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Arabic Printing in Italy: Venice as a Case Study

1 Arabic Printing in Italy

In his seminal work on the Arabic book, Johannes Pedersen devotes a few pages to an introduction on printed books and informs us that “a number of Islamic books were printed [...] in Europe, notably in Italy”.¹ In this chapter, Pederson gives an overview of the main actors involved in printing books in Arabic characters, and of the audience for whom these books were intended, mostly Arabic-speaking Christian communities connected to the Roman Church. It is not by chance that the first title mentioned by Pedersen is the Horologion (*Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawāʿī*, *Book of the Prayer of the Hours*, commonly known as the *Book of Hours*), the first Arabic text entirely printed with movable type and explicitly designed for distribution among Christians in the Middle East. This book was seemingly printed in 1514 in Fano, a city in Marche (Central Italy), the place mentioned in the colophon; nevertheless, the real place of printing is most probably Venice, as argued by some scholars on solid ground.² Beside the books of prayers, Gospels, Bible, etc., the Qurʾān had special prominence. The holy book of the Muslims was printed in Italy as early as the 16th century, along with grammars, such as *al-Ajurrumiya*, scientific books,

1 J. Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, translated by Geoffrey French, Princeton, 1984 (2nd ed.), p. 131. A classical and pioneering study on Arabic printing in the West is J. Balagna, *L'imprimerie arabe en Occident: XVI^e, XVII^e et XVIII^e siècles*, Paris, 1995.

2 For a description, see G. Vercellin, *Venezia e l'origine della stampa in caratteri arabi*, Padua, 2001, p. 58–69; S. Fani, M. Farina (eds.), *Le vie delle Lettere. La Tipografia Medicea tra Roma e l'Oriente*, Florence, 2012, p. 196–199. The celebrity of the Horologion is due to its being the first Arabic book entirely printed with movable type, but the place of printing raised an extensive bibliographic debate (summarized by Vercellin, *Venezia e l'origine della stampa*, p. 65–68). An in-depth study is C. Gianni, M. Tagliabracci, “*Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawāʿī*: protagonisti, vicende ed ipotesi attorno al primo libro arabo stampato con caratteri mobili”, in *Culture del testo e del documento*, 38, 2012, p. 131–185, which also contains a comparison with the Horologion printed at Bucharest in 1702, in Greek and Arabic (p. 148–149); on the debated issue of the place of printing, see the detailed analysis on p. 175–181. It is reasonable to suppose that the printer Gregorio de Gregori, whose presence in Fano is not proven, printed the Horologion in Venice but declared a fictitious place to validate the patronage of the Roman Church, which ruled central Italy at the time (as stated in Fani, Farina (eds.), *Le vie delle Lettere*, p. 196), or to circumvent the printing privilege held by another printer in Venice (as stated by Gianni, Tagliabracci, “*Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawāʿī*”, p. 182).

such as a treatise by Euclid, the *Canon* of Avicenna, and geographical works such as those of al-Idrīsī and Abū al-Fidā’.

In Italy, three notable printing presses were able to produce books in Arabic type. The best known is the Medici press (Tipografia Medicea), founded in Rome in 1584 by Ferdinando de’ Medici, at the suggestion of Pope Gregory XIII, to disseminate the sacred scriptures in the East; it then moved to Pisa and Florence. The others are the printing press of the Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith (Congregatio de Propaganda Fide), founded in Rome in 1622, and the Seminary Printing Press (Tipografia del Seminario) founded in Padua in 1680, whose most remarkable product was the Qur’ān in Arabic with a Latin translation by Ludovico Marracci (1612–1700).³ If these three are the best known, other printing presses also had the expertise and the technical means to produce books in Arabic, and in particular those operating in Venice should not be neglected. The case of Venice is noteworthy because of its role in the production and trade of books, its priority in Arabic printing, and the intriguing case of the Qur’ān entirely printed in Arabic. The only surviving copy of this Arabic printed Qur’ān is still preserved in the city, in the Franciscan Monastery of San Francesco della Vigna.⁴

2 Venice, City of the Book

The role of Venice in the production and trade of books, especially in the period of the late 15th – mid- 16th century, and again in the 18th century, should not be underrated.⁵ The centrality of Venetian publishing on the international scene can be better appreciated if we consider Nuovo’s comment that:

From 1546 to 1576, Venice was almost always the principal source of books from abroad presented at Frankfurt: only once, in 1568, was it outstripped, by Antwerp. Venetians presented

3 Pedersen, *The Arabic Book*, p. 131–133. On the Medici press, see Fani, Farina (eds.), *Le vie delle Lettere*; on the Seminary Printing House in Padua, see G. Bellini, *Storia della tipografia del Seminario di Padova, 1684-1938*, Padua, 1938; on Marracci, see M. P. Pedani Fabris, “Ludovico Marracci e la conoscenza dell’Islam in Italia”, *Campus Maior*, 16, 2004, p. 7–23.

