The First Book Printed in Arabic

BY PHILIP K. HITT

A book of Hours, printed in Arabic in Fano, Italy, in 1514 by a press subsidized by Pope Julius II has come into the possession of the Library. While not previously unknown, it is exceedingly rare and its production has long presented difficult questions to scholars. For example, what missionary or warlike project of Pope Julius in the Near East prompted the translation and production of a Catholic book of Hours in Arabic? What local usage does the book follow? Or perhaps it follows the Eastern Orthodox usage rather than the Western. These are questions that some scholar may solve in the future.

That the book was intended to attract adherents of Islam is clear by the opening lines of the various sections which imitate the beginnings of the sections of the Koran, "In the name of God, the Ever-living, the Eternal," etc. If it were translated into Turkish, it might well be connected with the odes made by Pope Julius to the Turks shortly before his death, but the Arabic text would seem to preclude that supposition.

I NTO the safekeeping of the Treasure Room of Princeton University Library there has recently passed a small unpretentious skin-bound book that represents the first attempt ever made at printing Arabic from movable type. Its title is Kişih Saiši al-Šundī (literally, the book of the prayer of the hours). Its date of printing is September 12, 1514, and the place Fano, Italy.

"The interest of the book does not end there. It is a rarity of which only three others are known to exist. All three are in Italy: One in the Estense Library at Modena, another in the Biblioteca Medicea at Florence and a third in the Ambrosiana at Milan. This copy, unique in the Americas, stands on a shelf in the Treasure Room next to a copy of the first Arabic work ever printed on a linotype in an American university press.

The book consists of 120 leaves in octavo, all extremely well preserved. The text is in black ink but the rubrics and punctuation marks in red; 12 lines per page. Nine pages have decorative woodcut borders, five of which are white on black, consisting of lines and geometrical figures imitating flowers and leaves and following the pattern of illuminated borders in Korans and other Oriental manuscripts. These borders constitute one of the earliest appearances in print of such motifs and ornamental de-
The colophon says:

The completion of this blessed Book of Hours took place on Tuesday, the twelfth of September, in the year of our Lord Jesus Christ, glory to his name! Amen. It was printed by the master Gregorius of the house of Gregorius of the city of Venice. Done in the city of Fano [Fà] during the reign of His Holiness Pope Leo, the occupant of the throne of St. Peter the Apostle in the city of Rome. He who finds error in it let him rectify it, and God will rectify his affairs through the intercession of the Lord. Amen.

The typographer Gregorius de Gregorius, who evidently made the type following the model of some unknown manuscript, was originally of Forlì, but was summoned from Venice, the then leading center of printing and engraving, to undertake this original project, for whom we are not sure. Father Cheikho asserts in al-Machriq, vol. III (1900), p. 80, that this Arabic press in Fano was established by Pope Julius II (1503–13), a patron of literature and art; but Jacob Mazzoni, a former owner of our copy and author of Annali typografici dei Soncino (Bologna, 1884–86), surmises that the press was attached to the printing establishment of G. Soncino, which produced many works, among them some in Hebrew in 1505. Soncino was himself a Jew. The Italian books of reference do not know much about Gregorius beyond his notable achievement of his, nor about the type he created. If other Arabic works were published in Fano, none are now known. In the article “Fanum Fortunae,” in Dictionnaire de Géographie Ancienne et Moderne à l’Usage du Libraire (Paris, 1790), by Pierre Deschamps it is stated that this Arabic book of hours was published at the request and the expense of Pope Julius II, who died before its completion. The colophon mentions the name of his successor, Leo X (1513–21).

Our copy bears some interesting handwritten gloses and marginal notes, mostly contemporary. The title page carries a manuscript title in Latin: “Horologium sive Graeco sermone in Arabicum translatum.” Below it a later Latin ownership inscription, probably eighteenth century, names the Augustine Eremites Convent at Munich. Other Latin notations on the margin render the Arabic captions. The collation of the forms of the book was marked in Syriac and Arabic by some hand, an Oriental one. Could it be the hand of the typesetter, some Christian immigrant...
from Lebanon, or was it the hand of a reader, one of those Maronite Lebanese scholars who in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries labored in Rome introducing and popularizing Oriental studies? To the inside cover is attached the bookplate of Jacob Manzoni: “Ex Libris Jacobi Manzoni,” with his coat of arms. Manzoni was a bibliophile, scion of an aristocratic family of Milan. He died in 1889; his library was sold 1892-4. Finally this item in it found its way, through an auction sale in England last winter, into the hands of a London bookseller, Goldschmidt, from whom Princeton acquired it by purchase. Here ends the story of our copy.

Several European orientalists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries possessed or utilized copies of this work. The French scholar Renaudot used a copy in Paris in 1716 and rightly termed the prayers Melkite, i.e., Greek Orthodox, evidently of the Alexandrine rite. Other copies in France, mentioned by Brunet, Manuel du Libraire, vol. IV, pt. 2 (Paris, 1803), p. 859, were in the libraries of two distinguished Arabists, Silvestre de Sacy (d. 1858) and Quatrémére (d. 1857). The Quatrémére copy was sold for 60 francs only. The Italo-French mathematician and bibliophile Libri sold presumably the same copy in 1859 for £ 5, 15 s. The de Sacy copy fetched 201 fr. In his Catalogus Bibliothecarum Medicearum (Florence, 1749), the younger Assemani (al-Sam‘ānī describes the Medici copy. The German scholar Tychsen had in 1776 a copy cited in Schnurrer, Bibliotheca arabica (Halle, 1840), pp. 231-3. In his Dictionnaire geographique d’Italie (Florence, 1903), art. “Fano,” Fumagalli reproduces a page of this Arabic book of prayers taken from a copy in the collection of L. S. Olschki, a Jewish bookseller in Rome. Where those copies at present are we do not know. The Encyclopedie Italiana, art. “Libro,” pl. XXII, reproduces the first page of the copy at Modena (Biblioteca Estense). Professor Nalliino of Rome, according to a verbal report made to me by Professor della Vida of the University of Pennsylvania, had recently occasion to examine the Ambrosian copy. A check by my colleague Dr. Faris on the printed catalogs of the major libraries of Western Europe and the Arab East failed to reveal the existence of any other copies. It is surprising that the Vatican does not treasure one.

The second time after 1514 in which Arabic makes its appearance in print is again in Italy in a polyglot Psalter edited by Agostini Giustiniani and published in Genoa 1516. It is interesting in this connection to note that the first Arabic press introduced into Egypt was that of the College of the Propaganda in Rome, which was plundered by Napoleon shortly before his invasion of Egypt in 1798. The first Arabic press in the East was founded in Aleppo, Syria, in 1732, almost two centuries after the Fano press. Today the leading Arabic press of Europe is in Leyden, Holland. Arabic printing was not introduced into America until 1819, when an enterprising Syrian immigrant founded a newspaper in New York.