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Kufesque between Pilgrimage and Polemic: representations of Arabic in Italian Altarpieces, 13th-15th centuries¹

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Representations of Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces of the medieval and Renaissance periods remain something of an enigma. They primarily appear in the haloes and borders of textiles worn by Mary, Jesus, and Christian saints beginning in the 12th century (**Figs. 1-2**). Although antiquarians and art historians of the 18th and 19th centuries remarked upon their presence, the first attempts to provide historical accounts of the enigmatic inscriptions were not undertaken until the early 20th century,² when the study of Islamic art was emerging as an autonomous field within European art history. The European concept of Islamic art then emphasized the unifying and ahistorical nature of arabesques: that is, repetitive linear abstractions of plant forms, understood as

¹ I would like to thank Joseph Ackley for inviting me to present on this subject as part of Wesleyan's Medieval Studies Lecture Series in 2019. I would also like to thank members of the University of Connecticut's Early Modern Studies Working Group who provided feedback for my paper in 2020. Additionally, I would like to thank Holly Flora, Andrea Celli, and the anonymous reader for providing suggestions as I prepared the paper for publication. The research for this article was supported by a Rush H. Kress fellowship at Harvard University's Villa I Tatti in Florence, Italy.

² Gustave Soulier, *Les influences orientales dans la peinture Toscane* (Paris: Laurens, 1924).

complementary to the calligraphic arts of Quranic Arabic.³ During the first half of the 20th century, the study of Arabic scripts in European art became associated with the concept of the arabesque, as the term *kufesque* emerged as a portmanteau of Kufic and arabesque to describe ornamental play upon Arabic scripts.⁴ Studies of *kufesque* implied or directly asserted that representations of Arabic scripts by European artists could be attributed to a decorative impulse, originating from within Islamic art, that tended towards meaningless abstraction of natural forms.⁵ *Kufesque* was, in this way, characterized as an effect of the influence of Islamic art and as a marginal, ornamental element within the figural order of Italian

³ Finbarr Barry Flood, "Picasso the Muslim. Or, how the *Bilderverbot* became modern (Part 1)," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 67/8 (2017): 42-60. Finbarr Barry Flood, "Picasso the Muslim. Or, how the *Bilderverbot* became modern (Part 2)," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 69/70 (2018): 251-68. Gülru Necipoglu, *The Topkapı Scroll: Geometry and Ornament in Islamic Architecture: Topkapı Palace Library MS H. 1956* (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities, 1995).

⁴ Richard Ettinghausen, "Kufesque in Byzantine Greece, the Latin west, and in the Muslim World," *A Colloquium in Memory of George Carpenter Miles (1904-1975)* (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1976), 28-47. Gustave Soulier, "Les caractères coufiques dans la peinture toscane," *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts/ Fondée Par Charles Blanc* 5 (1924): 347-358. Ennio Napolitano, *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions in Italian Art* (PhD dissertation, Otto-Friedrich-Universität, Bamberg, 2019), 3. Maria Vittoria Fontana, *Islam and the West: Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions* (Mantua: Universitas Studiorum, 2020).

⁵ There are numerous examples, to cite just a few: Henri Lavoix, "Les arts musulmans: De l'ornementation arabe dans les oeuvres des maitres italiennes," *Gazette Des Beaux Arts* 16 (1877): 15-29. Archibald Christie, "The Development of Ornament from Arabic Script," *The Burlington Magazine for Connoisseurs* 40.231 (1922): 287-292. Kurt Erdmann, *Arabische Schriftzeichen als Ornamente in der abendländischen Kunst des Mittelalters* (Mainz: Akademie der Wissenschaftler und der literatur in Mainz, 1953).



Figure 1 Cimabue, *Maestà*, c. 1280. Department of Paintings of the Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.



Figure 2 Cimabue, detail of *Maestà*, c. 1280. Department of Paintings of the Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

altarpieces.⁶ Such scripts were most often incorporated into representations of border elements, especially on textiles; the manifestly marginal visual character of kufesque within Italian painting and its association with applied or decorative arts facilitated its bracketing out as a framing element, conceptually detachable from the figural subject.⁷

Questions nonetheless recurred about the possible presence and significance of legible Arabic words, and specifically allusions to the Islamic faith. The question crystallized around representations of Arabic in haloes honoring the Virgin Mary.⁸ Of all the examples of Arabic scripts in Italian painting, these are the most associated with the sacred status of Mary as the mother of Jesus and are also the most visually ambiguous. The scripts often appear as letters of pure gold leaf emerging against a background of tooled or granulated gold,⁹ so photography often fails to capture the contours of these inscriptions. Despite these visual ambiguities, art historians particularly noted the appearance of what appeared to be Allah, الله, Arabic for God (written without any

⁶ Soulier, *Les influences orientales*. Leonardo Olschki, "Asiatic Exoticism in Italian Art of the Early Renaissance," *The Art Bulletin* 24 (1944): 95-106. Sibylla Schuster-Walser, "Arabische Schriftzeichen in der Renaissancemalerei," *Zeitschrift Der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 128 (1978): 90-97.

⁷ On the relationship between Renaissance ornamental arts and concepts of applied or decorative arts, see Alina Payne, *L'architecture parmi les arts: matérialité, transferts et travail artistique dans l'Italie de la Renaissance* (Paris: Hazan, 2016).

⁸ Vera-Simone Schulz, "Bild, Ding, Material: Nimben und Goldgründe italienischer Tafelmalerei in transkultureller Perspektive," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 79.4 (2016): 508-541.

⁹ Vera-Simone Schulz, "Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light: Prolegomena on the Pseudo-Inscribed Haloes in Giotto's Madonna di San Giorgio alla Costa and Masaccio's San Giovenale Triptych," *Mitteilungen des Kunsthistorischen Institutes in Florenz* 58.1 (2016): 59-93, 73.

diacritics). Others suggested the possible presence of the entire declaration of the Islamic faith, commonly known as the Shahada (literally: testimony):

لَا إِلَهَ إِلَّا اللَّهُ مُحَمَّدٌ رَسُولُ اللَّهِ

(There is no deity but Allah. Muhammad is the messenger of Allah).

Rudolf Sellheim, for example, writing in the 1960s, made this argument specifically in reference to an early 15th-century altarpiece painted by Masaccio (1426) (**Fig. 3**), claiming that the entirety of the Shahada was legible within the inscriptions radiating

Figure 3
Masaccio,
San
Giovenale
triptych
(detail).
Museo
Masaccio,
Cascia di
Reggello.
Photo:
Wikimedia,
Public
Domain.



around the head of Mary.¹⁰ At stake were the perceived boundaries between Western and Islamic art, and specifically questions about the potential for the Islamic religion to penetrate European culture, understood as essentially Christian.

Even though Rudolf Sellheim's argument regarding the presence of the Shahada in Masaccio's San Giovenale altarpiece has since been rejected by the majority of art historians, the idea of hidden references to Quranic Arabic has recurred in different contexts.¹¹ The visual elusiveness of these inscriptions, and the simplicity of some of the most basic words in the Arabic Shahada, especially Allah – which is essentially a sequence of three vertical lines linked together with a final loop – make it impossible to definitively say, in almost every case, whether the Italian painter intended the viewer to “read” any specific Arabic words. Until this point, the majority of studies of representations of Arabic script in Italian altarpieces have remained focused on this question of whether Arabic pseudo-scripts were decorative or contained hidden messages.¹² I would like to broaden the scope of the question, to consider larger contexts of pilgrimage and polemic, in which Italians explored the relationships between Islam and Christianity, in a way that challenges still-dominating assumptions regarding hard

¹⁰ Rudolf Sellheim, “Die Madonna mit die Schahada,” in Erwin Graf, ed. *Festschrift Werner Caschel zum siebzigsten Geburtstag* (Leiden: Brill, 1966), 308-315. Schulz, “Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light.”

¹¹ Martin Forstner, “Zur Madonna mit der Šahāda,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 122 (1972): 102–107. Franco Cardini, “Un esercizio d’orientalismo? A proposito della ‘shahada’ sul nimbo della Vergine,” in Caterina Caneva, ed., *Orientalismi e iconografia cristiana nel trittico di San Giovenale di Masaccio* (Florence: Puntostampa, 1999), 28-36.

¹² On the problems associated with the term pseudo-script, or pseudo-inscription, see Don Aanavi, *Islamic Pseudo-inscriptions* (PhD Thesis, Columbia University, 1969), 1-3.

boundaries between the cultures associated with the two religions.¹³ Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces lose some of their apparent strangeness and sense of transgression if we confront our own assumptions about the inherently oppositional nature of Christian and Islamic cultures. At the same time, by approaching kufesque elements of Italian altarpieces as parts of complex spaces of cultural encounter and translation, we can perhaps form a more nuanced historical understanding of perceptions of distinctions between the image culture of figurative European art and the supposedly non-image culture of Islamic art.¹⁴

Translation from Arabic

My interpretation of representations of Arabic in Italian altarpieces is offered to complement, rather than contradict, the idea that Arabic pseudo-scripts in Italian painting reflected the perceived importance of Arabic as a sacred language, associated with Biblical antiquity in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt.¹⁵ Arabic was not only understood as a sacred language of great antiquity, but also as a living aspect of vibrant Islamic cultures in those same regions and beyond. Beginning in the 12th century, Arabic versions of ancient Greek philosophical treatises were translated into Latin and other

¹³ Steven Epstein, *Purity Lost: Transgressing Boundaries in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1000-1400* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007).

¹⁴ Hans Belting, *Florence and Baghdad: Renaissance Art and Arab Science*, trans. Deborah Lucas Schneider (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2011).

¹⁵ Alexander Nagel, "Twenty-five notes on pseudo-script in Italian art," *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* 59/60 (2011): 228-48.

European languages. This translation movement, sometimes referred to as the Renaissance of the 12th century, was associated with key centers of polyglot learning, like Toledo, Palermo, Salerno, and Pisa, but the effects were diffuse, as works by Aristotle, Plato, and many other Greek philosophers were received through the lens of Arabic intermediaries throughout Europe.¹⁶ Arabic was not just associated with sacred texts of Biblical antiquity, but also with divine knowledge, as study of philosophy, medicine, and science more generally was characterized in this period. In the 12th and 13th centuries, mendicant friars and preachers, too, actively engaged with the question of Islam's relationship to Christianity, while pilgrims from various backgrounds communicated observations about Islamic worship experienced throughout the Eastern Mediterranean region. Yet the insistence that Arabic script in an Italian context was inherently meaningless, constituting nonsensical decorative elements without any authentic relationship to Islamic or Arabic culture, has ignored this larger context.

Although many modern studies have employed terms suggesting that Christian sacred images were like territory transgressed or infiltrated by Islamic culture, there is little evidence of such perceptions within the period itself. That representations of Arabic script within Italian altarpieces were essentially decorative has most recently been asserted by arguing that Italian artists were not aware of any potential content of

¹⁶ Charles H. Haskins, *The Renaissance of the Twelfth Century* (New York: Meridian Books, 1959). Robert G. Morrison, *Texts in Transit in the Medieval Mediterranean* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2016).

Arabic words, including Allah, which they may have copied from already debased inscriptions on minor decorative arts, like ceramics and textiles, imported to Italy.¹⁷ Yet, the representations of Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces, and the visual and semantic ambiguities of the resulting forms – both within the period and to history – challenge the historian’s desire for a single reading of the phenomenon. Likewise, by thinking about the Christian context for both altarpieces and related objects, my interpretation challenges still-prevalent assumptions that objects associated with Islamic art necessarily lost any relationship to religious contexts when they passed into a secular field of ornament whose primary values related to commerce and the display of wealth and prestige.¹⁸ Such interpretations perpetuate larger assumptions of fundamental distinctions between a secular artistic culture of an emergent modernity in Renaissance Italy in contrast to the unchanging medieval religiosity of the Islamic world.¹⁹ The emphasis upon objects as autonomous modes of transmission for decorative Arabic scripts also ignores the contemporary culture of Arabic study, including translations of philosophical works, interpretations of the Quran, and observations of key phrases and linguistic features associated with the experiences of Italian travelers throughout the Arabic-speaking world.

