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ARABIC SEALS AND SCRIPTS
SIMONE ASSEMANI THROUGH
HIS UNPUBLISHED CORRESPONDENCE

Abstract

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

Keywords

Simone Assemani, correspondence, seals, scripts

«To You Sir, dear brother, the most noble, the Master Olaus Gerardus Tychsen – God the greatest keep him, amen» / *ilā ḡanāb ḥaḍara' al-akh al-'azīz al-akram al-mu'allim Ūlaws Ġirārdūs Tīksin al-mukarram ḥafaḏahu Allāh ta'ālā amīn.*

This is the heading of a letter preserved as a draft (fig. 1) addressed by Simone Assemani to the famous German numismatist Oluf Tychsen (1734-1815). This manuscript belongs to the Moschini file, in the library of the Museo Correr in Venice. The so-called “Epistolario Moschini” contains 35 documents in Arabic, dated between 1785 and 1816: letters written by Simone Assemani, translated by him, and sent to him¹. I will concentrate here on just a few letters²: even if there is in fact little evidence of Assemani’s numismatic interests in his Arabic correspondence, these letters allow us to enlarge the scope of this contribution to the fields of Palaeography and Sphragistics – disciplines that are both traditionally related to Numismatics, and especially to Islamic Numismatics³. I will end with some considerations on the significance of the reuse of Islamic artefacts in Europe⁴.

The draft we are referring to is undated but the final letter, preserved in the archives in Rostock, bears the date of August 18, 1791⁵. Near the end of this draft letter to Tychsen, Assemani writes: «*ṣaḥḥa al-khātīm al-kūftī fī-l-bunduqiyya wa li-aḡl dālika lam aqdir akhtimu bihi wa-lā ursilu lakum ṭab'atahu*» (“*The Kufic seal in Venice is authentic this is the reason why I could not seal with it or send you an impression of it*”). We do not have elements to identify this seal but if it was not one of the

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

² I have already edited and translated some of these materials; cfr. A. D’OTTONE, *Il carteggio in arabo di Simone Assemani. Una scelta di lettere dalla corrispondenza inedita dell’epistolario Moschini*, in *Studi in memoria di Paolo Radiciotti*, edited by M. Capasso-M. De Nonno, «Papyrologica Lupiensia», suppl. 2015, pp. 175-210.

³ For coins, and gems, as sources for Arabic Palaeography, cfr. A. D’OTTONE, *Arabic Palaeography*, in *Comparative Oriental Manuscript Studies. An Introduction*, edited by A. Bausi et al., Hamburg, Tredition, 2015, pp. 271-276.

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

⁵ Cfr. R. FRENCH, *Oluf Gerhard Tychsen: ein deutscher Orientalist des 18. Jahrhunderts. Eine Untersuchung seiner Korrespondenz als Beitrag zur Geschichte der Orientalistik*, unpublished PhD thesis defended in Rostock in 1986, in particular, pp. 106-109.

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

These lines point out to an exchange between the two scholars, not just of handwritten letters, but of objects too: namely of gem-impressions, but also – as we know from other documents – of coins and glass jetons⁷. Such practice of exchanges is well attested with other erudite correspondences, and I must mention here the case of the famous Nicolas Claude Fabri de Peiresc (1580-1637), whose network spanned across a wide range of contacts – including, for example, the Arabist Thomas van Erpe (a.k.a. Thomas Erpenius, 1584-1624). Peiresc had been disappointed by maronites who had attempted to read some Arabic coins for him, and was then willing to obtain van Erpe's help for their reading and identification by sending to Leiden the casts of some, or all, his Arabic exemplars, or even the original themselves⁸.

Despite the obvious chronological gap, and the unavoidable biographical discrepancies, it is worth noting several common points between Peiresc and Assemani: they both lived in Padua – a university town where Peiresc briefly studied law⁹ and where Assemani taught Arabic most of his life¹⁰; they both left a large correspondence – still not fully published¹¹ – which encompasses not only Europe but also the Mediter-

⁶ Cfr. S. ASSEMANI, *Museo Cufico Naniano*, Padova, Stamperia del Seminario, 1788, vol. II: *Sigilli Cufici*, p. CCXIV e tavola IX. It seems important to note that only part of the Nani collection of Islamic coins, and possibly gems and glasses, is published: the ratio, for coins, is 125 published specimens on 422 total pieces; cfr. A. PONTANI, “*Or vedete, amico carissimo...*”: *Appunti sulla “cassetta gialla” del medagliere naniano di Venezia*, in *ΦΙΛΑΝΑΓΝΩΣΤΗΣ. Studi in onore di Marino Zorzi*, edited by C. Maltezou, P. Schreiner and M. Losacco, Venezia, Istituto ellenico di Studi Bizantini e Postbizantini di Venezia, 2008 (*Biblioteca* 27), pp. 309-337: p. 325. Therefore a work of control, revision and complete publication of the materials urges.

⁷ For a letter attesting Assemani's shipping of kufic coins to Tychsen, cfr. A. PONTANI, “*Or vedete, amico carissimo...*”, cit., p. 327.

⁸ Cfr. P. N. MILLER, *Peiresc and the Study of Islamic Coins in the Early Seventeenth Century. With Appendixes Identifying Peiresc's Coins* by J. Cunnally-S. Heidemann, in *The Rebirth of Antiquity. Numismatics, Archaeology, and Classical Studies in the Culture of the Renaissance*, edited by A. M. Stahl, Princeton, Princeton University Library, 2009, pp. 101-155 and *Appendixes* pp. 156-173: p. 113.

