Width (approximately)= 17 cm; Height (approximately)= 55 cm.

Plate 2: a metal amulet printing block from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Inventory number: (MW 636.2011). Its dimensions are equal to those of the previous one (Plate 1).

Plate 3: a metal amulet printing block from the Museum of Islamic Art in Doha, Qatar. Inventory number: (MW 634.2011). Width (approximately)= 31 cm; Height (approximately)= 43 cm.

Plate 4: An amulet scroll with polychrome block print, the David
Collection, a museum in Copenhagen (Inv. no. 85/2003).

Notes

(1) Schaefer, Karl: *Enigmatic Charms: Medieval Arabic Block Printed Amulets in American and European Libraries and Museums*, (Leiden: Brill, 2006). See p. 36, n. 69 and pp. 235-240 for a comprehensive list of references.

(2) Schaefer, Karl: "Medieval Arabic Block Printing: State of the Field", *in Historical Aspects of Printing and Publishing in Languages of the Middle East*, edited by Geoffry Roper, (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill, 2014), pp. 1-16.

(3) Muehlhaeusler, Mark: "Eight Arabic Block Prints from the Collection of Aziz S. Atiya", *Arabica*, 55 (2008), 528-582.

(4) Ibn al-Abbār: *al-Ḥullat al-Siyarā'*, edited by: Hussain Monés (Ḥusain Mu'nis), (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 2nd edition, 1981), vol. 1 p. 253.

(5) Hammer-Purgstall, Joseph: "sur un passage carieux de l'Ihathet, sur l'art d'iprimmer chez les arabes en Espagne", *Journal asiatique* 4e. serie, 20 (Aout-Septembre 1852) 252-255.

(6) Schaefer: Enigmatic Charms, op. cit., p. 25. I made slight changes to Schaefer's translation.

(7) Ibn al-Abbār: al-Ḥullat al-Siyarā), op. cit. vol. 1 p. 253. Schaefer relies on this edition by Hussain Monés; but he does not mention the editor's interpretation!!

(8) al-Zabīdī; *Tāj al-ʿArūs*, (Kuwait: Kuwait Government Press, 1963-2002) (40 volumes), vol. 21, p441.

(9) al-Zabīdī; Tāj al-ʿArūs, op. cit., vol. 21, p 444.

(10) Dozy, R. *Supplément aux dictionnaires arabes*, Leyde: Brill, 1881, re-editè par Librairie du Liban, Beirut, 1968, Tome 2, pp. 21-23.

(11) Schaefer: "Medieval Arabic Block Printing: State of the Field", op. cit., p. 2.

(12) Hammer-Purgstall: Journal asiatique, op. cit.

(13) The first publication was in 1901 in Cairo.

(14) Schaefer, Karl: Enigmatic Charms, p. 27.

(15) Hammer-Purgstall: Journal asiatique, op. cit., p. 254.

(16) Hammer-Purgstall: Journal asiatique, op. cit., p. 253.

(17) The reliable critical edition by Muḥammad ʿAbdallah ʿInān, 2nd edition (Cairo: Maktabat el-Khangi, 1973), vol. 3, p. 73. Other printings in Beirut and Algeria merely depend on this Cairo edition.

(18) al-Qalalalūsī, Abū Bakr: *Tuḥaf al-Khawāṣṣ fī Ṭuraf al-Khawāṣṣ* (gifts for the elite about exquisite properties), edited by Ḥusām al-ʿAbbādī, (Alexandria: Bibliotheca Alexandrina, 2007).

(19) al-Qalalalūsī, Abū Bakr: Tuḥaf al-Khawāṣṣ, op. cit., p. 41.

(20) Gari, Lutfallah: "Arabic Treatises about Spot Removal from the 3rd–11th/9th–17th Centuries", *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts*, Volume 6, number 1 (2015), pp. 132-96.

(21) Schaefer: "Medieval Arabic Block Printing: State of the Field", op. cit., p. 14.

(22) Bosworth, Clifford E. *The Mediaeval Islamic Underworld: The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature, Part 2: The Arabic jargon texts: the Qaṣīda sāsāniyyas of Abū Dulaf and Ṣafī d-Dīn*, (Leiden: Brill, 1976).

(23) *Bulliet*, Richard: "Medieval Arabic Ṭarsh: A Forgotten Chapter in the History of Printing", *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vol. 107 (1987) part 3: 427-438.

(24) Muehlhaeusler, Mark: "Eight Arabic Block Prints", op. cit., pp. 558-561.

(25) His biography is in *al-Ṣilah* by Ibn Bishkwāl, biography number 1126.

(26) Lévi-Provençal, Evariste, *Trois traités hispaniques de ḥisba*, (Le Caire: l'Institut français d'archéologie orientale, 1955), p. 112.

(27) He believed that the potency of an amulet is weak if it was not handwritten.

(28) *al-Zarkhuni* Muhammad b. Abi Bakr: *Zahr al-Basatīn fi 'ilm al-Mashatīn*. [Garden's Flowers on Sleight of Hand Knowledge], edited by Lutfallah Gari. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Imam al-Bukhari, 2012) p. 187.

(29) The correct word should be التي.

(30) The word *surmāṭ* was thoroughly investigated and explained by

Muehlhaeusler, "Eight Arabic Block Prints", op. cit., pp. 561-562.

(31) Dozy, Supplément, op. cit., Tome 2, p. 775.

(32) Muehlhaeusler, "Eight Arabic Block Prints", Op. cit. pp. 558-561.

(33) In fact the editions of the two poems that I consulted use the word *ṭirs*, not *ṭarsh*.

(34) Muehlhaeusler, "Eight Arabic Block Prints", Op. cit. pp. 558 and 560.

(35) Dozy, Supplément, op. cit., Tome 2, p. 35.

(36) Abū Shāmah, *al-Rawḍatayn fī akhbār al-dawlatayn*, edited by Ibrāhīm al-Zībaq, (Beirut: Mu)assat al-Risālah, 1997), vol. 1, pp. 64-65.

(37) Abū Shāmah, al-Rawḍatayn, op. cit. vol.1, p. 65.

(38) He was the full brother of Saladin; he succeeded his brother as a ruler of Egypt and the Levant. He reigned during 1200-1218.

(39) Al-Nuwairi: *Nihāyat al-'arab fī funūn al-'adab*, this volume was edited by Muḥammed Ḍiyā' al-Dīn el-Rayyis, (Cairo: General Organization of Books, 1992), vol. 29, p. 67.

(40) al-Dhahabī, *Tārīkh al-Islām*, edited by Baššār 'Awwād Ma'rūf, (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islāmī, 2003), vol. 13, p. 501.

(41) Schaefer: "Medieval Arabic Block Printing: State of the Field", op. cit., pp. 10-12.

(42) Schaefer, Karl: Enigmatic Charms.