¹⁷ Napolitano, *Arabic inscriptions and pseudo-inscriptions*.

¹⁸ See for example Maria Ruvoldt, “Sacred to Secular, East to West: the Renaissance Study and Strategies of Display,” *Renaissance Studies* 20.5 (2006): 640–657.

¹⁹ Finbarr Barry Flood, “From the Prophet to Postmodernism?: New World Orders and the End of Islamic Art,” in Elizabeth C. Mansfield, ed., *Making Art History* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2007), 31-53.

Rather than transgression, infiltration, or even influence, each of which suggest contamination of the purely Christian nature of altarpieces dedicated to the Virgin Mary, I would suggest that we consider the conceptual models of cultural translation and convergence.²⁰ Such concepts help to situate Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces within a multi-directional flow of people, texts, and objects, the complexities of which could only be partially evoked by a single painting. By alluding to these concepts, I am building upon the recent contributions of scholars who have turned attention to the role of portable objects in creating cultural links that crossed both linguistic and religious boundaries throughout the Mediterranean region and beyond.²¹ But I also specifically would like to explore more abstract and less-easily documented aspects of spatial convergence and cultural translation. To what extent Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces could be considered as a pictorial counterpart to the integration of Arabic philosophy into Christian theology and related textual arguments for Islam's relationship to Christianity is also examined.²²

²⁰ On the particularly problematic usage of the term influence within histories of European art in relation to the concept of the arabesque within Islamic art, see Flood, "Picasso the Muslim." On the idea of convergence in the study of cultural history, see Homi K. Bhabha, "Introduction" in Diana Sorensen and Homi K. Bhabha, eds., *Territories and Trajectories: Cultures in Circulation* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 1-12.

²¹ Elizabeth Rondini, "Mobile Things: On the Origins and the Meanings of Levantine Objects in Early Modern Venice," *Art History* 41.2 (2018): 246-265. Pamela H. Smith, *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledges Across Eurasia* (Pittsburgh: Pittsburgh University Press, 2019). Eva Hoffman, "Pathways of portability: Islamic and Christian interchange from the tenth to the twelfth century," *Art History*, 24.1 (2001): 17-50. Catarina Schmidt Arcangeli and Gerhard Wolf, eds, *Islamic Artefacts in the Mediterranean World: Trade, Gift Exchange and Artistic Transfer* (Venice, 2010).

²² Rita George- Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq: Riccoldo Da Montecroce's Encounter with Islam* (Turnhout: Brepols Publishers, 2013), 27.

Embodying Divine Wisdom

The earliest incorporations of Arabic scripts into Marian altarpieces occurred in Tuscany and specifically are found in visualizations of Mary as the *Sedes Sapientiae*, or Throne of Wisdom. This type of image is known in Italian as the *Maestà*, referring to the majesty of Mary as the Queen of Heaven. Cimabue's *Maestà* (**Figs. 1-2**) (c. 1280), made for the Franciscan church of San Francesco in Pisa, is a key example. Curvilinear golden lettering resembling Arabic cursive traces the borders of Mary's blue mantle, the patterned textile held by angels behind the Throne of Solomon, and the golden disc that constitutes her halo.²³ This altarpiece is thought to be the first example of a halo in Italian painting that incorporates features of Arabic writing, in this case, incisions into the gold leaf disposed radially around the disc's center. The letters in the halo resemble features of Arabic cursive, but do not appear to cohere into legible words, so in this instance, the term pseudo-script is apt. However, the absence of obviously legible words should not immediately lead to the conclusion that the inscriptions are inherently meaningless or lacking significative potential. If we set aside the assumption that the Italian representation of Arabic scripts resulted in decorative forms without relation to the figural subject of the painting, we can consider how the subject of such an

²³ On the Throne of Solomon, see Allegra Iafate, *The Wandering Throne of Solomon: Objects and Tales of Kingship in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

altarpiece – specifically Mary as the embodiment of divine wisdom – might have related to a culture of translation from Arabic that flourished in Italy in the same period.

The immediate precedents for Italian altarpieces figuring Mary as the *Sedes Sapientiae* were Byzantine icons, related to the theological concept of the *Theotokos*, for “she who brings forth God” or “Mother of God.”²⁴ Neither Byzantine icons, nor the related sculpted images of Mary enthroned as the Queen of Heaven created in a French context, incorporated representations of Arabic script.²⁵ The Arabic elements of Cimabue’s altarpieces, and related Italian altarpieces of the 13th century, require a localized interpretation, and one that moves beyond the assumptions of Italian artistic innovation emanating from individual creative geniuses, like Cimabue.²⁶ Instead, I would like to suggest that the obscure visual aspects of the Arabic inscriptions in Cimabue’s altarpiece be understood in terms of contemporary efforts to unlock the secrets of Arabic learning within a Christian context, especially by visualizing Mary as the ultimate source of divine wisdom.

²⁴ Liene H. Forsyth, *The Throne of Wisdom: Wood Sculptures of the Madonna in Romanesque France* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972). Bissera V. Pentcheva, *Icons and Power: The Mother of God in Byzantium*. (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Bissera V. Pentcheva, “The Performative Icon,” *The Art Bulletin* 88.4 (2006): 631-655.

²⁵ Margot Fassler, *The Virgin of Chartres: Making History Through Liturgy and the Arts* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2010).

²⁶ For a recent discussion of the problematic legacy of the biographical focus in the study of Italian art, see Holly Flora, *Cimabue and the Franciscans* (London: Harvey Miller Publishers, 2018). For a rare example of a recent study challenging the universalizing approach to Arabic inscriptions on textiles as decorative elements, see Isabelle Dolezalek, *Arabic Script on Christian Kings: Textile Inscriptions on Royal Garments from Norman Sicily* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2017).

The earliest European scholars and theologians engaged in the translation and study of texts from Arabic into Latin in the 12th and 13th centuries often noted the status of Arabic as a language of ancient wisdom and esoteric knowledge. Stephen of Pisa (fl. 1127), who translated a number of texts from Arabic into Latin in the 12th century, prefaced one of his translations of a medical treatise with a reference to Arabic as a language that has “hidden within it...all the secrets of philosophy.”²⁷ His statement is suggestive of how the visual complexities of interlacing Arabic cursive, particularly in contrast to Latin block letters, could be perceived as pregnant with esoteric knowledge. Stephen of Pisa also characterized his translation activities, aimed at revealing some of the hidden secrets of Arabic philosophy, as following the “command of Solomon.”²⁸ Pisa was a major center for translation activities between Arabic in Latin, beginning in the 12th century. In that century, Pisa was ascendant as a maritime power and a key actor in the formation and development of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem (1099-1187), when mosques were converted to churches throughout Palestine and Syria.²⁹ In the Syrian city of Antioch, Pisans were granted the parish of St. Saviour.³⁰ Arabic texts in

²⁷ Charles Burnett, *Arabic into Latin in the Middle Ages: The Translators and Their Intellectual and Social Context* (Farnham, England: Ashgate, 2009), 28-29.

²⁸ Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*, 22. On Solomon’s association with esoteric knowledge, see Pablo A. Torijano, *Solomon the Esoteric King: From King to Magus, Development of a Tradition* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

²⁹ Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*, 4. On Pisa’s relationship to the Holy Land, see also Kathryn Blair Moore, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land: Reception from Late Antiquity through the Renaissance* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 98-100.

³⁰ Giuseppe Müller, *Documenti Sulle Relazioni Delle Città Toscane Coll’oriente Cristiano E Coi Turchi Fino All’anno Mdxv* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1879).

particular flowed from Antioch to Pisa in this period; these texts were the primary bases of the translations of Stephen of Pisa, who also spent some time in Antioch.³¹

Arabic in this period was more specifically associated with the knowledge of the properties of materials and their potential for transformation, including within the field of alchemy. An anonymous Italian writer of the 13th century, copying an alchemical treatise translated from Arabic in the previous century, added a preface referring to the *sapientia Dei*, or wisdom of God, as the creative force for the transformation of metals.³² The alchemical work, *Liber Septuaginta* (Book of Seventy) by Jabir Ibn Hayyan (c. 721 – c. 815), known as Geber in Latin, had been translated from Arabic into Latin in the previous century by Gerard of Cremona (c. 1114-1187). From the 12th century onward, Arabic was widely recognized within Europe as the primary language transmitting knowledge of alchemy, which was itself characterized as just one facet of a larger potential for total knowledge of the interconnection of the terrestrial and celestial realms.³³ Writings on alchemy tended to be richly metaphorical and often encrypted, both to control the dissemination of potentially dangerous knowledge and to conceal the identity of authors.³⁴

³¹ Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*, 4-6.

³² Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*, 53 and 65. Bodleian Library, Ms. Digby 121.

³³ Robert Halleux, "The Reception of Arabic alchemy in the West," in Rashdi Raheed, ed., *Encyclopedia of the History of Arabic Science* Vol. 3 (New York, NY: Routledge, 1996), 963-984.

³⁴ Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*, 87.

Figure 4 Neri di Bicci, *Annunciation* (detail), 1464. Gallery of the Academy of Florence. Photo: Author.

In Italy, mendicant friars in particular actively studied alchemy and sought to understand the mysteries of material properties in terms of Christian theology, especially the idea of the Incarnation.³⁵ The alchemical metaphor for both the Incarnation and transubstantiation was invoked in various contexts over the centuries,



particularly by Franciscan thinkers; one wonders if the materialization of golden Arabic scripts in altarpieces honoring Mary as the vessel of the Incarnation resonated in this particular context. There are some suggestive renderings of the Incarnation, as in Neri di Bicci's *Annunciation* (1464), in which a cloth of pure gold appears as if imprinted with an Arabic script that extends into the borders of Mary's blue mantle (**Fig. 4**).

³⁵ For a parallel interpretation of Cimabue's use of lead white in relationship to alchemical ideas centering on the Virgin Mary in a Franciscan context, see Holly Flora, "New Light on Cimabue's Lead White at Assisi," *I Tatti / Villa I Tatti, the Harvard University Center for Italian Renaissance Studies* 21 (2018): 351-388. On the engagement of Franciscans with alchemical ideas, see also Leah DeVun, *Prophecy, Alchemy, and the End of Time: John of Rupescissa in the Late Middle Ages* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).



Figure 5 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin*, 1434-35. Department of Paintings of the Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.



Figure 6 Fra Angelico, *Coronation of the Virgin* (detail), 1434-35. Department of Paintings of the Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

If we situate Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces within a larger context of cultural translation, we might arrive at a deeper understanding of how such scripts could have related to the visualization of the embodiment of divine knowledge within the terrestrial realm. In the 14th and 15th centuries, depictions of the Coronation of Mary as the Queen of Heaven were specifically interpreted within a Dominican context as

celebrating Mary as the embodiment of divine wisdom.³⁶ Mary's coronation in heaven is not an event described in the Bible; Dominican theologians based the idea in the interpretation of Old Testament texts, like 1 Kings 2:19, in which King Solomon prepares a throne for his mother after his own coronation. Some of the most interesting and expansive examples of representations of Arabic scripts found in monumental altarpieces of the Coronation were created by Dominican artists. These include Fra Angelico's Coronation in the Louvre (1434-1435) (**Figs. 5-6**) and Filippo Lippi's in the Uffizi (c. 1439-1447) (**Fig. 7**).³⁷ In Fra Angelico's version, the scripts are presented as golden lettering on the disc of Mary's halo and the golden bands bordering the robes of both Mary and Christ. These golden inscriptions are echoed in the halos of angels, while the lettering visible in Latin within the other halos identifies each saint. In Filippo Lippi's version, the Arabic pseudo-script is represented across bands that extend from around the body of Christ and across the throne into the crowd of angels.