⁹ «[...] il se fixa pour finir à Padoue. Là il vécut à peine quelques mois, les temps que sa personnalité s'illustrât auprès de l'Académie», P. GASSENDI, *Viri illustri Fabricii de Peiresc...Vita*, Hagae comitis 1641; P. GASSENDI, *Peiresc (1580-1637). Vie de l'illustre Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc Conseiller au Parlement d'Aix*, traduit du latin par R. Lassalle, Paris, Belin, 1992, p. 39. P. N. MILLER, *Nicolas-Claude Fabri de Peiresc and the Mediterranean World: Mechanics*, in *Les grands intermédiaires culturels de la République des Lettres : Études des réseaux de correspondances du XVIIe au XVIIIe siècles*, edited by Ch. Berkvens-Stevenlik-H. Bots-J. Häselser, Paris, H. Champion, 2005 (*Les dix-huitièmes siècles*, 91), pp.103-125 : p. 103.

¹⁰ Cfr. A. PONTANI, *Simone Assemani*, in *Padua Felix. Storie padovane illustri*, edited by O. Longo, Padova, Esedra, 2007, pp. 255-268.

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

ranean: Egypt and Syria, for example¹²; they were both in contact with maronites: Peiresc dealing with Gabriel Sionite and Jean Hesronite in Rome, Assemani coming from a maronite family and remaining in contact with other co-religionists (despite having himself converted to the Latin rite); last but not least, they shared a pioneering interest for Islamic coins and numismatics.

THE ARABIC SCRIPT IN ASSEMANI CORRESPONDENCE

Another passage of Assemani's draft to Tychsen (fig. 1), deserves attention: «*The letter (al-khiṭāb)*¹³ you wrote in Arabic and that was sent to us printed by a print house (maṭba'a) of your country made us very happy. As far as the text, its meaning and the order of the words go, we find that these follow the French grammar rather than the Arabic one; concerning your reading of the Kufic script (al-kitāba al-kūfiyya), this is clear-cut ('alā al-ḥarf) – praise be to the One who gave you the gift of reading the ancient script {you do not have rivals in this}. [...] As for us, we wrote you in Arabic {in the language spoken and written by the common people not according to the grammar}».

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

Projects/peiresc/06rp-p-corr.htm. As for Simone Assemani, thanks to the efforts of Anna Pontani part of his correspondence is now published, cfr. A. PONTANI, *Nuovi contributi all'archivio di Simone Assemani (1752-1821): la biografia e il carteggio con Giovanni Cristofano Amaduzzi*, «Quaderni per la storia dell'Università di Padova», pp. 61-104; EAD., *Nuova luce sul “Venetorum angulus” dal carteggio Simone Assemani-Mauro Boni (1800-1815)*, in *Atti e Memorie dell'Accademia Galileiana di Scienze, Lettere e Arti già dei Ricovrati e Patavina*. Volume CXXVI (2013-2014). Parte III: *Memorie della Classe di Scienze Morali, Lettere e Arti*, Padova, Accademia Galileiana di Scienze, Lettere e Arti, 2015, pp. 215-263.

¹² Cfr. P. N. MILLER, *From Anjou to Algiers. Peiresc and the Lost History of the French Mediterranean*, in *Peiresc et l'Italie, Actes du colloque international, Naples, le 23 et le 24 juin 2006*, edited by M. Fumaroli, Paris, Alain Baudry et Cie, 2009 (*La République européenne des Lettres*, III), pp. 279-291. On this enlarged horizon of the European Republic of letters, reflected in the S. Assemani correspondence, cfr. D'OTTONE, *Il carteggio in arabo di Simone Assemani*, cit.

¹³ Considering the anonymous funeral oration for S. Assemani appeared on «Giornale dell'italiana letteratura», see *ultra*, I translate here the word *khiṭāb* with “letter” (it. «discorso, allocuzione [...] lettera, missiva, messaggio») and I do not think it can be rendered with “book” as previously suggested by M. Khairallah, cfr. A. PONTANI, *Dall'archivio di Simone Assemani (1752-1821): documenti e carteggi*, «Quaderni per la storia dell'Università di Padova» 40 (2007), p. 3-66: p. 28.

of the common people, *bi-lisān al-‘amma*¹⁴. This detail helps us to put Assemani’s knowledge of Arabic in perspective¹⁵: he was – after all – born in Rome, he studied in Rome, and he lived most of his life in Padua. Whether or not he was a dialectal Arabic mother-tongue speaker and he had to study classical Arabic, what always remained a work-tool for him. Moreover Simone Assemani always published in Italian and Latin, which suggests that these languages were easier for him and more familiar to him¹⁶.

On another subject, my attention was caught by the mention of a “printed letter” in which Tychsen discussed a Kufic inscription. Most likely, this document is linked to Tychsen’s reading and interpreting of the Arabic inscription carved on the so-called “throne of St Peter” in Venice. Tychsen dedicated several publications to this subject, between 1787 and 1790, and he is actually considered to be the first scholar to have attempted a scientific study of the throne¹⁷. Tradition had it that this throne had been used by St Peter in Antioch, and had then been offered to the Doge (chief magistrate) by a Byzantine emperor – whose name varies according to the sources. As other scholars already pointed out, this is a made-up story and the throne is a confection made of various pieces of marble of different dates, origins and functions – a *pot-pourri* so to say¹⁸.

¹⁴ The word *al-‘ammiyya* indicates, in fact, the spoken language.

¹⁵ On the discussed knowledge of the Arabic pretended by some maronites, cfr. A. GIRARD, *Quand les maronites écrivaient en latin: Fauste Nairon et la République des lettres (seconde moitié du XVII^e siècle)*, in *Le latin des maronites*, edited by M. Issa, Kaslik [in press] ; A. GIRARD, *L’enseignement de l’arabe à Rome au XVIII^e siècle*, in *Maghreb-Italie. Des passeurs médiévaux à l’orientalisme moderne*, edited by B. Grévin, Rome 2010, pp. 209-234 : p. 216.

