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ANTHROPOMORPHIC AND ZOOMORPHIC LETTERS IN THE HISTORY OF ARABIC WRITING (1)

by

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It is now just 110 years since *Michelangelo Lanci* published the first samples of both kinds of these fancy forms of writing in his "Seconda opera Cufica, Trattato delle simboliche Rappresentanze Arabiche, Paris 1845-46 (2). And although *Joseph von Karabacek* (3), the originator of scientific Arabic Paleography, has occasionally shown the interesting rôle, which these "Drôleries Arabes" played in art and in the history of script, nobody has yet consecrated special studies to it (4).

In my last lecture "The Origin and Early Development of Floriated Kufic" (on 25th April, 1955) I had already lightly touched upon these strange and fantastic products of the marvellous art of Arabic writing. I have tried to show, in what close connection with Hellenistic book-illumination the evolution of "Coufique fleuri" happened to be. Now the same can be stated concerning the group of "fancy letters," anthropomorphic as well as zoomorphic, the former using human bodies or parts thereof, the latter bodies of animals or parts thereof, as elements of Arabic script.

Kurt Weizmann (5), in a brilliant study on the Greek sources of Islamic scientific illustrations, has lately shown, how

(1) Communication présentée en séance du 5 mars 1956.

(2) Trattato delle simboliche Rappresentanze Arabiche e della varia generazione de' musulmani caratteri sopra differenti materie operati (Paris 1845-1846) Pls. XXIX, XXX, XL - XLI, XLV, XLVI.

(3) Die persische Nadelmalerei Susandschird (Leipzig 1881), pp. 129, 130.

(4) Cf. N. Kondakov, *Zoomorphe Initialen in griechischen und glagolitischen Handschriften des 10. bis 11. Jahrhunderts in den Bibliotheken des Sinai* (Petersburg 1905).

(5) *Archaeologica Orientalia in memoriam Ernst Herzfeld* ed: G. C. Mues, New York, 1952, pp. 244-296, especially p. 265.

strongly "Arab illustrators were exposed to Byzantine influences not only in the stage of the first reception from the Greek, but even long thereafter, since they adapt step by step the innovations which in the Greek manuscripts themselves developed only gradually." The present study may form a further contribution to the problem how far and in which way Arabic art preserved and developed the heritage of Hellenistic art.

Without going into further details I shall try to draw only a rough sketch of the evolution concerned here.

The decoration of letters with floral elements begins in the sphere of Greek and Latin writing as early as the third century A.D. (6) In the fourth century the vertical stroke of Jota is filled in with a herring-bone ornament in the codex of Virgilius Augusteus in Rome (7), in the sixth century A.D. the Orosius-codex in the Bibliotheca Laurentiana in Florence shows zigzag lines and the herring-bone ornament, and even a modest tendril as decoration of the initials (8) (Plate I, 1). In the seventh century A.D. the parchment psalter in the National Library in Paris (9) (Plate I, 2) shows a zigzag band, and in the eighth century A.D. a Greek lectionary (Plate I, 3) in the Library of the Propaganda Fidei in Rome a letter Pi (π) with plaited band. (10)

Both motifs are very frequent in Coptic (Pl. I, 4) (11), Greek and Armenian initials in the following ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries (Pl. I, 5, 6) (12). But very early Greek book-

(6) Cf. Martial' xiii, 75, Ausonius. — J. Strzygowski, *Byzantinische Denkmäler I*, p. 90.

(7) C. Nordenfalk, *Before the Book of Durrow*, *Acta Archaeologica XVIII* (1947), p. 152, fig. 9.

(8) *Ibid.*, p. 152, fig. 10, 153, fig. 11, 154, fig. 13. For the Orosius-codex cf. also C. Nordenfalk, *En senantik initialhandskrift*, *Kunsthistorik Tidskrift XVI* (1937), pp. 117 ff.

(9) Codex Coislinianus No. 186, cf. Stassoff, *L'Ornement Slave et Orientale*, Pl. 120, No. 22.

(10) Stassoff, *op. cit.*, Pl. 132, No. 17.

(11) *Ibid.*, Pl. 132 No. 21, a Coptic Lectionary Ms. 32, eighth century A.D. in the Library of the Propaganda fidei in Rome.