Convergences of Latin and Arabic

I have suggested that representations of Arabic script in Italian altarpieces might have been perceived as a visual incorporation of the Arabic language into the

³⁶ Diane C. Ahl, *Fra Angelico* (London: Phaidon Press, 2008), 47. See also Lilla Grindlay, *Queen of Heaven: The Assumption and Coronation of the Virgin in Early Modern English Writing, 1558-1625* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2018).

³⁷ Napolitano, *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions*, 97.



Figure 7 Filippo Lippi, *Coronation of the Virgin* (detail), c. 1439-47. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

embodiment of Mary as the mediator of divine wisdom between the celestial and terrestrial realms. I offer this as just one of several potential readings of the larger meaning of Arabic writing when considered in relation to the subject of Marian altarpieces. If we turn our focus to the role of Mary in efforts to articulate Islam's relationship to Christianity, another potential reading will emerge. This entails focusing on a cryptic aspect of Arabic scripts as represented in Italian altarpieces; that is,

incorporations of Latin words and phrases referring to the Virgin Mary, visualizing the convergence of Arabic and Latin traditions around the figure of Mary.

The inventive merge of Latin letters and features of Arabic cursive can particularly be observed in 15th-century Italian altarpieces, including those by Fra Angelico (**Fig. 5**) already discussed. The earliest interpretations of kufesque in Italian altarpieces did not address the frequent presence of Latin letters, and often entire Latin words, within the representations of Arabic script in Italian altarpieces. It has recently been more clearly established that these Latin words related to phrases associated with the Virgin Mary.³⁸ The inventive merging of Latin letters and features of Arabic cursive in altarpieces honoring Mary suggests – I would argue – a consciousness of the potential visual and semantic interplay of Christian and Islamic traditions made possible by Mary as a site of convergence between to the two religions.

In Gentile da Fabriano's *Madonna of Humility* (1420-1423) (**Fig. 8**), for example, a script resembling Arabic cursive encircles Mary's halo and extends in a smaller scale along the border of both her dress and Christ's bedsheet.³⁹ The lettering of the textile borders merge features of Arabic cursive with Latin letters, repeating Mary's name

³⁸ Ennio Napolitano, "The transfer of Arabic inscriptions in Italian Gothic and Renaissance painting. A new approach. The words al-mulk, baraka, and al-yumn in the 14th and 15th centuries Italian paintings" in Antonino Pellitteri, et al., eds., *Re-defining a Space of Encounter. Islam and Mediterranean Identity, Alterity, and Interactions* (Leuven: Peeters Publishers & Booksellers, 2019), 337-356 (especially 338).

³⁹ Vincenza Grassi, "Le iscrizioni arabo-islamiche nell'opera di Gentile da Fabriano" in Andrea De Marchi, ed., *Intorno a Gentile da Fabriano: nuovi studi sulla pittura tardogotica* (Livorno: Sillabe, 2008), 33-44. Napolitano, *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions*, 99-100. Grassi, "Le iscrizioni arabo-islamiche."

Figure 8 Gentile da Fabriano, *Madonna of Humility*, 1420-23. National Museum of San Matteo, Pisa. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.





Figure 9 Gentile da Fabriano, *Madonna and Child Enthroned*, c. 1420. National Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

and related prayers that are only partially visible, like “Ave Mater... Dei,” or “hail the Mother of God.”

Gentile da Fabriano’s *Madonna and Child Enthroned* at the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C. (c. 1420)

(Fig. 9) is perhaps one of the most beautiful examples of the visual

interplay of Arabic and Latin inscriptions around the figure of Mary.⁴⁰ While the halo is filled with a script resembling Arabic cursive, a golden inscription at her collar clearly

⁴⁰ Sylvia Auld, “Kuficising inscriptions in the work of Gentile da Fabriano,” *Oriental Art* 32.3 (1986): 246-265.

reads “Mater,” or “mother” in Latin. The entire phrase “Ave Maria Gratia Plena” – “Hail Mary full of grace” – is also clearly legible across the lower trim of her dress. In other contexts, painters seem to play upon the visual ambiguities of the golden lettering, especially when incorporated into the representation of haloes. In Masaccio’s Pisa altarpiece (1426) (**Fig. 10**), Mary’s name in Latin appears to emerge towards the end of the inscription within her halo.



Figure 10 Masaccio, *Madonna and Child with Angels* (detail), 1426. National Gallery, London. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

There are a number of examples in which other artists juxtapose pseudo-Arabic textile borders and haloes with less ambiguous Latin lettering containing some portion of the angelic salutation: “Ave Maria Gratia Plena Dominus Tecum,” which in full, reads: “Hail Mary full of grace, God be with you” (**Fig. 11**). This Latin phrase was Gabriel’s salutation made to Mary at the moment of the Annunciation.⁴¹ The Latin phrase had been understood from the earliest periods of Christianity as the enunciation of the logos, corresponding to the moment of the Incarnation, when Mary became the vessel for the materialization of the Holy Spirit in the terrestrial realm. That the inscriptions are only partially visible in any language is suggestive of the ineffable qualities of the Holy Spirit. The particular presentation of such inscriptions as if imprinted into golden discs encircling Mary’s head is also suggestive of centuries-old metaphors for the Incarnation as sealing of the invisible Word into matter; that this material is pure gold, is also evocative of Mary’s status as a virginal receptacle for the Holy Spirit. The distinctive materiality of such haloes, which often appear in relief as molded discs emerging from the surface of the painted altarpiece, further points to an analogy with Mary as the material vessel for the Incarnation.

But why did Italian artists not simply use Latin inscriptions, instead alternating between or mixing the legible “Ave Maria Gratia Plena” and the interlacing and curvilinear scripts associated with Arabic? I would like to propose two interrelated

⁴¹ Luke 1: 28.



Figure 11 Barnaba da Modena, *Madonna with Child* (detail), c. 1370. Department of Paintings of the Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

motivations: to visualize the relationship between Islam and Christianity around the figure of the Virgin Mary and to evoke the translation of the Latin phrase symbolic of the Incarnation into Arabic. A number of scholars have correlated parts of Arabic pseudo-scripts in Marian altarpieces with specific Arabic words associated with salutation of royalty and related honorifics, as well as divine blessing, specifically:⁴²

mulk, ملك (dominion, sovereignty)

yumn, يومن (prosperity)

baraka, بركة (blessing)

If we again set aside the assumption that the Italian representation of such Arabic words results in decorative forms without relation to the figural subject of the painting, the possibility emerges that these specific words were selected as part of a larger pictorial representation of the divine majesty of the Virgin Mary. These specific Arabic words were used within court rituals in Cairo during the Mamluk period, from 1250 to 1517 – the period when such inscriptions appeared in Marian altarpieces in Italy.⁴³

Invocations of the Arabic for God, sovereignty, felicity, and divine blessings all correlate with the essential content of Gabriel’s message to Mary, as well as more general praises

⁴² Napolitano, “The transfer of Arabic inscriptions.”

⁴³ Numerous Italian merchants and diplomats visited Cairo, and it is the latter who would have directly observed Mamluk ceremonial. Written records unfortunately do not record the details of such encounters; at best, historians are informed about the identity of European diplomats who were received in Cairo and the kinds of gifts that were exchanged. See Doris Behrens-Abouseif, *Practising Diplomacy in the Mamluk Sultanate: Gifts and Material Culture in the Medieval Islamic World* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014). It remains a matter of speculation whether St. Francis was truly presented to the Mamluk Sultan al-Kamil in 1219. See John V. Tolan *Saint Francis and the Sultan: The Curious History of a Christian-Muslim Encounter* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

for Mary as the Queen of Heaven. The apparent presence of references to Allah throughout representations of Arabic scripts, particularly in Marian haloes, which have prompted speculation about the presence of the entire Shahada, could instead be understood as elements of attempts to translate Gabriel's message into Arabic. However, I would argue that the kufesque haloes do not represent anything close to literal translation, but instead play with the ambiguities between Latin and Arabic, and the visual effects of the ideas of translation from Latin to Arabic and the related potential of conversion from Islam to Christianity (especially as predicated upon shared reverence for Mary, as we will see).

Polemic

The majority of Italians in the period probably would not have recognized or understood specific Arabic words. There were Latin-Arabic glossaries that circulated from the 12th century forward, but very few would have had access to them.⁴⁴ Such resources were especially associated with mendicant centers of learning, like Santa Maria Novella and San Marco, both in Florence. Study of Arabic in these contexts was

⁴⁴ Ugo Monneret de Villard, *Lo Studio Dell'islam in Europa Nel 12. E 13. Secolo* (Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Aaticana, 1944). Johann Fuck, *Die arabischen studien in Europa bis den Anfang des 20 Jahrshundert* (Leipzig: Otto Harrassowitz, 1955). Burnett, *Arabic into Latin*, 248. For a specific example of a 13th-century Arabic-Latin glossary, see Celestino Schiaparelli, *Vocabulista in Arabico: Pubblicato Per La Prima Volta Sopra Un Codice Della Biblioteca Riccardiana Di Firenze Da Celestino Schiaparelli* (Florence: Tipografia dei Successi Le Monnier, 1871). See also Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "The Renaissance Humanists and the Knowledge of Arabic," *Studies in the Renaissance* 2 (1955): 96-117.

primarily intended to create a knowledge base for evangelization activities in Palestine, Syria, and Egypt.⁴⁵ There are only exceptional examples of Italians in the period who could read Arabic with any fluency. Riccoldo da Montecroce (c. 1243-1320), who studied the Quran and lectured on the doctrinal errors of Islam – from a Dominican perspective – is one such example.⁴⁶ He spent years teaching in the convent of Santa Maria Novella in Florence and in other Tuscan centers of learning, like Pisa and Prato, both before and after his travels through the Holy Land to Baghdad in 1288 to 1302. His Arabic manuscript of the Quran with Latin annotations still survives in the French National Library.⁴⁷

William of Tripoli (fl. 1270s), whose writings were a major source for Riccoldo da Montecroce, included both translations and transliterations of Arabic phrases throughout his *Notitia de Machometo*.⁴⁸ Riccoldo da Montecroce's influential polemical tract, read many times over the centuries – including by Martin Luther (1483-1546) – incorporated a yet more extensive combination of transliterations and translations of a variety of Arabic words and phrases associated with the Quran. The oldest manuscript

⁴⁵ Riccoldo da Montecroce and Davide Cappi, *Libro Della Peregrinazione: Epistole Alla Chiesa Trionfante* (Genoa: Marietti, 2005), xii.

⁴⁶ Riccoldo da Montecroce, "Lettres," ed. Reinhold Röhrich *Archive de l'Orient Latin* (1884): 258-296. George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*. See more generally Thomas E. Burman, *Reading the Quran in Latin Christendom, 1140-1560* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2011).

⁴⁷ Montecroce and Cappi, *Libro Della Peregrinazione*, xvii.

⁴⁸ William of Tripoli also includes transliterations of Arabic phrases, including the Shahada. William of Tripoli, *Notitia de Machometo: De statu Sarracenorum*, trans. Peter Engels (Würzburg: Echter, 1992), 204. See also Thomas E. Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an," *Dante Studies, with the Annual Report of the Dante Society*. (2007): 93-109.