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

¹⁷ Cfr. V. STRIKA, *La «Cattedra» di S. Pietro a Venezia. Note sulla simbologia astrale nell’arte islamica*, Napoli 1978 – Supplemento n. 15 agli «Annali» 38 (1978), fasc. 2, p. 5. But it was Michelangelo Lanci (1779-1867) who eventually deciphered properly and fully understood the nature of the “throne”, cfr. M. LANCI, *Trattato delle simboliche rappresentanze arabiche e della varia generazione de’ musulmani caratteri sopra differenti materie operati* – Tomo secondo, Parigi, Dondey-Dupré, 1846, pp. 26-30 e tavole XVII-XVIII. The inscription is illustrated and briefly described in *Gli Arabi in Italia. Cultura, contatti e tradizioni*, edited by F. Gabrieli and U. Scerrato, Milano, Garzanti, 1993⁴ (ed. or. 1979), pp. 530-531: n. 600.

¹⁸ The seatback is a 11th century Seljukid stele whilst the rest of the seat is older, cfr. STRIKA, *La «Cattedra» di S. Pietro*, cit. Interesting parallel is the reuse of Coptic and Byzantine tables mainly as funerary steles in Islamic context, cfr. F.B. FLOOD, *The Medieval Trophy as an Art Historical Trope:*

Before discussing again the throne, I would concentrate, for the moment, on the existence of printed letters: the detail is interesting as they form a type of enlarged correspondence of public nature. Relevant to our theme, we illustrate here one example - in Latin and dated 1787 – addressed by Tychsen to the famous Maltese abbot Giuseppe Vella (1749-1814). In this example (figg. 3-4), preserved in the British Library, Tychsen thanks Vella for his *placet* to his interpretation of the inscription on the throne¹⁹: “*Nothing could be more pleasant for me than your very important agreement on my interpretation of the Kufic inscription on the throne of St Peter, falsely attributed. The famous Assemani [i.e. Giuseppe Assemani] was not able to read it [...]. I received your gentle letters with great pleasure and I read them again and again with undiminished profit*”²⁰. Printed letters must, therefore, be taken into account by whoever tries to reconstruct the private library of Simone Assemani, which contained such documents as well as books and manuscripts.

An attempt to read the marble inscription of the so-called throne of St Peter (fig. 5) was made before Tychsen’s. The very famous great-uncle of ‘our’ scholar, Giuseppe Assemani (1687-1768), had indeed tried but failed. Unluckily he did not study it in a philologically way, as he was instead trying to decipher what traditionalists wanted to read: that it was from Antioch – detail that implicitly validated the “tradition” according to which it was the throne of St Peter in Antioch²¹. In 1787, Simone Assemani referred himself to the reading by his great-uncle, and wrote in

Coptic and Byzantine “Altars” in Islamic Context, «Muqarnas. An Annual on the Visual Culture of the Islamic World» XVIII (2001), pp. 41-72.

¹⁹ On Tychsen approval of the authenticity of the Arabic-Sicilian codex forged by Giuseppe Vella, cfr. PONTANI, *Dall’archivio di Simone Assemani*, cit., p. 29.

²⁰ «*Quod tuo gravissimo assensu meam interpretationem inscriptionis cuficæ in cattedra S[ancto] Petro falso adscripta probes, nihil mihi potuit esse dulcis. Assemanum V[irum] C[larissimum] cufica legere non potuisse [...]. Litteras tuas humanissimas [...] mihi redditas summa voluptate, nec minori cum fructu legi relegique*», O. TYCHSEN, *Summe Reverendo ... J. Vella ... S.P.O.D.G. Tychsen*, [s.l. s.d]. My colleagues Anna Pontani and Bruno Callegher recently re-published a funeral oration from 1821 in which it is mentioned that Assemani had received printed letters from Tychsen and possibly the same one addressed by Tychsen to Vella: «[...] ed in quell’anno medesimo [i.e. 1790], il suo amico Olao Gherado Tychsen, professore di lingue orientali nell’università di Rostoc, vi stampò alquante lettere di lui intorno ad un cippo sepolcrale di un maomettano che, in Venezia nella chiesa di san Pietro, si guarda da molti come la cattedra di quell’apostolo», cfr. A. PONTANI-B. CALLEGHER, *Un orientalista a Padova: primi appunti su “l’Arabico Assemani” (1752-1821)*, in *Simposio Simone Assemani sulla monetazione islamica* (Padova 17 maggio 2003), Padova 2005, pp. 11-29, sp. pp. 21-24. This, anonymous, oration had appeared in the «Giornale dell’italiana letteratura», issue 53.

²¹ Cfr. G. MOSCHINI, *Guida per la città di Venezia all’amico delle belle arti*, Alvisopoli 1815, vol. 1, pp. 4-5; M. LANCI, *Trattato delle simboliche rappresentanze e della varia generazione de’ musulmani caratteri sopra differenti materie operati*, Parigi, Dondey-Dupré, 1846, vol. II, p. 26 e tavv. XVII-XVIII; G. SECCHI, *La cattedra alessandrina di S. Marco evangelista e martire conservata in Venezia entro il Tesoro Marciano delle reliquie*, Venezia, P. Naratovich, 1853, pp. 9-10.

his *Museo Cufico Naniano*: «Eventually I consider very difficult to read that Arabic script called ‘Qarmatian’: in this script is written the inscription on the marble throne that the common people think to be that of St Peter and that is found in the Patriarchal church in Venice. The already mentioned [...] Flamminio Corner in his work published it²² [i.e. the inscription] with the reading of my great uncle Giuseppe Simonio Assemani»²³.

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

²² The reference is to F. CORNER, *Ecclesiae venetae antiquis monumentis nunc etiam primum editis ac in decades distributae*, Venezia 1749 18 vols.: *Decadis XVI*, c. 194v. G. Assemani’s reading was as follows: «Civitas Dei Antiochia. Postula a me et dabo tibus gentem haereditatem tuam, et potestas tuas usque ad terminos terrae. Reges eos in virga ferrea et tanquam vas figuli conteres eos. Opus Abdullae servi Dei. Sedes tua Deus in saeculum saeculorum, virga aequitas, virga regni tui». On Flamminio Corner, cfr. P. PRETO, *Corner, Flamminio*, in *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani*, vol. 29 (1983), pp. 191-193 and online: http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/flamminio-corner_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/ (last access: February 2015).