4 A reference work on Arabic printing in Venice is Vercellin, *Venezia e l’origine della stampa*.

5 For a very brief overview, see the catalog of the exhibition *Venezia città del libro: cinque secoli di editoria veneta e rassegna dell’editoria italiana contemporanea*, Venezia, Isola di San Giorgio Maggiore, 2 settembre–7 ottobre 1973, Venice, 1973. A good introduction to the history of printing in Venice in the 16th century is A. Marzo Magno, *L’alba dei libri. Quando Venezia ha fatto leggere il mondo*, Milan, 2012. Also see S. Pelusi (ed.), *La civiltà del Libro e la stampa a Venezia. Testi ebraici, cristiani, islamici dal Quattrocento al Settecento*, Padua, 2000. For a detailed description of the role of Venice in the book trade, see A. Nuovo, *The Book Trade in the Italian Renaissance*, Leiden, 2013.

an average of 52 editions each year, as compared to 32 editions from Antwerp, with Plantin alone sending an average of 14. Paris and Lyon followed at some distance.⁶

As a meaningful hint at this role, we could consider the symbol of Venice: Mark the Evangelist, protector of the city, is represented as a winged lion holding a book (St Mark's Gospel) in his paws. The priority of the printing industry in Venice cannot be understated: it dates to 1469, less than 15 years after the invention of movable type printing in Mainz. The strong interest of the government in the book manufacturing, considered an important source of income (beautiful books were highly rated and could be sold at high prices), was stirred by the Venetian defeat at Agnadello (1509) that forced the Serenissima to look for alternative sources of wealth: an economic policy and the creation of competent government bodies and specific measures, such as privileges⁷ and patents, were thus crucial in supporting the book industry. Moreover, Venice had an efficient commercial network, a strategic location at the crossroad of routes going from Aleppo and Constantinople to Southampton in England, to Germany and France, and a cosmopolitan dimension: Albanians, Armenians, Dalmatians, French, Germans, Greeks, Persians, Slavs, and Turks were part of the population, and had their own fraternities and institutions. Other factors that contributed to determining the early success of Venetian publishing were the quality of the books due to the excellent kinds of paper, elegant characters, refined images, superb bindings, easy access to raw materials, and, finally, the attractiveness of the city as a cultural hub. In this connection, it is noteworthy that the first books printed in Venice were the classics, such as Cicero's *Epistles* (1469) and the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (1470), a sign that the book industry originated in the humanities, contrary to Germany, where the first printed book was the Bible. Only later were religious books commercially produced in Venice.⁸

In the larger context of this thriving publishing activity, printing in non-Latin type is a distinguishing feature of the book industry in Venice. In July 1489, Democrito Terracina obtained from the Venetian Republic the first privilege for printing in non-Latin characters ("in lingua arabica, morescha, soriana, armenicha

⁶ Nuovo, *The Book Trade*, p. 293.

⁷ "A privilege protected the privilege holder from competition, allowing him to use a specific novelty for his sole benefit for a specific period, in the sense that potential rivals were prohibited under the threat of various sanctions from 'doing' (fare) anything 'against' (contro) the exclusive rights conceded to the privilege holder. Such a prohibition took the character of an order on the part of the authority that had conceded the privilege" (Nuovo, *The Book Trade*, p. 198).

⁸ M. Zorzi, "Il libro religioso nella storia della stampa veneziana", in Pelusi (ed.), *La civiltà del Libro e la stampa a Venezia*, p. 18.

et barbarescha”): it was valid for 25 years, and was then extended until 1538. However, Terracina and his heirs never used it.⁹

The first book to contain Greek type, Cicero's *De finibus*, can be dated to 1471, and printing presses owned by Italian and Greek printers produced books of different characters (the classics, religious texts, etc.) for centuries.¹⁰ Books in Armenian were published by the Mechitarist Congregation located on the island of San Lazzaro starting in 1512, and likewise by other printers in the city.¹¹ Hebrew books had a rather different story, as they were considered a threat to the faith, and the printing activity underwent difficult periods, culminating in the burning of books in St Mark's Square in 1535. However, a printing press for Hebrew books was established as early as 1475 in the suburbs of Venice, and a few months after the set-up of the Ghetto, established by a decree of the Senate of the Most Serene Republic of Venice issued on March 29, 1516, the first Hebrew book (the Pentateuch and Books of the Prophets, with a commentary) was printed in Daniel Bomberg's press.¹² All this is a token of the vibrant typographic activity in Venice during the Renaissance, and the case of Arabic books is a telling example of its diverse intellectual, technical, and economic aspects. Three case studies will now be taken into consideration: the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, the “mysterious” Venetian Qur'ān, and the multilingual calligraphic tables.

3 Case studies

3.1 *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*

The case of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, a work ascribed to Francesco Colonna, is a good example of the lively intellectual life of Venice and the interaction between humanists and printers that is a peculiar feature of the history of printing there. Published by the famous humanist and printer Aldo Manuzio, the founder of the Aldine Press (b. in Bassiano, Lazio, c. 1449/1452 – d. in Venice, February 6, 1515),

⁹ On this case see, among others, the detailed analysis of Gianni, Tagliabracci, “*Kitāb ṣalāt al-sawāʾ*”, p. 167–173.