Figure 12
Duccio, *Maestà*
(detail), c. 1285.
Uffizi Gallery,
Florence. Photo:
Wikimedia
Commons/Public
Domain.

of the treatise, still in Florence, contains a few words in Arabic script that some believe were added by Riccoldo himself.⁴⁹ Riccoldo's Quran was almost certainly with the Dominican friar throughout his residency at Santa Maria Novella in Florence, since he annotated the manuscript as he composed *Contra Legem Saracenorum* (Against the Law of the Saracens).⁵⁰ The Marian altarpieces that incorporated representations of Arabic script were often directly associated with mendicant churches. Duccio's *Maestà* of 1285

⁴⁹ George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*. The manuscript is in the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale of Florence: Ms. Conventi Soppressi C. VIII, 1173. An example of the Arabic script can be found on fol. 208r.

⁵⁰ Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an," 94-96. The manuscript is in the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris: Ms. Arabe 384.

(Fig. 12), also referred to as the Rucellai Madonna, was painted for an altar in the church of Santa Maria Novella.⁵¹

A key feature of polemical treatises on Islam like those of Riccoldo da Montecroce and William of Tripoli was the demonstration of the Christian aspects of the Islamic faith, especially in relation to the Virgin Mary.⁵² Although Muslims consistently denied the virginal birth and Jesus's status as God incarnate, Mary was revered within Islamic cultures as an exemplar of virtue and mother of Jesus as a prophet.⁵³ Riccoldo quoted a number of Quranic passages that refer to Mary's special status within Islam, perhaps most importantly verse 21:91: "We have breathed into her our holy spirit" (*Insufflauimus in eam de spiritu nostro*). Riccoldo presented the Latin translation of this and similar Quranic verses as demonstrations of concordances between the Gospels and the Quran around the figure of Mary, and specifically as definitive proof – from his perspective – of the Quran's recognition of her status as the vessel for the Incarnation.⁵⁴

⁵¹ Napolitano, *Arabic Inscriptions and Pseudo-Inscriptions*, 55.

⁵² Thomas E. Burman, "Polemic, philology, and ambivalence: Reading the Qur'an in Latin Christendom," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 15.2 (2004): 181-209.

⁵³ Montecroce and Cappi, *Libro Della Peregrinazione*, ix. The manuscript is Ms. Conventi Soppressi C. VIII, 1173 of the Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale in Florence. See also Thomas E. Burman, "Two Dominicans, a lost manuscript, and Medieval Christian Thought on Islam" in Ryan Szpiech, ed., *Medieval Exegesis and Religious Difference: Commentary, Conflict, and Community in the Premodern Mediterranean* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2015), 71-86.

⁵⁴ Burman, "How an Italian Friar Read His Arabic Qur'an," 99. Burman notes that the Latin translation can be found in the margins of Ms. Arabe 384 of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France in Paris, specifically in the earlier set of notes that is probably not in Riccoldo's hand. See also Riccoldo da Montecroce and Giuseppe Rizzardi, *I Saraceni = Contra Legem Saracenorum* (Florence: Nardini Editore, 1992), 157. William of Tripoli had referred more generally to the Muslim practice of uttering prayers

Such knowledge of Islamic reverence for Mary and other relationships between Muslim and Christian worship was certainly not restricted to the learned culture of friars like Riccoldo da Montecroce. The popular Dominican preacher and fellow friar of Riccoldo, Giordano da Pisa (c. 1260-1311), paraphrased and sometimes even quoted Riccoldo in sermons given in Florence up to his death in 1311.⁵⁵ Giordano da Pisa's sermons represent a key example of an intersection between the text-based culture of theological polemic and the popular knowledge of Islam that circulated within the larger culture of Italian cities like Florence. We can only imagine how a member of the parish of Santa Maria Novella, having heard Giordano da Pisa's sermons, may have encountered representations of Arabic script in an altarpiece like Duccio's *Maestà*.

We are best informed about Riccoldo da Montecroce's viewpoint, as he wrote so extensively throughout his career. In his *Epistolae*, Riccoldo suggested that altarpieces representing Mary and Jesus played a pivotal role within his ongoing struggle to understand the relationship of Islam to Christianity. In one remarkable passage, directly addressed to Jesus, Riccoldo referred to a practice of bringing his Quran to read to an image of Jesus and his mother, in other words, an altarpiece:

As you know, frequently when reading the Quran in Arabic with a heart full of utter grief and impatience, I have placed the book open on your altar before your

whenever the names of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, Abraham, or Muhammad were mentioned. George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 61. Tripoli, *Notitia de Machometo*, 256-258.

⁵⁵ George-Tvrtković, *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*. See also Emilio Panella, "Ricerche su Riccoldo da Monte di Croce," *Archivum Fratrum Praedicatorum* 58 (1988): 5-85, esp. 47-48.

image and that of your most holy mother, and said, “read, read what Mahomet says!” And it seems to me that you do not want to read.” I ask, therefore, that you do not disdain to hear a little of what I recount to you.”⁵⁶

Contrary to ideas about the spatial and temporal remoteness of Arabic as an ancient sacred language, Riccoldo’s staging of a dialogue between Muhammad and Jesus is evocative of the urgent contemporaneity and vital presence of the Quran, as a subject of ongoing translation and interpretation for the Dominican friar. Elsewhere in his writing, Riccoldo directly contrasted what he perceived as the inertness of God’s word within Islam, specifically “like a statue that does not breath and does not perceive anything,” in contrast to the Christian God, who “possesses an incarnated word in the most holy Virgin.”⁵⁷ For Riccoldo, might an altarpiece like the Rucellai Madonna have been perceived as a symbolic incorporation of the Arabic script into the material, living embodiment of Mary as the incarnated word? By means of incorporation into the fabric of Mary’s body, Arabic does seem – even to the modern viewer – to constitute an integral aspect of the living image of Mary as Queen of Heaven in such altarpieces. Like Riccoldo’s own writings, the Arabic scripts represented within altar images of Mary were not directed at a Muslim audience; instead, as polemical works, both Riccoldo’s writings and the Marian altarpieces with Arabic scripts could have been perceived as

⁵⁶ George-Tvrtković (with English translation), *A Christian Pilgrim in Medieval Iraq*, 87. Riccoldo da Montecroce, *Epistolae V de perditioe Anconis, 1291*, ed. Reinholdt Röhricht, *Archives de l’Orient latin* 2 (1884), 258-296, 286.

⁵⁷ Montecroce and Rizzardi, *I Saraceni*, 162.

articulating the Dominican perspective of the animate image of Mary as the incarnated logos manifesting the ultimate sign of Christianity's supremacy over Islam.

Pilgrimage and Conversion

I would additionally like to explore whether the specific image of the Virgin Mary provided a context for a visual expression of a desired conversion of Muslims to Christianity within a more general mendicant context. Pilgrimages made by members of the mendicant orders like the Dominican and Franciscan Orders were undertaken with the hope of peacefully repossessing the sacred territory of the Holy Land by converting Muslims to the Christian faith.⁵⁸ Even pilgrims who did not know Arabic or read the Quran were well aware of the reverence of Muslims for Mary demonstrated at pilgrimage sites throughout Palestine, Syria, and Egypt.⁵⁹ The observations of pilgrims like Riccoldo da Montecroce, who noted the "great reverence" shown by Muslims at the

⁵⁸ Robert I. Burns, "Christian-Islamic Confrontation in the West: The Thirteenth-Century Dream of Conversion," *The American Historical Review* 76.5 (1971): 1386-1434. Montecroce and Cappi, *Libro Della Peregrinazione*, xiv. More generally, see Michael Gervers and Ramzi J. Bikhazi, *Conversion and Continuity: Indigenous Christian Communities in Islamic Lands: Eighth to Eighteenth Centuries: Conference Entitled "conversion and Continuity": Papers* (Toronto: Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, 1990). *Espansione Del Francescanesimo Tra Occidente E Oriente Nel Secolo Xiii: Atti Del Vi Convegno Internazionale, Assisi, 12-14 Ottobre 1978* (Assisi: Società internazionale di studi francescani, 1979).

⁵⁹ John V. Tolan, *Saracens: Islam in the Medieval European Imagination* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 33. John V. Tolan, *Sons of Ishmael: Muslims Through European Eyes in the Middle Ages* (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 2013).

Tomb of Mary in Jerusalem, are suggestive of a more pervasive awareness among contemporary pilgrims.⁶⁰

Franciscan authors particularly emphasized this aspect of the Holy Land pilgrimage; there are suggestions that Franciscans perceived Muslim reverence for Mary as a potential basis of conversion to Christianity.⁶¹ This may help account for the emphasis upon visual references to Arabic script in Marian altarpieces, in contrast to other written languages like Hebrew and Phags-pa. That Muslims controlled the majority of Marian shrines in the Holy Land since the demise of the Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem in 1187 also rendered the idea of converting Muslims to Christianity a more urgent matter, and particularly so for the Franciscans, who acquired the formal role of custodians of all Christian sanctuaries in the region in 1342.⁶² Niccolò da Poggibonsi, who made the journey in the first years of the Franciscan Custody of the Holy Land (specifically 1346-1350), described witnessing Muslim pilgrims praying at the Tomb of Mary in Jerusalem and the Chapel of the Nativity in Bethlehem.⁶³ Niccolò's richly

⁶⁰ Rita George-Tvrtković, "Bridge or Barrier? Mary and Islam in William of Tripoli and Nicholas of Cusa," *Medieval Encounters* 22 (2016): 307-325, esp. 314.

⁶¹ Benjamin Z. Kedar, *Crusade and Mission: European Approaches Toward the Muslims* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), 40-41.

⁶² Antony R. Leopold, *How to Recover the Holy Land: The Crusade Proposals of the Late Thirteenth and Early Fourteenth Centuries* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000). James M. Powell, *Muslims Under Latin Rule, 1100-1300* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

⁶³ Moore, *The Architecture of the Christian Holy Land*, 149-160.

descriptive Italian-language account of the pilgrimage experience was widely read in Italy and was also known in a series of illustrated manuscript copies.⁶⁴

Far from being fixed Christian or Islamic spaces, the Marian shrines in the Holy Land constituted complex spaces of both convergence and exclusion. At the Tomb of Mary (**Fig. 13**), for example, Niccolò da Poggibonsi noted that while Muslims demonstrated devotion at her Tomb, they did not participate in the Mass that was held at the nearby altar within the same subterranean space in Jerusalem.⁶⁵ Niccolò da Poggibonsi, like other pilgrim-authors of the period, also noted the absence of Muslim pilgrims at the Church of the Holy Sepulcher, associated with the Resurrection and Crucifixion of Jesus. Niccolò also presented the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem (**Fig. 14**), which is to say the Dome of the Rock and related esplanade, as a contested site to which he was denied access. He recounted the building's association with Jesus's presentation to the Temple, but only observed its features from a distance, since the space was exclusively used by Muslims in the period. Throughout his journey, the Franciscan pilgrim remained attentive to how the sacred sanctuaries associated with the lives of Jesus and Mary manifested different aspects of doctrinal agreements between Christianity and Islam.

⁶⁴ Kathryn Blair Moore, "The Disappearance of an Author and the Emergence of a Genre: Niccolò Da Poggibonsi and Pilgrimage Guidebooks between Manuscript and Print," *Renaissance Quarterly* 66.2 (2013): 357-411.

⁶⁵ Niccolò da Poggibonsi, *Libro D'oltramare, 1346-1350. Testo Di A. Bacchi Della Lega Riveduto E Riannotato Dal P.b. Bagatti O.F.M. a Ricordo del Sesto Centenario* (Jerusalem: Tipografia dei PP. Francescani, 1945), 50-51.