²³ S. ASSEMANI, *Museo Cufico Naniano*, Padova, Stamperia del Seminario, MDCCLXXXVII, p. XIV: «Finalmente io penso mal agevolissima a leggersi quella scrittura Arabica, che volgarmente dicesi Carmatica: in questi caratteri c’è l’iscrizione della cattedra di marmo dal volgo creduta di S. Pietro, la quale esiste nella Chiesa Patriarcale di Venezia, e dal sullodato [N.U.] Flamminio Corner nella cit[ata] Opera fu pubblicata, coll’interpretazione fatta dal mio prozio Giuseppe Simonio Assemani».

²⁴ Cfr. CH. M. FRAEHN, *Du caractère d’écriture arabe nommé carmatique. Dissertation où l’on prouve qu’il n’a jamais existé un caractère ainsi nommé*, «Journal Asiatique» I (1828), pp. 379-391, also on the website *Gallica.fr*.

²⁵ The full title of this work is: *al-Qāmūs al-muḥiṭ wa-l-qābūs al-wasīṭ al-ḡāmi‘ li-mā ḏahaba min al-‘arab šamaṭīṭ*; cfr. H. FLEISCH, *al-Fīrūzābādī*, in *E.I.*², Leiden, Brill, II (1965), pp. 926-927.

²⁶ Frähn also cites al-Jawharī (d. 1002 or 1008), the author of the dictionary *Tāğ al-luğa wa šihāh al-‘arabiyya* (“The crown of the language of correct Arabic” commonly known as *al-Šihāh* or *al-Šahāh*). Cfr. L. KOPF, *al-Djawharī*, in *E.I.*², II (1965), pp. 495-497.

with the word *qarmaṭa*, when applied to a script, is a basic way of writing – which can be found in every languages and scripts²⁷.

REUSE AND PERCEPTION OF ARABIC ARTEFACTS

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

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

²⁷ Cfr. FRAEHN, *Du caractère d'écriture arabe*, cit., p. 391: «Cessons de croire qu'il ait existé un caractère carmatique; ne donnons plus un faux sens à ce que les lexicographes arabes nous disent d'une simple manière d'écrire, qui doit nécessairement se rencontrer dans chaque langue, dans chaque écriture». Unfortunately, and despite Frähn's plea, an art historian resuscitated this fictitious script in 2006, cfr. S. BLAIR, *Islamic Calligraphy*, Cairo 2006, p. 179, nota 9. On the need of a proper distinction between the field of study of Calligraphy and Palaeography, cfr. A. D'OTTONE, *Un'altra lezione negata. Paleografia araba ed altre paleografie*, «Rivista degli Studi Orientali» 87 (2014), pp. 213-221; pp. 218-221.

²⁸ Cfr. A. D'OTTONE, *Il carteggio in arabo di Simone Assemani*, cit.

²⁹ Cfr. A. D'OTTONE, *Il carteggio in arabo di Simone Assemani*, cit.

re-used in a Christian context and registered among the relevant monuments of the town of Venice. As early as 1583, in the chapter dedicated to the church of St Peter in his book entitled *Venetia, città nobilissima et singolare*, Francesco Sansovino referred to the throne of St Peter: «There you can see also the marble throne that St Peter was using when he was Bishop of Antioch and that was donated to the [Venetian] Republic by Michael Paleologus, emperor of Costantinople»³⁰. In a revised edition, enlarged by Giovanni Stringa who was canon of the church of St Marc, an additional piece of information can be found: the throne was “Revered and kissed by pious and devoted people, especially during the feast day of St Peter to receive the indulgence”³¹. And so Michelangelo Lanci writes, recalling the effect that Giuseppe Assemani’s reading of the inscription had on the common people, who: «Believing to such an authoritative testimony [...] more frequently and with more enthusiasm than before pious people were kissing the letters and were rubbing their rosary beads on it - praying»³².

Such “special properties” attributed to the throne are very meaningful³³, but it is not the only case of an Arabic-Islamic artefact re-used in a Christian context³⁴. I can give here as example the Fatimid textile known as ‘the veil of St Anne’, which was originally a honorary robe given by the caliph to one of his favorite but became a

³⁰ F. SANSOVINO, *Venetia, città nobilissima, et singolare descritta in XIII. Libri*, Venetia 1583, I: *Di Castello, San Pietro*, p. 5v: («Vi si vede anco la cattedra di San Pietro di marmo, della quale si serviva quando fu Vescovo d’Antiochia, donata alla Republica da Michele Paleologo, Imperatore] di Costantinopoli»).

³¹ *Venetia, città nobilissima, et singolare descritta già in XIII. Libri da M. Francesco Sansovino et hora con molta diligenza corretta, emendata, e più d’un terzo di cose nuove ampliata dal M.R.D. Giovanni Stringa Canonico della Chiesa Ducale di S. Marco*, Venezia 1604, p. 101: «riverita et baciata da pie et devote persone: et specialmente nella solennità di San Pietro [...] per ricevere la Indulgenza».

³² «Impertanto su la fede di un così autorevole testimonio tutti nella vecchia loro opinione affermaronsi, anzi con più frequenza e più caldezza di cuore i fedeli baciavano buonamente le lettere e con devota prece rosarii e coroncine vi stropicciavano», LANCI, *Trattato delle simboliche rappresentanze*, cit., p. 26.