¹⁰ Zorzi, “Il libro religioso nella storia della stampa veneziana”, p. 22–24; for a brief overview of Greek books printed in Venice, see *Venezia città del libro*, p. 89–93.

¹¹ For a brief outline, see Zorzi, “Il libro religioso nella storia della stampa veneziana”, p. 24–25; *Venezia città del libro*, p. 97–99.

¹² Zorzi, “Il libro religioso nella storia della stampa veneziana”, p. 25–26; G. Tamani, “Edizioni ebraiche veneziane dei secoli XVI–XVIII”, in Pelusi (ed.), *La civiltà del Libro e la stampa a Venezia*, p. 29–36; *Venezia città del libro*, p. 123–125.

the *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* is one of the most famous and admired incunables. The Aldine Press, established in 1494 in Venice, whose first publication was issued in March 1495, became famous for its editions of the Latin and Greek classics, for the aesthetic quality of its type, and its innovations in typographic practices, such as the introduction of italics and the adoption of the small octavo size, an element that enormously enhanced the transportability of books and made them easier to read. Among the splendid books printed by Manuzio, *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* (litt., *Poliphilus's Amorous Fight in a Dream*) stands out as an amazing textual and iconographic program: defined by some as “the most beautiful printed book of all times and all countries”,¹³ it is an allegorical work whose authorship remains uncertain.¹⁴ Printed in 1499 and enriched with 169 beautiful woodcuts, it is characterized by its multilingual dimension: it contains, alongside over 70 Latin, Greek, and “hieroglyphic” inscriptions, three in Arabic.¹⁵ Noteworthy are the two epigraphs incorporated in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*: one is bilingual Greek-Arabic, and the other, much more complex, is quadrilingual, Arabic-Hebrew-Greek-Latin.¹⁶ The first epigraph (B 7r) contains only three words in two different scripts (Fig. 1): the words “pain and intelligence”¹⁷ in Greek letters, placed on three lines (ΠΙΝΟΣ ΚΑΙ ΕΥΦΥΙΑ), and “fatigue and knowledge” in Arabic letters, placed on two lines (*tā'āb* [sic] *wa-ma'rifa*). Peculiar flaws of the Arab script are the wrong position of the dot of *bā'*, and the missing dots of the *tā' marbūṭa*. More interesting are the two

13 Venezia città del libro, p. 9: “Il Polifilo è, fuor di dubbio, il più bel libro a stampa di tutti i tempi e di tutti i paesi”.

14 A description in Vercellin, *Venezia e l'origine della stampa*, p. 53–57. For an in-depth study of this book in its multicultural and multilingual aspects, see A. M. Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe nella *Poliphili Hypnerotomachia*”, in Ch. Burnett, A. Contadini (eds.), *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, London, 1999, p. 199–220; A. Klimkiewicz, “Cultura sincretica dell'*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* di Francesco Colonna”, *Cuadernos de Filología Italiana*, 21, 2014, p. 181–194.

15 Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe”, p. 207, qualifies it as the first Arabic text published in print in the world (“Si ha così il primo testo arabo pubblicato a stampa nel mondo”), but this statement should be nuanced: if “Arabic” is referring to the type, the first specimen of Arabic printing in Europe is the alphabet table contained in *Peregrinatio in terram sanctam* of Bernhard von Breidenbach, Mainz, 1486 (see below, section 3.3).

16 See Vercellin, *Venezia e l'origine della stampa*, p. 53–57; Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe”.

17 The reading of the Greek ΕΥΦΥΙΑ as “intelligence, ability to understand the world” departs from the reading of other scholars (I thank my colleague Bishara Ebeid for pointing this out). They translate “industria” (industriousness), like Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe”, p. 208, quoting the Italian translation on H 6r of *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* as “...prossimo al greco, ma non precisamente corrispondente dell'arabo...”, and Vercellin, *Venezia e l'origine della stampa*, p. 54, or “operosità” (industriousness), as well as Klimkiewicz, “Cultura sincretica dell'*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*”, p. 187. In fact, there is no discrepancy between the Greek ΕΥΦΥΙΑ and the Arabic *ma'rifa*, as the above studies suggest.

alifs wrongly inserted in the word *tā'āb*, probably because this was useful to make reading unambiguous by marking the vowels (usually not indicated in Arabic), and to align the word. All this considered, it seems plausible that the epigraphist was an Italian erudite and not a speaker of Arabic.¹⁸