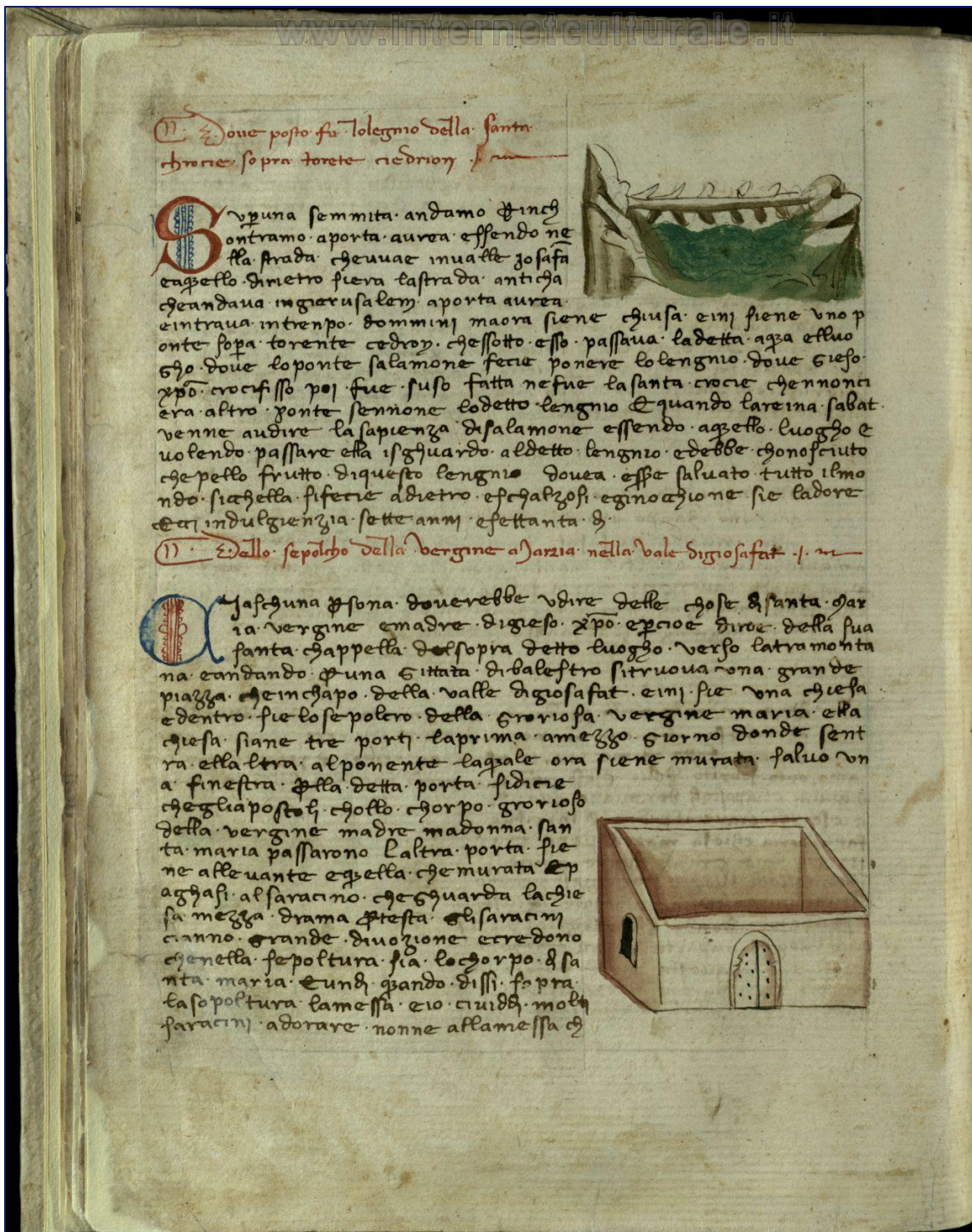


Figure 13 Tomb of Mary, Ms. Castiglioni 5, fol. 21v. Braidense National Library, Milan. Photo: Braidense National Library.



Figure 14 Temple of Solomon, Ms. Castiglioni 5, fol. 23v. Braidense National Library, Milan. Photo: Braidense National Library.

The written testaments of journeys like Niccolò da Poggibonsi's often incorporated observations of Islamic cultures in Syria, Palestine, and Egypt, with citations of Arabic words or phrases associated with the Islamic faith, like Allah referring to their one god, or more detailed studies of the Arabic alphabet.⁶⁶ Such alphabets found in pilgrimage manuscripts often diverged from real Arabic, resulting in approximations of the essential visual features of the script without exact correspondence to individual characters. A relatively close approximation of the Arabic alphabet can be found in two 14th-century manuscript copies of Niccolò da Poggibonsi's *Libro d'oltramare* (Figs. 15-17). The two oldest surviving manuscript copies, each dating to the second half of the 14th century or early 15th century, contain appendices enumerating the languages of non-Christian peoples encountered in the Holy Land, specifically: Hebrews, Greeks, Armenians, Saracens, Arabs, Syrians, and Ethiopians.⁶⁷ The alphabets are followed by the Latin Credo in Tartar and Hebrew. For each language, the Latin text is presented as a translation from those languages that has then

⁶⁶ The alphabet included in Bernhard von Breydenbach's printed pilgrimage account is thought to be the first with an accurate rendition of the Arabic alphabet. Elizabeth Ross, *Picturing Experience in the Early Printed Book: Breydenbach's Peregrinatio from Venice to Jerusalem* (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2014). Arnold von Harff included a glossary for Arabic in his work. Arnold Harff, *The Pilgrimage of Arnold Von Harff, Knight, from Cologne Through Italy, Syria, Egypt, Arabia, Ethiopia, Nubia, Palestine, Turkey, France, and Spain, Which He Accomplished in the Years 1496 to 1499* (Nendeln/Liechtenstein: Kraus, 1967). Gabriel von Rottenberg did likewise in his 1527 account of the pilgrimage. Reinhold Röhricht and Heinrich Meisner, *Deutsche Pilgerreisen Nach Dem Heiligen Lande. Herausgegeben Und Erläutert Von R. Röhricht Und H. Meisner* (Berlin, 1880). See also Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "The Renaissance Humanists and the Knowledge of Arabic," *Studies in the Renaissance* 2 (1955): 96–117.

⁶⁷ Kathryn Blair Moore, "Braidense Ms. Castiglioni 5: An additional early illustrated copy of Niccolò da Poggibonsi's *Libro d'oltramare*," *Peregrinations: Journal of Medieval Art and Architecture* 7.3 (2021): 116-141. <https://digital.kenyon.edu/perejournal/vol7/iss3/4>.

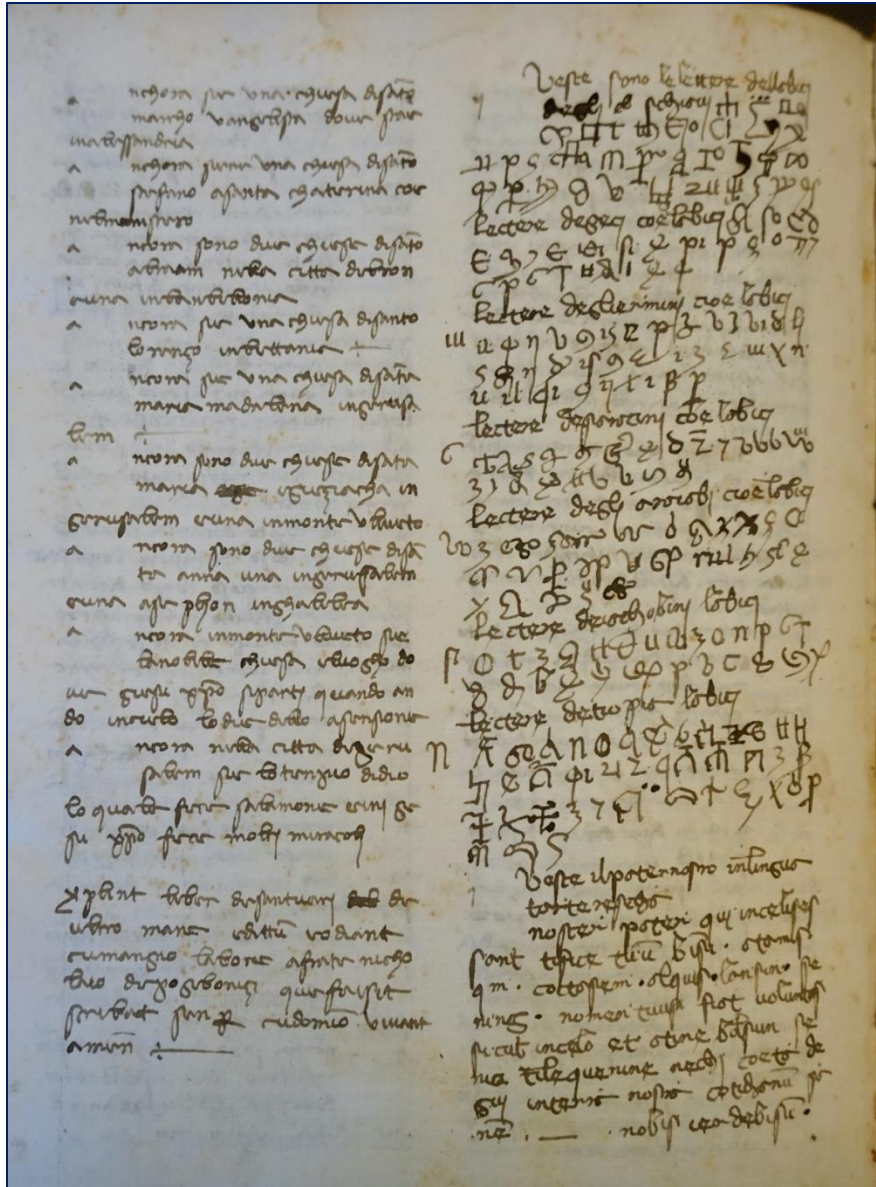


Figure 15 Appendix with alphabets of non-Christian peoples, Ms. II IV 101, fol. 49v. National Library, Florence. Photo: Author.

been transliterated into Latin, resulting in essentially nonsensical representations of the prayer.⁶⁸ The alphabets and transliterated prayers do not represent the basis for intelligible communication; for a

reader ignorant of the true alphabets or languages of the various non-Christian peoples of the Holy Land, the representation of these alphabets nonetheless could have been received as visualizations of the potential for universal conversion to Christianity.

⁶⁸ An important point of comparison is provided by the relatively accurate translations of Christian prayers in Persian and Cuman found in the mercantile dictionary known as the Codex Cumanicus. Felicitas Schmieder and Peter Schreiner, eds., *Il codice cumanicus e il suo mondo* (Rome: Edizioni di storia e letteratura, 2005). The question of whether pseudo-scripts in Italian painting incorporated intentional references to Phags-Pa remains unresolved. Hidemichi Tanaka, "Oriental Scripts in the Paintings of Giotto's Period," *Gazette Des Beaux-Arts / Fondée Par Charles Blanc* 6 (1989): 214-226.