(12) Cf. *Chaghbakcank'*. Die fürstliche Familie der Chaghler oder Proschier, col. 170, fig. 70. *Garegin Howsepian*, *Materialien und Studien zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte, fasc. A* (Jerusalem 1935), p. 20, fig. 3. Plate I, 5 is given after H. Bordier, *Description des peintures et autres ornements contenus dans les manuscrits Grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale* (Paris 1885), p. 97, fig. 39 (Ms. grec 438). Plate I, 6 after p. 117, fig. 55 (Ms. Grec 654, tenth century A.D.) of the same work.

illumination did not confine itself to mere floral or geometrical elements: the *human* figure as well as the figure of *animals* were included in the decoration of initials as early as the sixth century A.D. The first appearance of human figures is proved by the Book of Kells, which is dated in the sixth — from some scholars in the ninth — century A.D. ⁽¹³⁾, that of animals in a Latin Gospel manuscript in the National Library in Paris (Pl. I, 7) ⁽¹⁴⁾, where e.g. the right shaft of A is formed by a fish (seventh century A.D.), or in a manuscript of the eighth century A.D. in the library at Laon, where fishes form the initial Iota and a dragon's head the initial Sigma (S) (Pl. I, 8) ⁽¹⁵⁾. To the same time belongs a Greek gospel manuscript in the National Library in Paris, in which e.g. the initial Alpha shows a dragon (Pl. I, 9) ⁽¹⁶⁾. This animal also forms an initial in the ninth century A.D. ⁽¹⁷⁾, and a bear with a snake occurs in the Beta (B) in a Greek gospel manuscript of the tenth century A.D. in the National Library in Paris (Pl. II, 1) ⁽¹⁸⁾.

Birds preferably are used for the composition of ingeniously designed initials, e.g. the initial L in a Bible of the tenth century A.D. formerly in the Abbey St. Martial de Limoges ⁽¹⁹⁾, or the codex Vaticanus Graecus No. 1162 of the eleventh century, where an Epsilon ε is compounded of a hawk and a falcon with a hare in the middle ⁽²⁰⁾. In Armenian manuscripts, e.g. of the thirteenth, fourteenth centuries A.D. the whole alphabet is formed of such birds (Pl. II, 2) ⁽²¹⁾; it may go back here as far as even the ninth century A.D. ⁽²²⁾. In the sphere of *Islamic art* the first attempts to combine letters with an anthropomorphic

(13) Cf. *L. v. Kobell, Kunstvolle Miniaturen und Initialen aus den Handschriften des 4. - 16. Jahrhunderts* (München 1890), p. 6.

(14) *Lecoy de la Marche Les manuscrits et la miniature*, (Paris s. a.), p. 137, fig. 32 (Codex Latinus No. 256).

(15) *Ibid.*, p. 139, fig. 33.

(16) *H. Bordier, Description des peintures et autres ornements contenus dans les manuscrits Grecs de la Bibliothèque Nationale*, p. 60, fig. 3 (Codex Grec No. 277).

(17) *Lecoy de la Marche, op. cit.*, p. 141.

(18) *H. Bordier, op. cit.*, p. 105, fig. 48 (Ms. grec No. 64, fol. 12).

(19) *N. Kondakoff, Histoire de l'Art Byzantine* (Paris, 1896), p. 27.

(20) *S. Betssel, Vatikanische Miniaturen* (Freiburg i/Br. 1893), Pl. XV.

(21) *J. Strzygowski, Byzantinische Denkmäler*, I, p. 90. — Cf. *Chargh-bakeunk'*, *op. cit.* col. 234, fig. 102.

(22) *J. Strzygowski, op. cit.* I, p. 95.

or zoomorphic ingredient begins in the twelfth century A.D. The occasion thereto is offered by the knoblike top of Alif, already occurring in manuscripts of the eleventh century A.D. (Pl. II, 3) ⁽²³⁾. On a bronze-kettle, dated 559 A.H. (1163 A.D.) in the Ermitage Museum in Leningrad, made in Herât ⁽²⁴⁾, the top of Alif is transformed into a human head in the inscription of the first and fifth line (Pl. II, 4), and similar tops of Alif are to be seen on a bronze-ewer in the Gulistân Palace Museum in Teherân (twelfth century A.D., Pl. II, 5) ⁽²⁵⁾, a candle-stick of bronze in the same Museum ⁽²⁶⁾, on a brass-ewer in the British Museum (Pl. II, 6) in the first and last band of writing ⁽²⁷⁾, a brass-ewer in the Musée du Louvre (twelfth/thirteenth century A.D., Pl. II, 7) ⁽²⁸⁾, in the first and last bands of writing. In a brass-casket in the Victoria and Albert Museum, South Kensington, this form of the Alif is merely used as an ornament and shows no human face ⁽²⁹⁾. It is by no means difficult to point to parallel ornaments in Greek illuminated manuscripts: e.g. Pl. II, 8 shows the initial in the Greek manuscript in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris of the tenth century, ending in two human heads ⁽³⁰⁾. Anyhow, it needed two centuries, before this decoration found its way into the embellishment of Arabic letters, not only for the letters Alif and Lâm, but of other letters also. So the inscription on a golden vessel, originally in the possession of the Roman jeweller *Rota* ⁽³¹⁾, (Pl. II, 9), shows human heads at the top of all letters of the inscription