The second epigraph (H 8r), which conveys a more complex and multifaceted iconographic program, is contained in the representation of three doors (“three doors or choices of the realm of Queen Telosia”),¹⁹ each with multilingual titles written in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Arabic (Fig. 2). The three titles in Arabic are, from right to left, *majd al-dunyā* (corresponding to the Greek ΘΕΟΔΟΣΙΑ and the Latin *Gloria Dei*), *umm al-maḥabba* (corresponding to the Greek ΕΡΩΤΟΤΡΟΦΟΣ and the Latin *Mater Amoris*), and *majd Allāh* (corresponding to the Greek ΚΟΣΜΟΔΟΣΙΑ and the Latin *Gloria Mundi*). The first and third Arabic inscriptions are inverted and do not correspond to the Greek and Latin ones mentioned immediately below. For brevity's sake, we do not intend to discuss the asymmetry of the Arabic inscriptions, but their position and dimensions are worth consideration. As already stressed by scholars, the upper position, the larger dimensions, and the magnificent calligraphic style confer to the Arabic prominence over the other languages; this prominence is echoed in the words of Beltramo Mignanelli (1370-1455), a merchant and humanist from Siena, fluent in Arabic, who stated that *nec est sub celo ydioma majus illo* (“there is no greater language under the sky”).²⁰ This sentence is a token of the superior rank attributed to Arabic due to its circulation across three continents, which confirms the integration of Arabic into the intellectual education in humanistic circles: knowledge of Arabic and the study of Arabic texts were indeed progressively integrated into the foundations of Renaissance culture.

The religious factor was also relevant in this context: Arabic, along with Hebrew, Latin, and Syriac, were the languages shared by Christian communities, and texts such as the Psalter represented a common basis of textual comparison. The literary canon emerging from this integration included classical Latin and Greek texts along with Hebrew, Arabic, and “Chaldean” (biblical Aramaic). The case of Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494) and his passion for Hebrew, Arabic, and Chaldean studies represents the culmination of this scholarly tendency. Arabic manuscripts were thus collected and studied throughout the 15th century, notably

¹⁸ This is the hypothesis put forward by Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe”, p. 209, who also gives a detailed analysis of the two scriptural peculiarities of the epigraph.

¹⁹ In an ethical-philosophical context, the right side usually represents virtue, and the left side represents pleasure. The presence of the middle door indicates a third way, pointing to the importance of Venus. For this interpretation of the three doors in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, see Klimkiewicz, “Cultura sincretica dell’*Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*”, p. 190–192.

²⁰ Cf. Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe”, p. 211.

among the Jewish community in Sicily and the area between Tuscany, Urbino, and Rome.²¹

3.2 The Venetian Qur'ān

The case of the so-called “Venetian Qur'ān”, whose rediscovery decades ago thrilled the historians of printing, can be taken as a case in point of the Venetian printers' entrepreneurial audacity and technical expertise. Information about a “mysterious” Qur'ān²² entirely printed in Arabic in Venice in the 1530s had been circulating for decades, but no one had seen this book for centuries, and many doubted its very existence. The “Venetian Qur'ān”, Thomas Erpenius stated, was lost because all the copies were burned (*exemplaria omnia cremata sunt*)²³ shortly after publication. The book thus remained shrouded in mystery until 1987, when Angela Nuovo, an Italian scholar who was carrying out a study on Paganini's typography, discovered the only extant copy of the book, printed by Alessandro Paganini between 1537 and 1538.²⁴ The discovery had a wide echo outside Italy and the article published by Angela Nuovo was soon translated into English and Arabic.²⁵

This unique piece, mentioned in the catalog as *Alcoranus arabicus sine notis*, was at that time kept in the Franciscan Monastery of San Michele in Isola (the cemetery of Venice). Later, to protect it from humidity and secure better conservation conditions, it was moved to the library of the Franciscan Monastery of San Francesco della Vigna in Venice, where it remains to this day. How this copy arrived in Venice remains a mystery: the copy was in fact the property of Teseo Ambrogio degli Albonesi, an Arabist from Pavia (d. after 1540), and was later owned by Fr Mancasula de Asula, vicar of the Holy Office in Cremona and Inquisitor General of Como.²⁶

The nature of the Venetian Qur'ān is debated. The printed copies were probably destroyed before being completed: in the specimen, pagination and collation are missing, and the page margins are wide, probably so conceived to be decorated later, as customary in manuscript copies of the Qur'ān. Moreover, the last

²¹ See Piemontese, “Le iscrizioni arabe”, p. 200–206.

²² “... un mystérieux *Coran*”, in Balagna, *L'Imprimerie arabe en Occident*, Paris, 1995, p. 23.

²³ Cf. A. Nuovo, “La scoperta del Corano arabo, ventisei anni dopo: un riesame”, *Nuovi annali della Scuola speciale per archivisti e bibliotecari*, 27, 2013, p. 13.

²⁴ A. Nuovo, “Il Corano ritrovato” (Venezia P. e A. Paganini, tra l'agosto 1537 e l'agosto 1538), *La Bibliofilia*, 89, 1987, p. 237–271.

²⁵ Nuovo, “La scoperta del Corano arabo”, p. 12, n. 5.