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

³⁴ For parallel cases of classical or Byzantine monuments, some of them inscribed in a script different than Arabic (possibly Greek, Hebrew or Syriac), to which talismanic powers were assigned in medieval Syria, cfr. F. BARRY FLOOD, *Image against Nature: Spolia as Apotropaia in Byzantium and the dār al-Islām*, «The Medieval History Journal» 9, 1 (2006), pp. 143-166: p. 148. As well as in Giovanni Stringa’s version of the description of the city of Venice, these classical monuments were registered in the description of the Islamic cities: «By the twelfth century apotropaia and talismans were considered a sufficiently significant part of the urban topography and sacred geography to merit a specific chapter in histories of major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, and key public monuments within them», BARRY FLOOD, *Image against Nature*, cit., pp. 148-149.

relic of the Saint³⁵. The Pisa Griffin – now in the Museum of the Opera del Duomo, but originally installed on the top of the cathedral – the original position of which might be linked to the transfer of its apotropaic powers to the church³⁶. The Ballycotton brooch is also a well-known case of an Arabic object being re-used (fig. 6): this Carolingian cross is set with an Islamic seal in black glass³⁷, and the fact that it was discovered in Ireland has been explained in light of the Viking trade with the Islamic world³⁸. Considering that the Ballycotton brooch is a Christian symbolic object, which contains a Muslim artefact, and was in possession of pagans, hypotheses have been made as to the item having been attributed magical properties³⁹.

I must express here the wish for a comprehensive census of Arabic *spolia* (whether marbles, textiles, gems or other artefacts) which have been re-used in the medieval West (whether in reliquaries, crowns, *et similia*), as it seems to be a pre-requisite for an understanding of how widespread these “exotic” objects were in Europe and how they were perceived and re-used⁴⁰.

³⁵ Cfr. G. CORNU, *Les tissus d'apparat fatimides*, in M. Barrucand (ed.), *L'Égypte fatimide, son art et son histoire*, Actes du colloque organisé à Paris les 28, 29 et 30 Mai 1998, Paris, Presses de l'Université de Paris-Sorbonne, 1999, pp. 332-337 and 8 plates : pp. 333-337 and plates 58-61.

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

³⁷ Cfr. V. PORTER-B. AGER, *Islamic amuletic seals: the case of the Carolingian brooch from Ballycotton*, in *Science de Cieux. Sages, mages, astrologues*, edited by R. Gyselen, Bures-sur-Yvette, Groupe pour l'étude de la civilisation du Moyen-Orient, 1999 (*Res Orientales*, XII), pp. 211-218.

³⁸ Like in the case of the silver ring set with an inscribed amethyst which was found at Birka in Sweden; cfr. *The Viking World*, edited by S. Brink and N. Price, Abingdon, Routledge, 2008, p. 547; S.K.T.S. WÄRMLÄNDER-L-WÄLANDER-R. SAAGE-KH. REZAKHANI-S.A. HAMID HASSAN-M. NEIß, *Analysis and Interpretation of a Unique Arabic Finger Ring from the Viking Age Town of Birka, Sweden*, «Scanning» 9999 (2015), pp. 1-7.

³⁹ Cfr. PORTER-AGER, *Islamic amuletic seals*, cit.

⁴⁰ For Britain, cfr. A. PETERSEN, *The Archaeology of Islam in Britain: recognition and potential*, «Antiquity» 82 (2008), pp. 1080-1092. For some thoughts on the different identities an object experiences, see HOFFMAN, *Pathways of Portability*, cit., p. 42. The number of Islamic objects in the Treasuries of churches in the Latin West is far from being irrelevant considering that it includes: «circa eighty Islamic rock crystal objects, thirty cut- and enameled-glass vessels – the so-called *bacini* [...]» to these (incomplete) figures one has to add the number of objects known through inventories and today lost as well as that of objects nowadays in public and private collections but originally kept in church

I will limit myself to point out here some examples of engraved Arabic gems re-used in a western, particularly Christian, context⁴¹: a garnet in the reliquary of St. John's tooth (Treasure of Monza Cathedral)⁴², another garnet in the crown of the Holy Roman Empress Constance of Aragon (Palermo Cathedral)⁴³; a black glass bead in the reliquary of St. Maurus (now in the Czech Republic) (fig. 7)⁴⁴; a carnelian with an Arabic inscription formerly set in the front of a Romanesque altar (Treasure of the Gerona Cathedral)⁴⁵ (fig. 8). Such pieces deserve separate studies, because of the regional and chronological differences of their contexts, but they all belong to the Islamic gems used in medieval Europe, and they contribute to the study of their circulation, their re-use, and their perception⁴⁶. Moreover, as it has been already

treasuries, A. SHALEM, *The Otherness in the Focus of Interest: Or, If Only the Other Could Speak*, in *Islamic Artefacts*, cit., pp. 29-44: p. 35. For a contribution dedicated specifically to Islamic caskets and textiles that were (re-)used in ecclesiastical context in Christian Spain, cfr. M. ROSSER-OWEN, *Islamic Objects in Christian Context: Relic Translation and Mode of Transfer in Medieval Iberia*, «Art in Translation», 7,1 (2015), pp. 39-64.

⁴¹ Pope Leone XIII (1810-1903), commenting on the opening of a Seminar in Grottaferrata in which the catholic Albanese rite was adopted, said that it was “an Oriental gem set on the pontifical tiara”, cfr. F. LAURITZEN, *Orientali d'Italia. Da minoranza regionale a seconda religione d'Italia*, in *Cristiani d'Italia. Chiesa, Società, Stato, 1861-2011*, Roma, Istituto della Enciclopedia Italiana, 2011, pp. 905-910: p. 906.

⁴² Cfr. E. P. ECCLESIA, “L'incanto delle pietre multicolori”: *gemme antiche sui reliquiari altomedievali*, in *Gemme dalla corte imperiale alla corte celeste*, edited by G. Sena Chiesa, Milano, Università degli Studi di Milano, 2002, pp. 55-74: p. 61.

⁴³ According to Michele Amari, the inscription in cursive script reads: « In Dio Isà b. Gibair s'affida » (*'Isà b. Ġubayr relies on God*), cfr. M. AMARI, *Le epigrafi arabe di Sicilia*, Palermo, L. Pedone-Lauriel, 1879-1885, vol. II, fasc. I (1885): n. II, pp. 15-16.

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

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

⁴⁶ For an interesting case of reuse of an Arabic inscribed gem set in a British seal – now in the collection of Gisela and Werner Daum (Berlin), cfr. A. D'OTTONE, *East&West. A Medieval Seal with an Arabic Gem*, in *Seals and Status*, Proceedings of the conference held at the British Museum

stressed, engraved gems are unique documents and it is important to publish them all – reused or not⁴⁷.