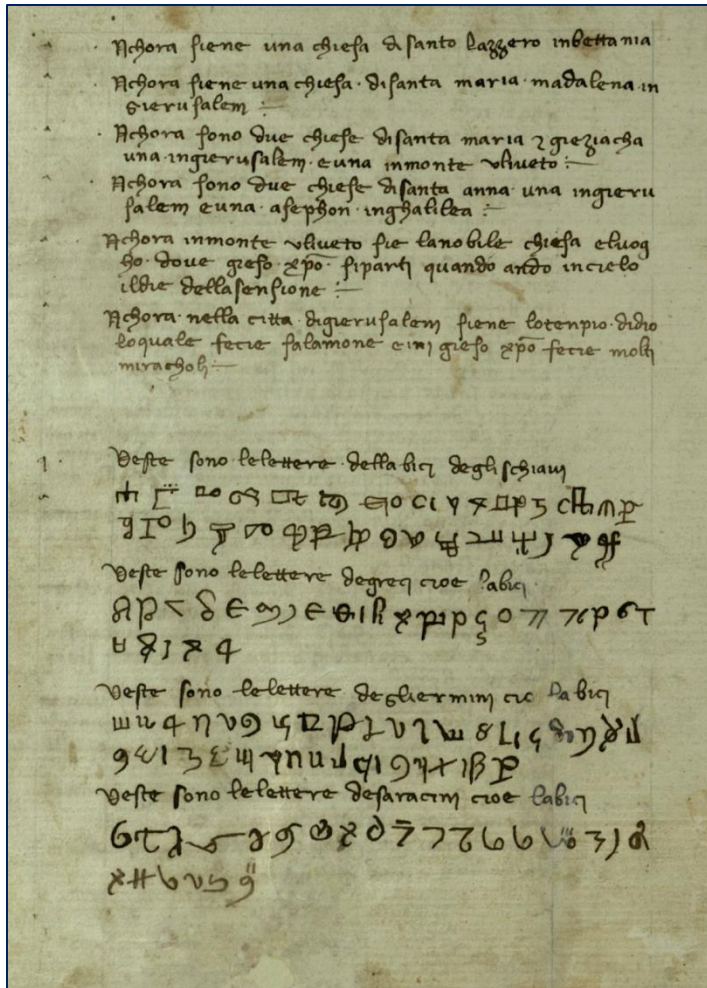


Figure 16 Appendix with alphabets of non-Christian peoples, Ms. Castiglioni 5, fol. 77v. Braidense National Library, Milan. Photo: Braidense National Library.

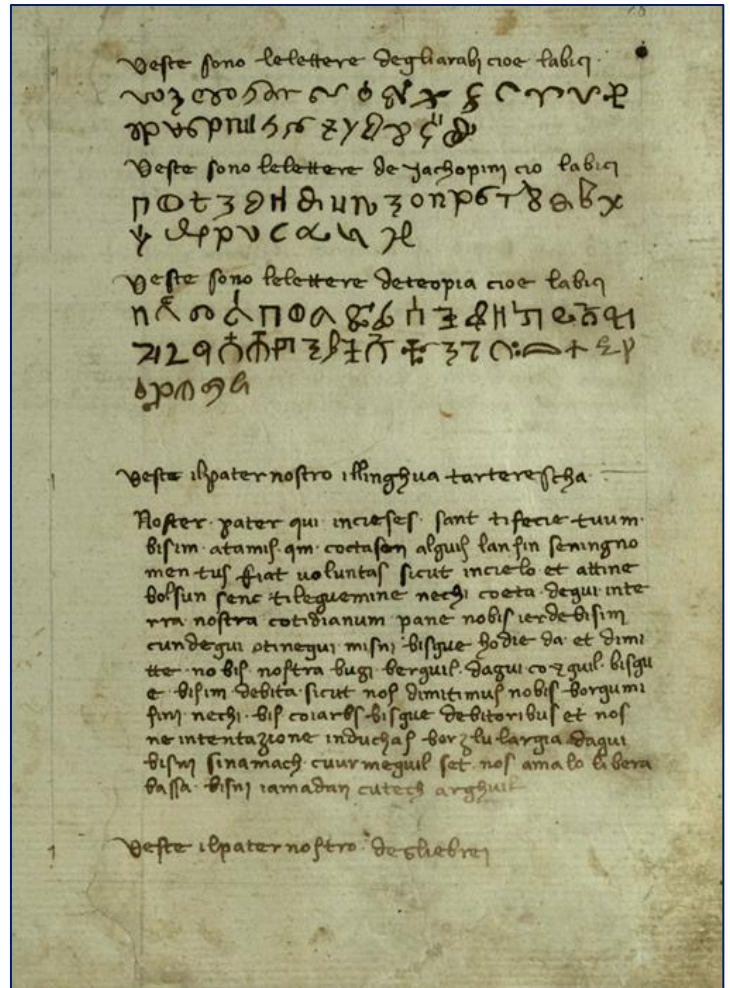


Figure 17 Appendix with alphabets of non-Christian peoples, Ms. Castiglioni 5, fol. 78r. Braidense National Library, Milan. Photo: Braidense National Library.

Objects of Conversion

Christian pilgrims who visited the Holy Land from Europe often noted that while Islamic culture shared with Christianity a reverence for Mary, images of Mary and Jesus – as well as Christian worshippers – were excluded from mosques.

Representation of Mary as the mother of Jesus incorporating features of Arabic writing

could have been perceived by some, particularly the mendicants, as an assertion of both the supremacy over Islam of the incarnated logos and the related image culture associated with the celebration of Mary's role in the Incarnation, suggested above. Keeping in mind the larger cultures of translation, pilgrimage, and conversion sketched out, I would like to offer a new way to think about the role of objects in the creation and reception of Arabic scripts as represented in Italian altarpieces. Far from being decorative objects, textiles and metalwork objects with Arabic scripts that arrived in Italy became essential aspects of the celebration of the Mass, as Arabic-inscribed textiles were adapted as vestments or reliquary shrouds and inlaid brass dishes served as patens. I would like to take one primary example, the Strozzi altarpiece of 1423 (**Fig. 18**), to think about the adaptation of such Arabic-inscribed objects in a pictorial representation of the first pilgrimage, in other words, the Adoration of the Magi.

Gentile da Fabriano's Strozzi altarpiece was undoubtedly one of the most expansive and materially lavish reflections upon the context of pilgrimage for the celebration of Mary's role in the Incarnation. The Magi are the first faithful in the history of Christianity and the first pilgrims; their expansive retinues winding across the landscape suggest the potential for universal Christianization in the wake of Jesus's

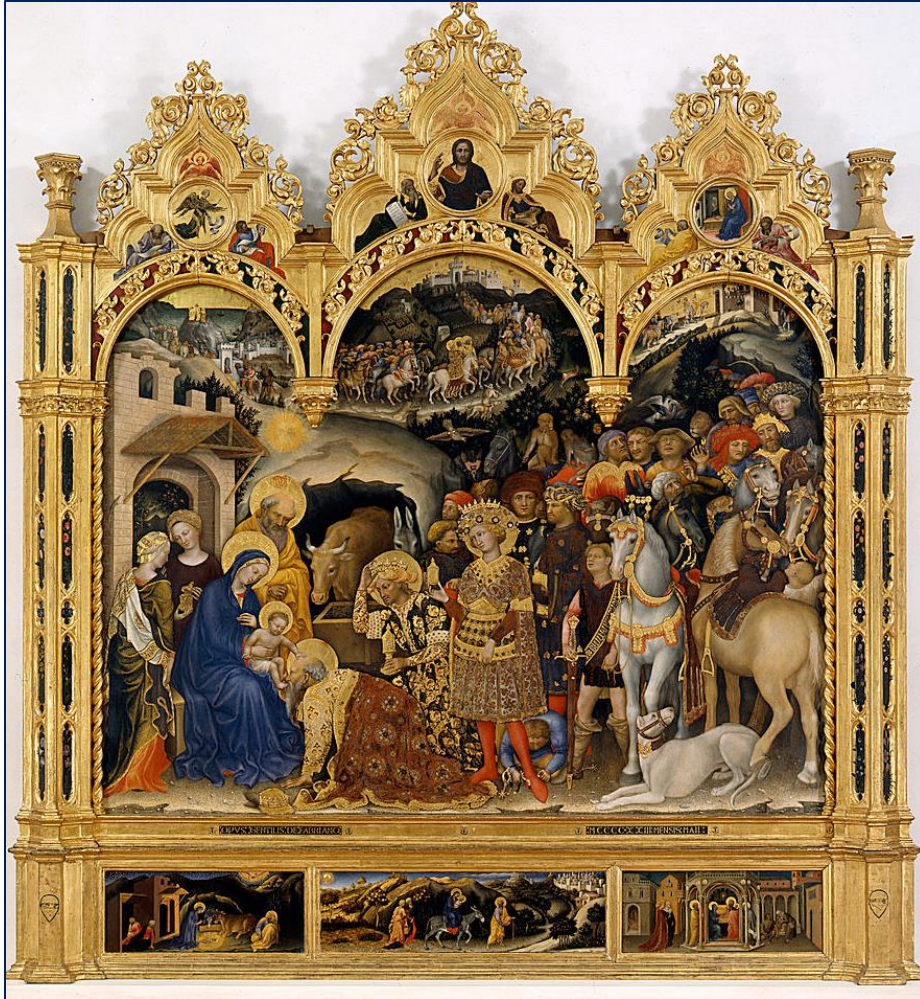


Figure 18 Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi*, 1423. Gallery of the Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

birth.⁶⁹ The patterned textiles and precious objects born by each king

are signs of both their distant origins and royal status, while the theme of the recognition of the supremacy of Jesus as the one true king extends into the figurations of both Jesus and Mary. Mary's halo (**Fig. 19**) is the largest and its cursive inscription evokes Mamluk honorifics, like *al-mulk*. Additional honorifics and blessings are rendered as luminous golden lettering in the textile borders of Mary's attendants (**Fig. 20**), as if radiating out from the central revelation of golden light in Mary's halo.

⁶⁹ Darrell Davisson, "The Advent of the Magi: A Study of the Transformations in Religious Images" (Ph.D. Dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, Baltimore, MD, 1971).

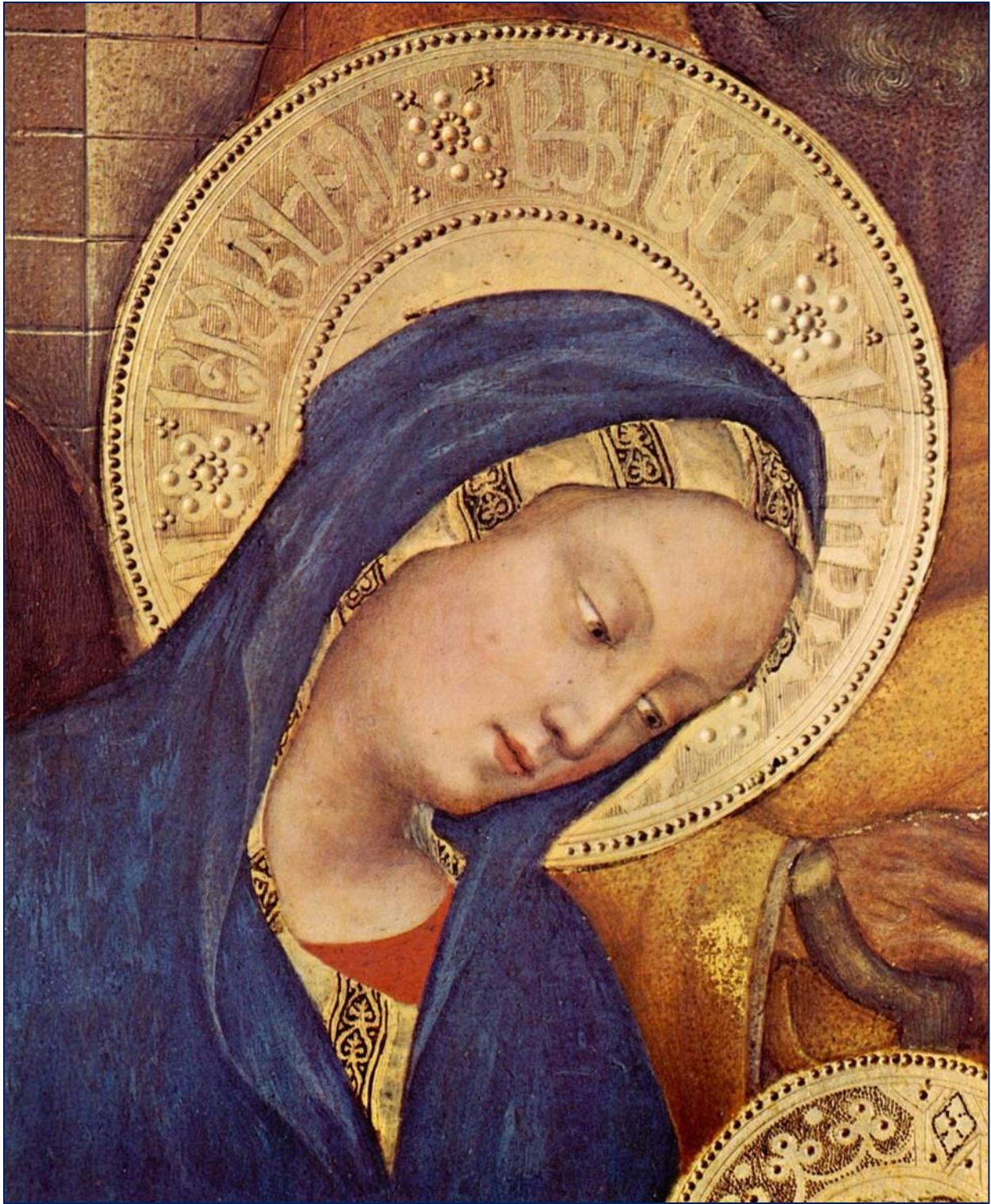


Figure 19 Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi* (detail), 1423. Gallery of the Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.