²⁶ See M. Borrmans, “Présentation de la première édition imprimée du Coran à Venise”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 9, 1991, p. 96.

page contains the first four verses of *Sūrat al-Baqara*, without a title.²⁷ If, as some argue,²⁸ the extant copy could thus be considered a draft print (and not the Qur'ān printed in Venice in Maghribi style alluded to in the correspondence between Guillaume Postel and Tomaso degli Albonesi),²⁹ the Venetian Qur'ān printed by Alessandro Paganini remains to be found.³⁰ The hypothesis that we are dealing with a draft print was nevertheless discarded by Angela Nuovo on the basis of technical elements, such as the excellent quality of the paper, which is unjustified for a draft copy, and historical information about a printed copy of the Qur'ān brought to Constantinople by a Venetian merchant, who was sentenced to death because printing the Qur'ān was forbidden and the text was also full of errors.³¹

The reason for this risky, innovative (and visionary) enterprise seems to be exclusively commercial: the printer, Alessandro Paganini, hoped to sell the book in the Levantine market, aiming to make lavish profits. However, he seriously underestimated the scope of this venture: apart from the technical aspects (like the complexity and peculiarities of Arabic spelling and script), he did not consider the cultural context and miscalculated the commercial risks. His enterprise thus resulted in failure. An extensive examination of the text shows aesthetic, linguistic, and spelling deficiencies which are sufficient to explain why the enterprise failed. We have no information about those who collaborated to produce this Qur'ān printed with movable type, and we do not know what expertise was secured in order to achieve this operation, but is it obvious that the Arabic text cannot be the result of collaboration with a competent Arabic speaker, and that the Paganini were “victim[s] of their Oriental informants or their consultants in Oriental sciences”.³² Leaving aside the inelegant typefaces, the spelling is quite problematic: for instance, *hamza* and *mādda* are totally missing, *dāl* is systematically replaced with *dhāl*, *thā'* with *tā'*, *shadda* is used only for God's name, and *sīn* is topped by a small

27 Borrmans, “Présentation de la première édition”, p. 99. Borrmans puts forward the hypothesis of an Italian humanist not entirely familiar with the Arabic script, nor with the attitude of the Muslims towards their Holy Book (p. 124).

28 A. M. Piemontese, “Il Corano latino di Ficino e i Corani arabi di Pico e Monchates”, *Rinascimento*, 36, 1996, p. 257–258; Borrmans (“Présentation de la première édition”, p. 123) seems to share this opinion.

29 Vercellin, *Venezia e l'origine della stampa*, p. 88; Piemontese, “Il Corano latino di Ficino”, p. 257; E. Barbieri, “La tipografia araba a Venezia nel XVI secolo: una testimonianza d'archivio dimenticata”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 9, 1991, p. 130, and references therein.

30 “Quindi, se stampato in caratteri punici o maghrebini, il Corano prodotto dall'officina di Paganini resta da trovare”, cf. Piemontese, “Il Corano latino di Ficino”, p. 258.

31 Nuovo, “La scoperta del Corano arabo”, p. 17–18.

32 Borrmans, “Présentation de la première édition”, p. 98.

v or the *tanwīn* of *ḍamma*. The text contains other peculiarities, the worst of all being the total absence of *kasra* and *ḍamma*, so that the only vowel sign in the text is *fatḥa*. Other textual anomalies are also to be noticed – notably, the wrong titles of the *sūras*, their inaccurate attribution to the Medinan or Meccan periods, and the fanciful rendering of numerals extensively written in letters. Mistakes in the spelling of words, which result in changes in the text, are so numerous and so awful that Muslims could not help but see this as a blasphemous falsification of their Holy Book.³³ The poor quality of the text was even more of a serious hindrance if we consider that forgery (*taḥrīf*) of the sacred text (which in this case would have been distributed in many copies) was considered a serious crime, and the fear of forgery was at the basis of the suspicion with which Muslims viewed printing.³⁴

Alessandro Paganini was a skillful typographic technician able to print in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew type. He had developed a new book format and designed various series of typefaces. But why and how exactly did he embark on the risky project of printing the Qurʾān? This was an expensive undertaking implying elements that had to be carefully evaluated, and the risks could not be underrated: it needed over 600 different typefaces, trustworthy typesetters, proofreaders fluent in Arabic, and a reliable text of the Holy Book. The explanation should probably be sought in the Paganini family's network of relations, which included kinship with the Gabiani, wealthy and important book merchants, and the Vuković family, whose trade network extended from Dalmatia, Albania, Hungary and the Romanian Principalities to Constantinople. The printing of the Qurʾān can be explained in the broad context of the interests of a trading company with good relations in the Levant and in relation to the production of liturgical and religious books in

33 See a fine-grained description and analysis of all the mistakes in Borrmans, "Présentation de la première édition", p. 99–104.