The marbles in the throne of St Peter, the Fatimid textile known as veil of St Anne, the Pisa Griffin and the Arabic paste in the Ballycottin brooch, are all examples of Arabic artefacts in the West. Marbles, textiles, bronzes, crystals and gems inscribed in Arabic were mounted, or integrated, within a new context – seemingly often religious. In their medieval western context, these Arabic elements had acquired magical properties – or at least properties linked to some form of religiosity or superstition. Rewording what has been written for the Byzantine or classical elements re-used in the *Dār al-Islām*⁴⁸, Islamic artefacts in the West were rare fragments of a different culture imbued with supernatural powers. This “exotic effect” is palpable in the ascription of talismanic value⁴⁹.

(4-6 December 2015), edited by J. Cherry, London, British Museum, [forthcoming]. About the re-use of ancient gems in Medieval seals, see M. HENIG, *The re-use and copying of Ancient intaglios set in Medieval Personal Seals mainly found in England*, in *Good Impressions. Image and Authority in Medieval Seals*, edited by N. Adams, J. Cherry and J. Robinson, London, British Museum, 2008 (*British Museum Research Publication*, 168), pp. 25-34.

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

⁴⁸ Cfr. BARRY FLOOD, *Image against Nature*, cit., p. 160.

⁴⁹ On the arrival in Venice of Islamic objects not on a regular basis but as curiosities and rarities, cfr. G. CURATOLA, *Venezia e il mondo islamico da documenti d'archivio*, in *Venezia e l'Islam 828-1797*, Catalogue of the exhibition (Venezia, Palazzo Ducale 28.7/25.11.2007), edited by S. Carboni, Venezia, Marsilio, 2007, pp. 69-77: p. 74. A mysterious exoticism is evoked also by Oleg Grabar for the double inscription, in Latin and Arabic, of a bronze peacock in the Louvre: whilst the Latin text would have been meaningful for a Western owner, the Arabic text – according to Grabar – would have been a fascinating enigma, cfr. O. GRABAR, *About a Bronze Bird*, in *Reading Medieval Images: The*

Still nowadays, the western perception of the Arabic script seems to be associated to magic⁵⁰: in the catalogue of the Egyptian and Roman magical intaglios from the Paris coin cabinet, one could find, under the “symbols” section, a gem (fig. 9) described as «*a line of signs between a moon-crescent and a six-ray star*»⁵¹. In fact, the inverted photograph shows the Arabic inscription: “*In God Muḥammad trusts*” (“*billāh yaṭīqu Muḥammad*”)⁵².

Is it magic? No, Arabic.

Art Historian and the Object, edited by E. Sears and T.K. Thomas, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2002, pp. 117-125.

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

⁵¹ Cfr. A. MASTROCINQUE, *Les intailles magiques du département des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques*, Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, 2014, p. 223, cat. no. 639 : «*Entre croissant de lune et une étoile à 6 rayons : une ligne de signes*».

⁵² Cfr. PORTER, *Arabic and Persian Seals*, cit., pp. 50-55.

٥

تيلسن الملحم حفظه الله العيني

الى جناب حضرة الشيخ العزيز الكرم المعلم اولاد وجراردوت

اولا مزيد كثرة الاشواق لاستماع اخباركم المسترقه وبث
 او فورا ترشنتياق لرويا وحكم السعيد على كل خير
 وسلاما وبعده في ابرق وقت وصلنا عزيز كتابكم
 صرح به الماضى قريناه وحمدنا الله تعالى على صحة
 سلامتكم الموعوده التي عندها غاية المراد من رب العباد
 وجميع ما ذكره صار في علمنا وحقا كان ~~الذي~~
 انشغل بالناس قبل الموضى العارض على بصركم فلكن
 كما اخبرتمونا ابصر الله بحالكم ونفقكم فخذوه ونشده
 على انعامه ارحم لا تداوموا القرائه ليلو يتعب البصر بالزيادة
 فانشرنا ~~الكتاب~~ الخطاب تصنيفكم بالعربية الذي ارسلتم
 لنا مقيوم في مطبعة بلوكم الموحده اما النص والمعاني
 ونوع ترتيب الكلام فوجدناه على قواعد الفرجيه ليس
 على قواعد العربية الاخراتكم الكتابه الكوفيه في على الحرف
 سيجان الذي اعطاه هذه الموهبه ان تقولوا الخط القديم
 ليس ~~تسمى~~ في هذا المعنى ~~ليس~~ يوجد عندنا اخبار
 اخر وانا ما عندهم كتبنا لكم بالسنن العريف ~~كما~~ ~~تفكر~~ ~~وتفكر~~
 العامه ليس ~~بالعريف~~ ونرجو لا تعهدوا في اجبال ~~السنن~~
 وطلب ~~السنن~~ ~~في~~ ~~طريقنا~~
 ونرجو لا تعهدوا تمنعوا عنا اخبار سلامه منكم الساربه ومما
 لزمكم من الخدام موقوفه على العلم ومننا السلام على
 كل من يسال عنا في طريقكم ودام ادمي بقاءكم والسلام
 مع ما يحتاج الكوفيه في البندقية واجار الله ~~بكم~~ ~~المعاني~~
 لم اقدر لخدمه وانه ارسل لكم طبعته نسخة السهوه

FIGURE 1 – Venice, Museo Correr, Epistolario Moschini, S. Assemani to O.G. Tychsen, draft