Figure 20 Gentile da Fabriano, *Adoration of the Magi* (detail), 1423. Gallery of the Uffizi, Florence. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

The Strozzi altarpiece was commissioned by the banker Palla Strozzi (1372-1462) to stand at the altar within the sacristy of Santa Trinita in Florence, the primary space within the church associated with the consecration of the Eucharist.⁷⁰ At the time that the altarpiece was created, Palla Strozzi, the wealthiest citizen of the Florentine Republic, also intended to create a public library above the church of Santa Trinita, a project that was never realized due to his exile in 1434.⁷¹ Palla reportedly intended the

⁷⁰ Panzanelli-Clignett, "The Kings from the Orient: The Strozzi Altarpiece as Visual Testimony to the Patron's Social Position," *Italian Culture* 10.1 (1992): 67-84.

⁷¹ Darrell D. Davisson, "The Iconology of the S. Trinita Sacristy, 1418-1435: A Study of the Private and Public Functions of Religious Art in the Early Quattrocento," *The Art Bulletin* 57.3 (1975): 315-334. See also Allie Terry-Fritsch, "Florentine Convent as Practiced Place: Cosimo de' Medici, Fra Angelico, and the



Figure 21 Gentile da Fabriano, *Presentation to the Temple*, 1423. Department of Paintings of the Louvre, Paris. Photo: Wikimedia Commons/Public Domain.

library to focus especially upon sacred literature, in addition to Greek and Latin texts.⁷²

It is thought that Palla intended the sacristy of the church to be the entranceway to the library. In this context, the pronounced allusions to Arabic may have resonated within displays of both the material splendor and divine wisdom of the holy family and Magi.

The predella subjects of the Strozzi altarpiece include Christ's Presentation to the Temple in Jerusalem (**Fig. 21**); Gentile's composition emphasizes the Eucharistic significance of the presentation of Jesus's body by Mary at the altar, while also imagining the interior of the Temple of Jerusalem that was inaccessible to Christian

Public Library of Florence," in Taryn E. L. Chubb and Emily D. Kelly, *Mendicants and Merchants in the Medieval Mediterranean* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), 82-123.

⁷² Davisson, "The Iconology of the S. Trinita Sacristy," 323.



Figure 22 Tray Made for the Rasulid Sultan al-Mu'ayyad Da'ud ibn Yusuf, early 14th century. Brass, engraved and inlaid with silver and black compound. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Accession No. 91.1.605). Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Public Domain.

pilgrims at the
time. From this
perspective, I

would like to think more directly about how the golden discs of such haloes perhaps related to metalwork objects with Arabic inscriptions that were adapted to the Eucharistic rites in Italian churches in the period, and how this may have related to a larger context of desired conversion of Muslims to Christianity.

It was within the context of trying to account for the presence of Arabic pseudo-scripts in haloes of Italian altarpieces that art historians first suggested that Mamluk brass dishes or trays with radiating inscriptions (**Fig. 22**) may have been the direct

inspiration for artists like Masaccio and Gentile da Fabriano.⁷³ Art historians have not yet considered the additional implications of the adaptation of such objects to the Christian ritual, in which they were used as salvers for the display of the Eucharistic bread; this question has not been directly raised because of the general tendencies of art historians both to separate the study of Islamic from Christian art and to separate the study of pictorial cultures from the history of objects.⁷⁴ The majority of such Mamluk trays came into museum collections or were sold on the art market in the modern period, but a small fraction remains in treasuries of Italian churches.⁷⁵ If we look at the haloes with pseudo-Arabic in Italian altarpieces not in isolation, but as integral aspects of trajectories of pilgrimage, conversion, and translation, it becomes possible to consider their role in a larger context of acts that repeatedly staged the historical and contemporary relationships of Christianity to Islam.

The convergence of an Arabic-inscribed object with the Latin ritual of the mass, as part of the adaptation of an object associated with the Islamic cultures of Egypt and

⁷³ Sylvia Auld, "Kuficising inscriptions in the work of Gentile da Fabriano," *Oriental Art* XXXII (1986): 246-265. Schulz, "Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light." Schulz, "Bild, Ding, Material."

⁷⁴ Esin Atıl, *Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Mamluks* (Washington, D.C: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1981). Rachel Ward, *Islamic Metalwork* (London: British Museum Press, 1999). The primary study of the adaptation of Islamic metalwork in a European context remains Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1998). The exceptional works within European art history that consider the engagement of Islamic objects in relation to the pictorial arts are Rosamond E. Mack, *Bazaar to Piazza: Islamic Trade and Italian Art, 1300-1600* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002) and the essays of Vera-Simone Schulz, including "Bild, Ding, Material" and Schulz" and "Intricate Letters and the Reification of Light."

⁷⁵ See for example Shalem, *Islam Christianized*, 296 and Gereon Sievemich and Hendrik Budde, eds., *Europa und der Orient 800-1900* (Munich: Bertelsmann-Lexikon-Verlag, 1989), cat. 4/89

Syria, could have been perceived as enactments of a desired conversion of Muslims to Christianity.⁷⁶ The ambiguities of the real pilgrimage spaces could be momentarily resolved through such actions: the Muslim reverence for Mary and the larger association of Arabic culture with the sacred territories of Palestine, Syria, and Egypt could be given a logic within the ritual order of the church. The real pilgrimage involved spaces of convergence between Islam and Christianity around sites inscribing the absent bodies of Jesus and Mary. The Italian altarpiece and related altar spaces instead visualized plenitude: the presence of the body of Christ displayed on the Eucharistic salver and the Eucharistic vessel imagined as an extension of Mary's body as envisioned within the altarpiece. The objects had themselves journeyed along the routes from the Holy Land associated with the pilgrimage that began with the journey of the Magi.

Competitive Adaptation

It is too simple to say that such acts of adaptation represented by both the Eucharistic salvers and the haloes with Arabic pseudo-scripts were part of a transformation of the altar area into the sacred spaces of Palestine and Egypt; instead,

⁷⁶ On the role of ritualized speech in endowing objects with power, see Irène Rosier-Catach, "Regards croisés sur le pouvoir des mots au Moyen Âge" in Nicole Bériou, Jean-Patrice Boudet, and Irène Rosier-Catach, eds. *Le pouvoir des mots au Moyen Âge: Études réunies* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols publishers, 2014), 511-588.

the repetitive staging seemed to remain focused on the process of transformation, as details within the image repeatedly pointed back in space and time, and specifically to the role of objects, materials, writings, and ultimately languages whose journeys made possible such transformations.⁷⁷ There is also the intriguing possibility that some salvers that have all of the features associated with Mamluk metalwork were created in Italy in the 15th and 16th centuries, offering fictitious adaptations of Egyptian or Syrian objects to the Latin mass.⁷⁸ Likewise, there is some evidence that textiles bordered with Arabic script of woven gold previously believed to have been produced in Mamluk Egypt or Syria were instead made in Italy. A key specimen at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York (**Fig. 23**) is a fragment of a silk with metal-wrapped thread bands forming legible cursive script composed of honorifics typical of the Mamluk period (specifically *al-sultan al-malik*, or the sultan, the king).⁷⁹ The textile had been fashioned into a vestment, perhaps a chasuble. Previously identified as a product of Mamluk craftsmanship, recently it has been suggested that it might have been created in Italy.⁸⁰ Such Arabic-inscribed textiles, wherever they originated, were most often used as

⁷⁷ For an exceptional but perhaps also related instance of representations of Arabic script in the context of Marian reverence in Florence, specifically at the church of Santissima Annunziata, see Bradley Cavallo, "Of Medici and Mamluk Power: Islamic Forms in a Renaissance Florentine Stained-Glass Window," *Viator* 45.1 (2014): 311-330.

⁷⁸ Sylvia Auld, *Veneto-Saracenic Metalwork* (PhD. Thesis: University of Edinburgh, 1989), Vol. 1: 153-156. See also Sylvia Auld, *Renaissance Venice, Islam and Mahmud the Kurd: A Metalworking Enigma* (London: Altajir World of Islam Trust, 2004).

⁷⁹ Denise-Marie Teece, "Arabic inscriptions in the service of the church: an Italian textile evoking an early Christian past," in Christine Göttler, and Mia M. Mochizuki, eds., *The Nomadic Object: The Challenge of World for Early Modern Religious Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2018), 74-102.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 89.



Figure 23
 Fragment of a silk textile, Italy, Egypt or Syria, 14th century. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Inventory No. 46.156.14). Photo: Metropolitan Museum of Art/Public Domain.

vestments for priests performing the Mass or to “dress” the remnants of Christian saints – in other words, to wrap relics.⁸¹ Like Arabic-inscribed dishes adapted as salvers, such objects had become integral to the ritual order of the Italian church by the 15th century.

⁸¹ The practice of wrapping relics in textiles bordered with Arabic inscriptions was not limited to Italy. For an example of such a textile that can be associated with a specific relic, see Kathleen M. Ashley, *The Cults of Sainte Foy and the Cultural Work of Saints* (New York: Routledge, 2021). Many other surviving textiles are only known to have been used as wrapping for some kind of relic, without the specific object being known; see Teece, “Arabic inscriptions in the service of the church.”

Pilgrimage accounts of the same period are suggestive of a consciousness of a larger culture of competitive adaptation between Christianity and Islam around symbols of faith, and particularly symbols of the Eucharist as a key point of difference between the two faiths. The Dominican Felix Fabri (1441-1502) for example referred to the cup on the Mamluk sultan's blazon as having an inscription which he inventively transliterated for his reader as "Legala piste ha la la" and – more plausibly – translated as "There is no victory but that of God."⁸² He further explained that the cup was first adopted by the Mamluk sultans when a Christian king had been captured and sought to buy his freedom:

by promising the sultan that he was ready to deliver his God to him as a pledge that he was able to pay his ransom, and he gave him the sacrament of the Eucharist in a chalice. The Lord Sultan, to the shame of the Christians, then had the chalice painted on the shields with which he forced the Christians to withdraw. From that day to this, all the sultans use this emblem.

The cup referred to the status of the cupbearer within the Mamluk hierarchy and appeared as a blazon on various objects, including metalwork; this was especially true in the late Mamluk period, the second half of the 15th into the early 16th century.⁸³ There are no suggestions within the Mamluk sources, however, of a Eucharistic symbolism.