34 See, for example, Muhsin Mahdi: "[...] the disturbing manner in which European printers took liberties with the text of the Koran (when compared to the care taken in printing the Gutenberg Bible, for instance) could not but raise doubts among Muslims regarding the virtues of printing when they first encountered the new technology. One look at the title page of the Koran printed in Hamburg in 1694 [...] must have made Muslim readers of the Koran think that only the Devil himself could have produced such an ugly and faulty version of their Holy Book; and the same must have been the impression made on them by Alessandro de Paganino's Venice Koran printed in the 1530s, where the printer, perhaps following some contemporary Arabic vernacular, did not distinguish between certain letters of the alphabet, such as the *dāl* and *dhāl*", cf. M. Mahdi, "From the Manuscript Age to the Age of Printed Books", in G. N. Atiyeh (ed.), *The Book in the Islamic World: The Written Word and Communication in the Middle East*, Washington, DC, 1995, p. 1. See also Borrmans, "Présentation de la première édition", p. 98.

non-Latin type to be exported to the Levant as far as Constantinople.³⁵ Nevertheless, this solid commercial and technical background was not enough to guarantee the success of the enterprise.

3.3 Multilingual Calligraphic Tables

The case of calligraphic tables containing Arabic letters, perhaps a less-known topic, is a telling example of the relevance of Venice in the intellectual panorama of the Italian Renaissance and of its role in the diffusion of the Arabic alphabet in Italy. Printing in Arabic is not just a technical matter, but, as duly emphasized by Michele Angelo Piemontese, should be considered in the frame of the interconnected activities of travelers, informants, scientists, scholars, publishers, and printers, all creating a “network of orientalist interests”.³⁶ The first example ever of a printed Arabic alphabet table was produced in Mainz in 1486: it is included in the *Peregrinatio in terram sanctam (Pilgrimage in the Holy Land)*, the travelogue of Bernhard von Breidenbach (c. 1440–1497) describing his itinerary from Venice to Jerusalem and back (Fig. 3). The title of the table refers to the “Arabic language and letters” used by the Saracens (*Sarraceni lingua et littera utuntur Arabica hic inferius subimpressa*). The woodcut table contains thirty Arabic alphabetic signs altogether, each accompanied by the corresponding name in Latin characters. The last box on the left contains the words *wa-l-salām*, the first instance of a phrase in the Arabic language printed in Europe in Arabic type, thus predating the phrases contained in *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* printed by Aldo Manuzio in 1499.³⁷

Although Venetian printers could not claim chronological primacy in this field, they undoubtedly played a crucial part in boosting Arabic printing in Italy. We have already mentioned the case of the first privilege for printing in non-Latin characters granted to Democrito Terracina in 1489: his printing press possessed a wide range of “Oriental” typefaces, which required not only the expertise of calligraphers skilled in non-Latin alphabets, but also the acquisition of manuscripts that could serve as models for designing and producing these typefaces. Between the end of the 14th century and the beginning of the 15th century, the humanist art of

35 For all the issues related to the Qur’ān of Paganini, the context in which it originated, and the reasons for its printing, see Nuovo, “La scoperta del Corano arabo”, p. 19–23, and Nuovo, *The Book Trade*, p. 79–80.

36 M. A. Piemontese, “Venezia e la diffusione dell’alfabeto arabo nell’Italia del Cinquecento”, *Quaderni di Studi Arabi*, 5–6, 1987–1988, p. 641.

37 A description of the travelogue of Bernhard von Breidenbach in Vercellin, *Venezia e l’origine della stampa*, p. 98–102 (p. 101–102 for the table).

calligraphy, already well practiced for the Latin alphabet, was implemented with “Oriental” letters. Consequently, treatises of calligraphy, both theoretical and practical, started to include the Arabic alphabet in its Oriental and Maghribi variants. The first overt manifestation of this practice is attested in Venice: in 1524, Giovanni Antonio Tagliente (c. 1465/1470 – 1527/1530), a master of writing, printed a calligraphic album entitled *Lo presente libro insegna la vera arte delo eccellente scrivere de diverse varie sorti de lettere, le quali se fano per geometrica ragione*, which contains a table of the Arabic alphabet (Fig. 4).³⁸

Tagliente’s treatise, along with others, circulated in Italy and Europe and boosted the wide circulation of Arabic alphabet tables. The table of Arabic type could be considered the first example of the Arabic alphabet not issued from a scholarly orientalist milieu.³⁹ Though the presence of some drawbacks (the dot of the letter *bā’* is misplaced because of clumsy carving, the *lām-alif* is split into two boxes and, as a consequence, an odd *hā’* is wrongly labelled *alif*, while the correct *hā’* is labelled as *nula*, i.e., a non-alphabetic sign), it depicts in general a faithful rendition of the Arabic letters in their isolated form. The mapping of the diffusion of the Arabic alphabet includes Persians, Arabs, Africans, Tartars (*Questo alphabetto serue a persi harabi aphricani turchi & tartari*), thus covering the “ethnic areas” where Arabic script was in use. It is worth noticing that this “ethnic” description denotes a very different approach from that of Bernhard von Breidenbach, who preferred the overarching term of “Saracens” (*Sarraceni*).⁴⁰ The number of editions and reprints testifies to the fortune of Tagliente’s treatise: it was published twice in 1524, three times in 1525, and once in 1534, and there are at least thirty reprints in Venice, and at least one outside Italy (Antwerp, 1545).⁴¹ A similar calligraphic table was included by Giovanbattista Palatino (1515–1575?), with the title *Alphabetum Arabum*, in his *Compendio del gran volume del’arte del bene et leggiadramente scrivere*, published in 1540 in Rome.⁴² These two tables were useful handbooks for collectors of alphabets and people curious about foreign languages.