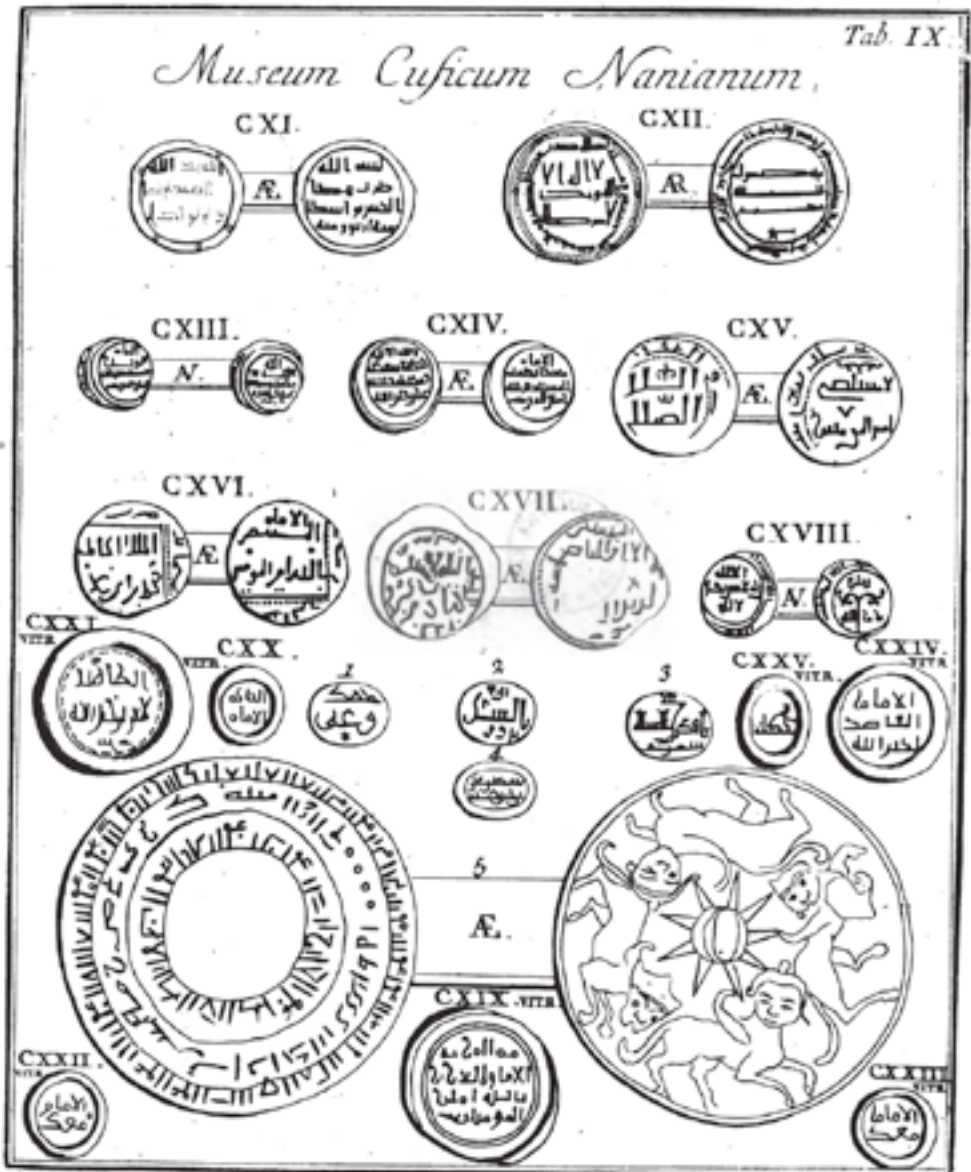


FIGURE 2 – S. Assemani, Museo Cufico Naniiano, Padova, Stamperia del Seminario, 1788, vol. II, pl. IX: Sigilli Cufici