Felix Fabri's story, like his inventive translation of the Arabic inscription that he

⁸² Sylvia Auld, "The Mamluks and the Venetians Commercial Interchange: The Visual Evidence," *Palestine Exploration Quarterly* 123.2 (1991): 84-102.

⁸³ James W. Allan, "Later Mamluk Metalwork: A Series of Dishes," *Oriental Art* 15.1 (1969): 38-43. Helmut Nickel, "A Mamluk Axe" in Robert Elgood, ed., *Islamic Arms and Armour* (London: Scholar Press, 1979): 149-161. Leo Ary Mayer, *Saracenic Heraldry* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933).

associated with the chalice, does not necessarily capture the literal truth, but points to a larger consciousness of competitive adaptation of objects and symbols between the Islamic culture of the Mamluk sultanate and the Christian culture of his native Italy.⁸⁴

In the previous century, the Florentine pilgrim Simone Sigoli (fl. 1384-90) included observations of the remarkable culture of metalwork in the Mamluk Sultanate, in the account of his pilgrimage of 1384-1385.⁸⁵ During his visit to Damascus in 1384, Simone visited the markets of the city and based upon these experiences described the brass objects there that “appear of gold,” worked with “figures and foliage and other fine works in silver, so that it is a very beautiful thing to see.”⁸⁶ This observation returns us to a subject raised in the first part of this paper: the association of Arabic with knowledge of the transformation of materials, and specifically the arts of alchemy. The possible relationship of inscribed metalwork objects in this period to the alchemical as well as talismanic arts remains a little understood aspect of the history of this period.⁸⁷

⁸⁴ By the late 15th century, Italian pilgrims like Felix Fabri must have become used to the image of Mary in a textile bordered by a script resembling Arabic. Is it possible that the practice of sultans and other high-ranking officials dressing in similar robes of honor could have – like the chalice emblem – been perceived as a Mamluk practice appropriated from an originally Christian practice?

⁸⁵ Rachel Ward, “Plugging the Gap: Mamluk Export Metalwork, 1375-1475” in Jens Kröger, Annette Hagedorn, and Avinoam Shalem, eds., *Facts and Artefacts: Art in the Islamic World: Festschrift for Jens Kröger on His 65th Birthday* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), 263-285.

⁸⁶ Lionardo Frescobaldi, Giorgio Gucci, and Simone Sigoli, *Visit to the Holy Places of Egypt, Sinai, Palestine and Syria in 1384, by Frescobaldi, Gucci, and Sigoli. Translated from the Italian by Theophilus Bellorini and Eugene Hoade. Preface and Notes by Bellarmino Bagatti* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Press, 1948), 182.

⁸⁷ Ittai Weinryb, *The Bronze Object in the Middle Ages* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 108-146. Halleux, “The Reception of Arabic alchemy in the West.” Pamela H. Smith, “Itineraries of Materials and Knowledge in the Early Modern World” in Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds., *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (London: Routledge,

This is true also for the Mamluk context for the creation of Arabic-inscribed dishes that inspired the haloes with Arabic pseudo-scripts in Italian altarpieces.

Could invocations of power and divine majesty, as extended by means of inscribed metal objects, have been understood in relationship to the talismanic arts? The talismanic arts centered upon the manipulation of the influence of stellar rays through knowledge of the interrelation of metals to the stars and the activation of this relationship by means of inscriptions.⁸⁸ The resemblance of the Mamluk dishes with radiating inscriptions to the novel Italian materialization of the halo as an inscribed golden disc might ultimately relate to a shared culture originating in Arabic philosophical works like *De Radiis* by al-Kindi (c. 801 – c. 873).⁸⁹ This 9th-century Arabic text, known only through Latin translation of the 12th century, was a foundational treatise on the manipulation of the effect of celestial elements upon the sublunar realm by means of inscriptions knowledgably made into appropriate metals at auspicious times.⁹⁰ There is evidence that some of the cryptic features of Arabic for an Italian audience perhaps had a more general resonance with the perceived power of talismans,

2015): 1-31. P. T. Craddock, "The Copper Alloys of the Medieval Islamic World - Inheritors of the Classical Tradition," *World Archaeology* 11.1 (1979): 68–79.

⁸⁸ Alicia Walker, "Meaningful Mingling: Classicizing Imagery and Islamicizing Script in a Byzantine Bowl," *The Art Bulletin* 90.1 (2008): 32–53.

⁸⁹ Interpretations of the radiating inscriptions on Mamluk metalwork dishes have primarily focused upon the idea of representations of solar or light rays, rather than more general perceptions of the influence of rays emitted from both stellar and sublunary sources. Eva Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983). Sheila Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1998), esp. 117-118. David Rice, "Studies in Islamic Metalwork IV," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 15.3 (1953): 489-503.

⁹⁰ Rosier-Catach, "Regards croisés sur le pouvoir des mots."

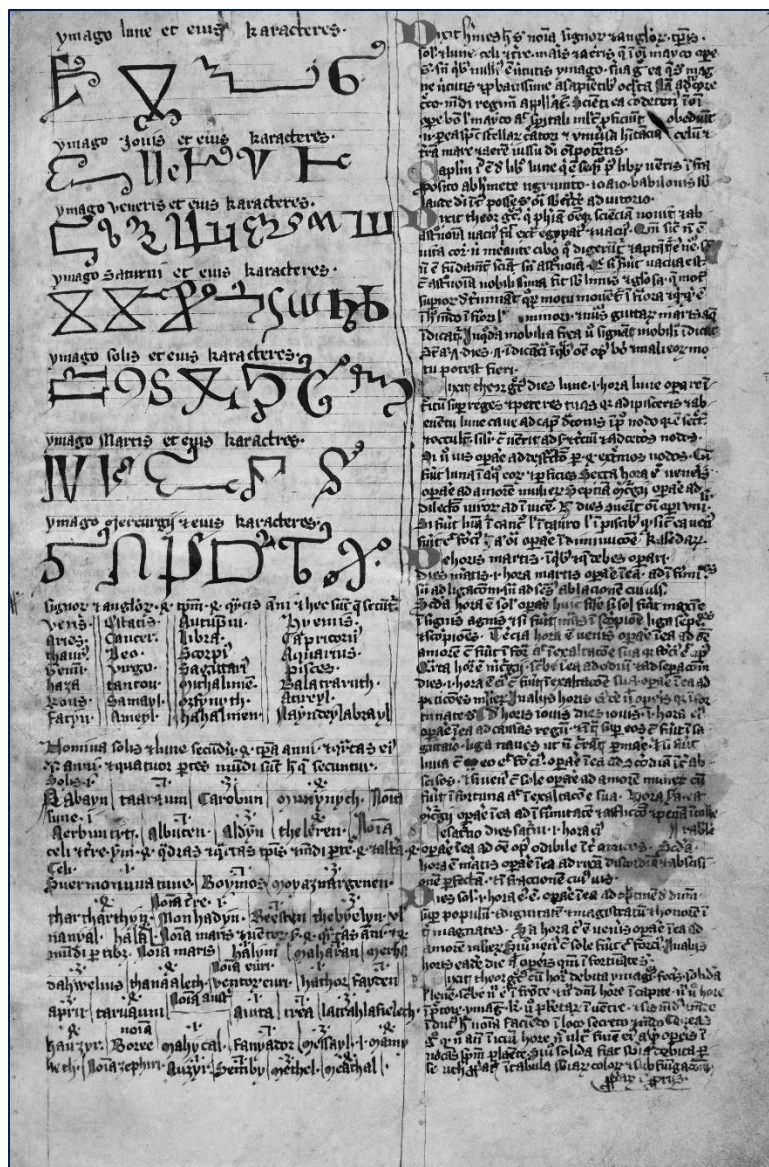


Figure 24 Talismanic inscriptions, Ms. Palatinus Latinus 1196, f. 3r. Vatican Library. Photo: By permission of Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, with all rights reserved © 2021 Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana.

understood as part of the esoteric knowledge transmitted from pre-Christian cultures of Egypt, Babylonia, and India by means of Arabic philosophers.⁹¹ Although written sources on the subject are scant from the period because of fears of

abuses of such knowledge, some manuscripts do survive, including specifically from Italy in the 14th and 15th centuries.⁹² In such manuscripts, explanations of the talismanic

⁹¹ Charles Burnett, et al. "Arabic Magic: The Impetus for Translating Texts and Their Reception," *The Routledge History of Medieval Magic* (London: Routledge: 2019), 69–84. David Pingree, "The Diffusion of Arabic Magical Texts in Western Europe" in Biancamaria Scarcia Amoretti, ed., *Diffusione delle scienze islamiche nel Medio Evo europeo* (Rome: Accademia nazionale dei Lincei, 1987), 57-102. Emilie Savage-Smith, *Magic and Divination in Early Islam* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Variorum, 2004). Walker, "Meaningful Mingling."

⁹² Julien Véronèse and Pseudo-Solomon, *L'Almandal Et L'Almadel Latins Au Moyen Âge: Introduction Et Édition Critique* (Florence: SISMEL, Edizioni Del Galluzzo, 2012). See also Jean-Patrice Boudet, Anna

arts often incorporated illustrations of the characters to be inscribed into metal objects; scholars have noted that the Italian manuscripts often incorporate features of Arabic scripts (**Fig. 24**).⁹³ Renderings of magical characters in such manuscripts are most often presented as illustrations to texts reportedly translated from Arabic works transmitting more ancient Solomonic knowledge.⁹⁴

Conclusion

Considerations of larger perceptions of Arabic within cultures of translation around alchemy, talismanic arts, and philosophy more generally, as well as within cultures of pilgrimage and conversion, entail moving beyond the paradigm of cultural exchange imagined as operating within a pan-Mediterranean culture of shared taste for sensuous surfaces and display of luxury goods. This also involves integrating the study of images into questions of experience of space and consciousness of the movement of objects, people, and texts. Concepts like cultural sharing and hybridity fail to capture the complexities of appropriation and articulations of difference. The idea of convergence instead evokes trajectories of intentionality, that can be contextualized

Caiozzo, and Nicolas Weill-Parot, *Images Et Magie: Picatrix Entre Orient Et Occident* (Paris: Honoré Champion éditeur, 2016).

⁹³ Paolo Lucentini and Compagni V. Perrone, *I Testi E I Codici Di Ermete Nel Medioevo: Appendice: Paolo Lucentini, Antonella Sannino: Le Stampe Ermetiche* (Florence: Polistampa, 2001).

⁹⁴ The Italian texts of such works also are filled with transcriptions of Arabic terms, many of which are nonsensical to the modern reader, and likely to the original copyist. Véronèse and Pseudo-Solomon, *L'Almandal*, 16.

within larger cultures of translation and conversion. The significance of such experiences of convergence within the context of pilgrimage for the formation of polemical characterizations of Islam attests to the complex negotiations of shared traditions and perceived cultural differences. What has been called kufesque or pseudo-Arabic in art historical studies of the modern period should – I would argue – be understood as a meaningful articulation of the ground for Christian figures, that ultimately served to visualize perceived differences between Christian and Islamic doctrine around the idea of the figurability of the divine.

I also hope that by reframing the history of representing Arabic scripts in Italian altarpieces in relation to cultures of translation and conversion we can form a more nuanced picture of the historical emergence of a European concept of Islamic art. The concept of kufesque, like arabesque, emerged within the field of visual experience before being articulated within art theory or history. This process of emergence is in itself a testament to the significance of perceptions of Arabic and Islamic cultures as a ground for certain aspects of figuration in European art. Writing a history of this process will ultimately entail a reversal in our direction of thinking, primarily by understanding kufesque and arabesque not as a product of the influence of Islamic art, but as visual concepts born out of a process of visually articulating the perceived relationships between Islamic and Christian cultures. Representations of Arabic scripts in the context of Italian altarpieces constitute just one aspect of this larger history. 🐼