Another meaningful case that testifies to the vibrant activity of Venetian printers and their entrepreneurship, though less well known, is the privilege granted to Antonio Brucioli (1495–1566), a Florentine humanist exiled to Venice, where he and his brothers operated a printing press that produced Hebrew books. This

³⁸ See a description of Tagliente’s table in Vercellin, *Venezia e l’origine della stampa*, p. 76–80.

³⁹ Piemontese, “Venezia e la diffusione dell’alfabeto arabo”, p. 645.

⁴⁰ As stressed by Vercellin, *Venezia e l’origine della stampa*, p. 80.

⁴¹ Piemontese, “Venezia e la diffusione dell’alfabeto arabo”, p. 646.

⁴² See a description in Vercellin, *Venezia e l’origine della stampa*, p. 82–85. See also Piemontese, “Venezia e la diffusione dell’alfabeto arabo”, p. 646–647.

privilege, dated January 15, 1544, covers an Arabic alphabet that, it is stated, was invented by Brucioli himself.⁴³ The document is quite interesting since it refers to a very specific series of Arabic typefaces, including ligatures, which were probably intended to reproduce cursive writing, and the different shapes taken by the letters in context. The nature of these characters remains obscure: we have no information whether Brucioli ever designed or cast type, and in those years the only printing press possessing an entire set of fonts, with all their shortcomings, was that of the Paganino family. At the current state of our knowledge, and in the absence of further information, the privilege granted to Brucioli could be taken as a hint at his desire to use, sell, or grant to other printers, in Italy or even abroad, the hypothetical fonts that he would have created. At that time, the real challenge for the international typographic market was in fact the creation of a complete set of fonts adaptable to the use of the *tashkīl* (i.e., the use of orthographic signs to indicate vowels, which are added to letters to aid pronunciation, as only consonants are usually written in Arabic script). The printer who could have manufactured it would have made a fortune from this. The mystery remains to be solved, but this minor episode adds another piece to the mosaic that depicts the attractiveness of Venice as a cultural hub, the entrepreneurial spirit of its printers, and the breadth of vision of the actors of the Venetian publishing market.

43 See Barbieri, “La tipografia araba a Venezia”.



Fig. 1: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Venice, Aldus Manutius, 1499. Bibliothèque municipale de Toulouse, B 7r (<https://gallica.bnf.fr>).