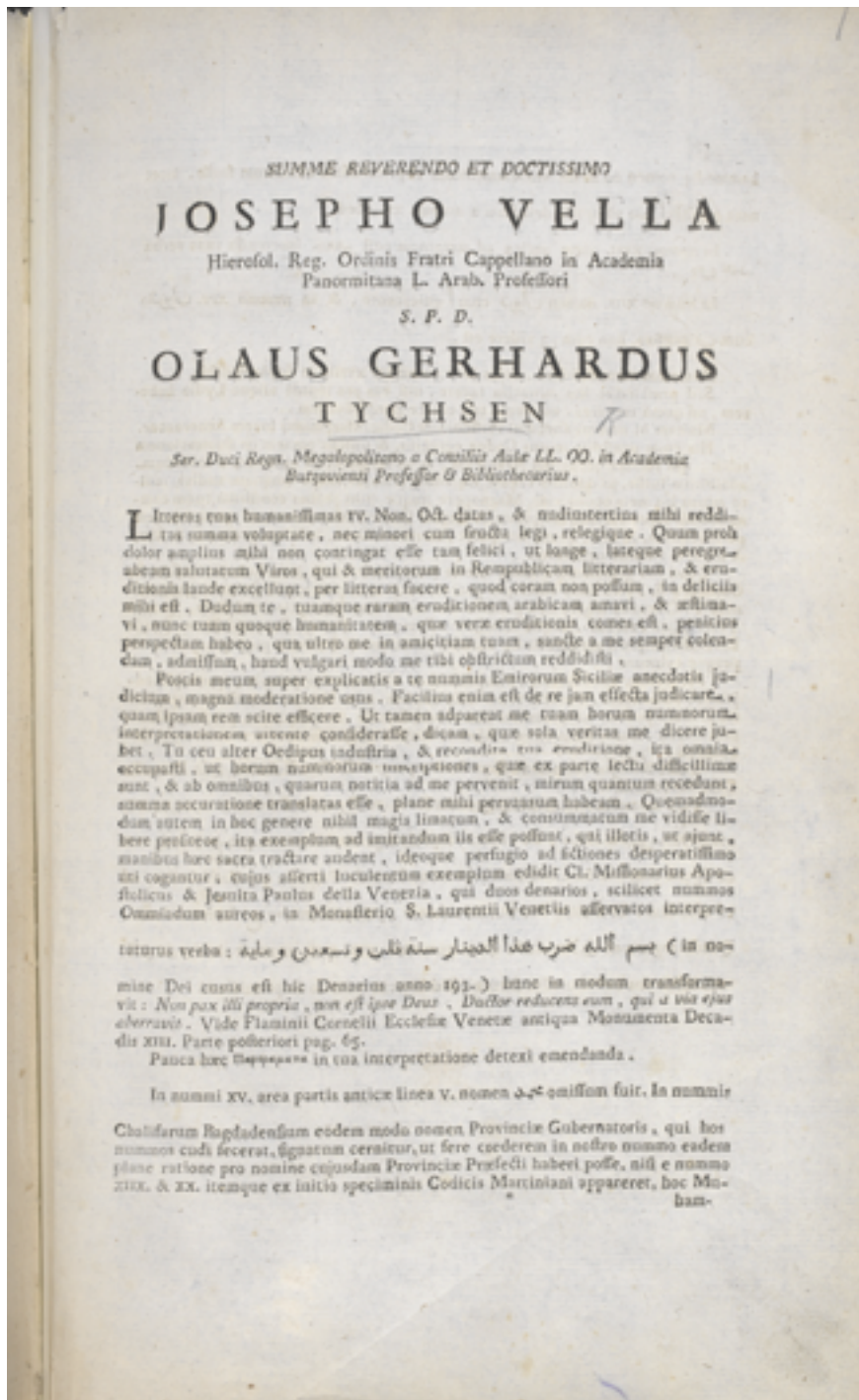


FIGURE 3 – O. TYCHSEN, Summe Reverendo ... J. Vella ... S.P.O.D.G. Tychsen

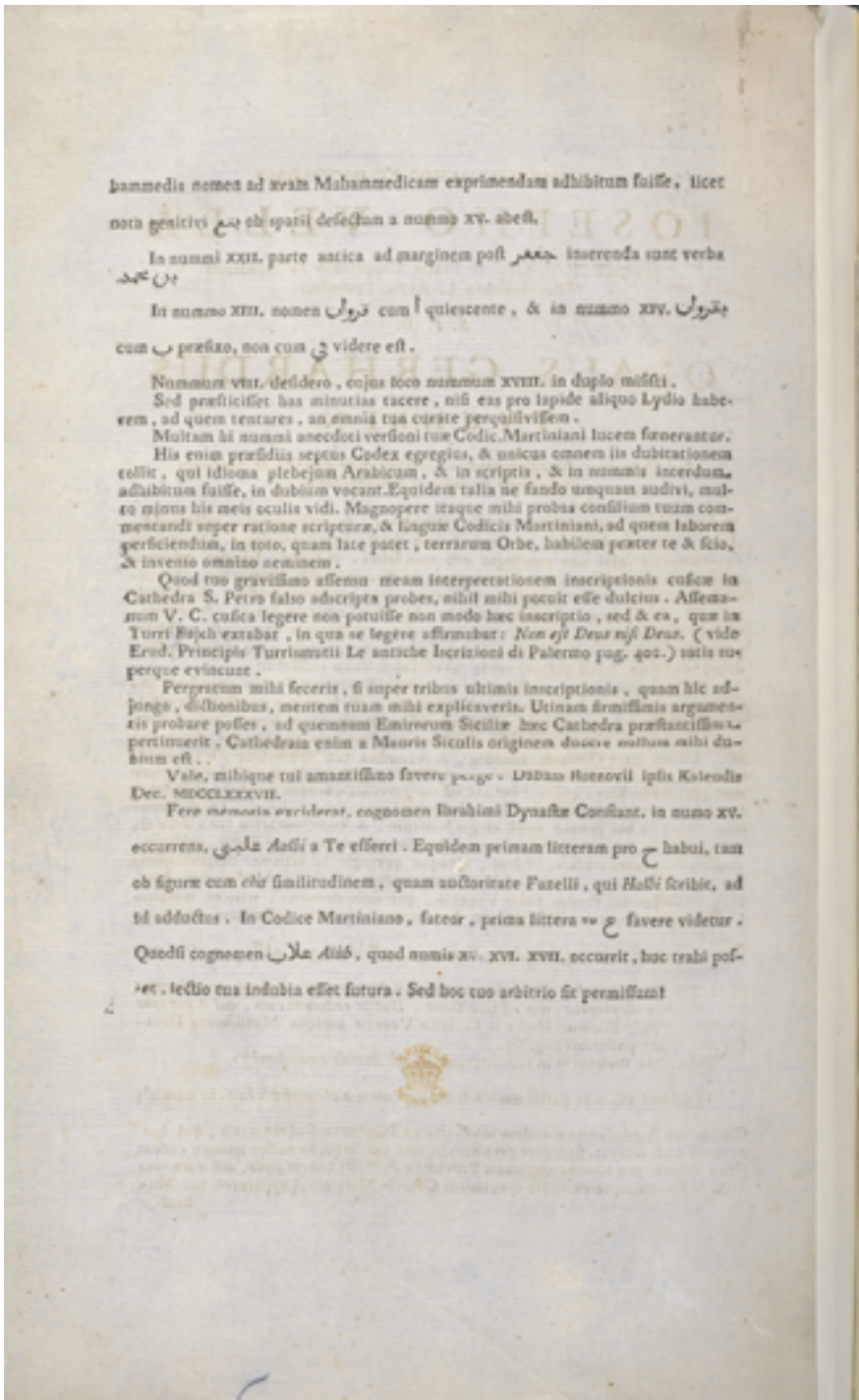


FIGURE 4 – O. TYCHSEN, Summe Reverendo ... J. Vella ... S.P.O.D.G. Tychsen



FIGURE 5 – Venice, St Peter church, throne of St Peter



**FIGURE 6 – London, British Museum, Ballycottin Brooch, Inv. No. 1875,1211.1
(photo © Trustees of the British Museum)**



**FIGURE 7 – Bečov nad Teplou, reliquary of St. Maurus,
detail of the black glass bead**



FIGURE 8 – Gerona, Treasure of the Cathedral, cornaline engraved in Arabic
(photo © A. D'Ottone)



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