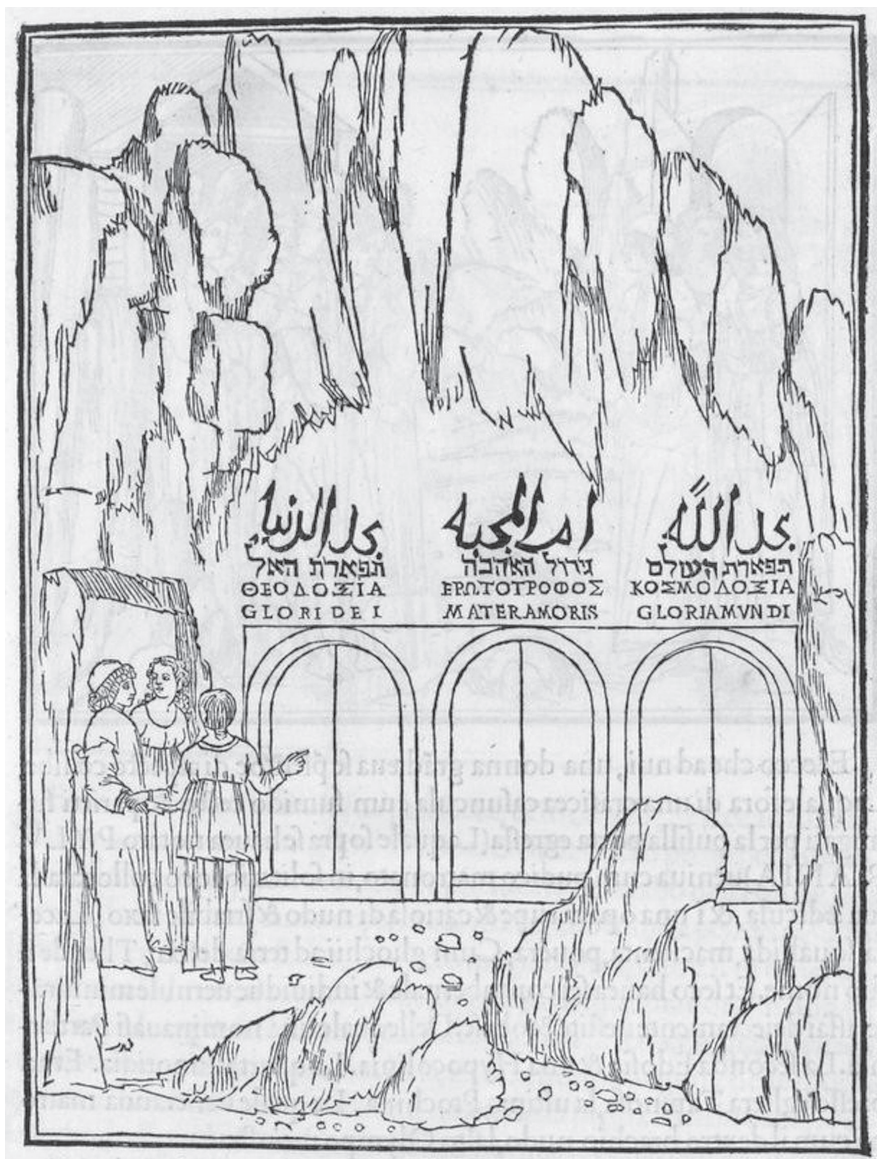


Fig. 2: *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili*, Venice, Aldus Manutius, 1499. Bibliothèque municipale de Toulouse, H 8r (<https://gallica.bnf.fr>).

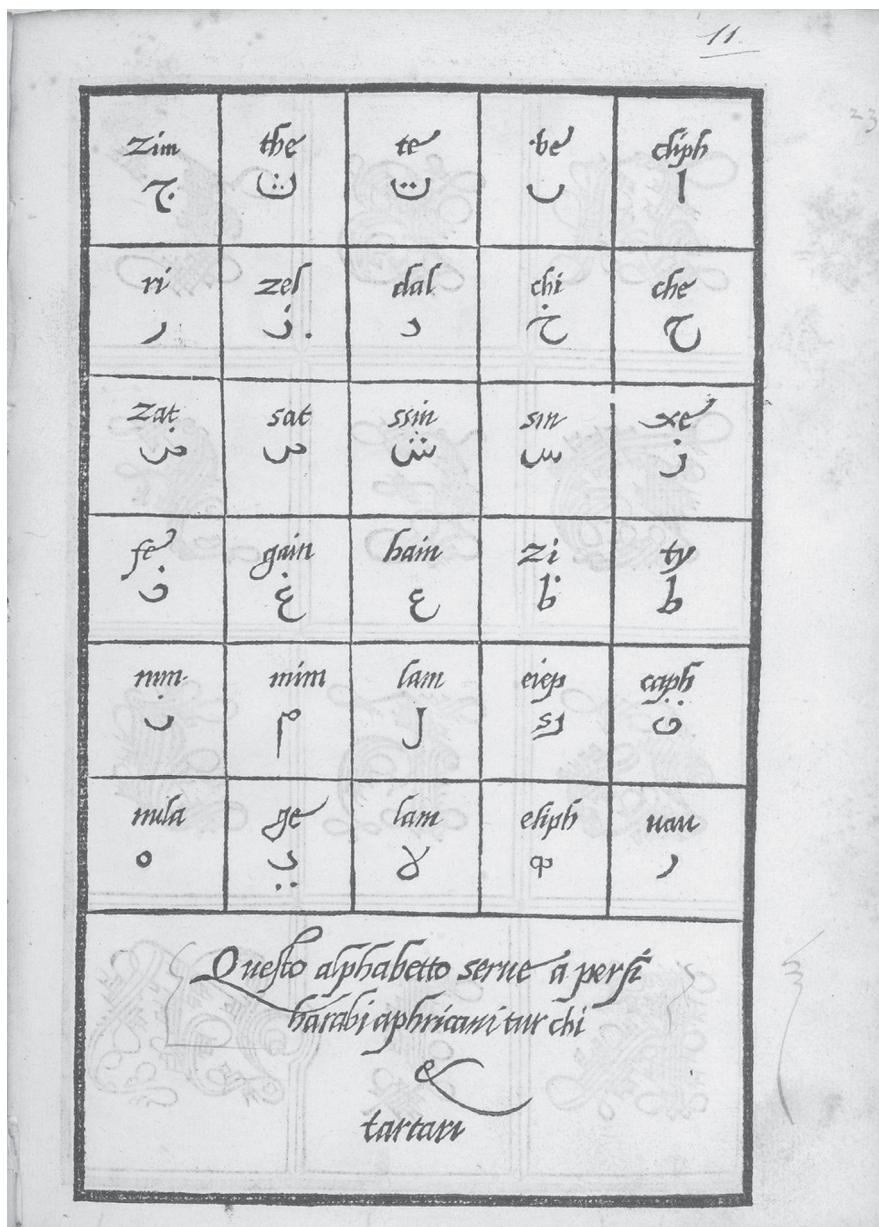


Fig. 4: Giovanni Antonio Tagliente, *Lo Presente libro insegna la vera arte delo eccellente scrivere de diverse varie sorti de lettere, le quali se fanno per geometrica ragione... Opera del Tagliente novamente composta... nel anno...MDXXIII*, Antwerp, 1545. Bibliothèque nationale de France, Département Arsenal, 4-S-3924 (1), E 1v (<https://gallica.bnf.fr>).

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