و باليمن والبركة والدولة والسرور والتامة والسعادة والعافية والعناية والقناعة والقادرة والقدرة والدولة لصاحبه

(23) E. g. PER Inv. Chart. Ar. 17631 (MPER IV, p. 80).

(24) A. Pope, *A Survey of Persian Art*, VI (1939), Pl. 1308.

(25) *Ibid.* Pl. 1314, *Ars Islamica* V/2, 1938, fig. 1 opposite p. 113.

(26) *Ibid.* Pl. 1316.

(27) *Ibid.* Pl. 1325.

(28) *Ibid.* Pl. 1328. Human heads turned to the right decorate the shafts of Alif and Lâm in the Naskhî inscription of a candlestick, published by *Bishr Faris*, *Essai sur l'esprit de la décoration islamique* (Conférences de l'Institut Français d'Archéologie Orientale, III, Cairo 1952) Pl. IV b and p. 29. It was made in Mosul about 1294 A.D.

(29) *Ibid.*, Pl. 1359.

(30) *Leeroy de la Marche*, *op. cit.*, fig. 95, p. 285.

(31) M. Lanci, *Seconda opera cufica*, vol. III, Pl. xxix, vol. II, p. 63.

and a gold-ewer and plate in the same collection ⁽³²⁾, later belonging to the *Odiot*-collection in Paris, shows the same elaborate kind of writing. The ewer (Pl. III, 1) العز والاقبال والدولة والراحة
the plate (Pl. III, 1) العز والبقا والمدحة والثنا والرفعة والعلا والعافية والسنا والبر
والعطا لصاحبه أبداً

A further example is offered by the goblet in the Museum in Bologna ⁽³³⁾. Already in the thirteenth century A.D. animal heads are used in addition to human heads on a pen-case in the Freer Gallery of Art, Washington (Pl. III, 2) made by Shâkir, the engraver, in 607 A.H. (1210/11 A.D.) ⁽³⁴⁾ :

عمل شاكر النقاش في شهور سنة سبع وسبائة
دوا(ة) لشاكر والشاركة والنعمة والرياضة

The *hastae* of Alif and Lâm end in human heads, but a goat's head forms the top of Kâf, and furthermore heads of a lion, a dragon, a dog adorn the tendril intersecting the letters, while in the upper inscription Râ, Yâ and Sin end in bird-heads (Pl. III, 2). It, therefore, recalls the inscription on a seal of the sixth century A.H. (XIIth century A.D., Pl. IV, 1) ⁽³⁵⁾

ذكر الله نور الايمان

where the Kâf in ذكر , Râ in نور and Nûn in الايمان end in bird-heads, while the other letters are richly decorated with floral elements, and on a textile from Palermo ⁽³⁶⁾ of the twelfth century A.D., where the tops of Alif also end in bird-heads. We have already seen that the decoration with bird-heads is frequently used in Greek manuscripts of the tenth century A.D. and may, in Armenian manuscripts, go back even as far as the ninth century A.D.

The culminating point in the creation of zoomorphic and anthropomorphic letters is then reached in the course of the twelfth century A.D. in the well known bronze-vessel made at

(32) *Ibid.* op. cit., vol. III, Pl. xxx, vol. II, p. 64.

(33) *Ibid.*, vol. III, Pl. XL, XLI.

(34) *Ars Orientalis*, I (1954), fig. 8, p. 27.

(35) *M. Lanci*, *Seconda opera Cufica*, vol. III, Pl. LXIII, 7; *J. von Karabacek*, *Susandschird*, p. 130.

(36) *F. Fischbach*, *Ornamente der Gewebe* (Hanau 1883), Pl. XIX.

Mosul in 629 A.H. (1232 A.D.) in the collection of the Duke of Blacas ⁽³⁷⁾ (Pl. IV, 2), where the inscription الخطبة الدائمة consists of human and animal bodies.

A similar piece is known from the collection of Don Philipp Andrea Doria Pamphili Landi ⁽³⁸⁾ with the inscription :

العز الدائم والاقبال الخالد والجد الزائد

It is important to state that in the Islamic sphere of art zoomorphic and anthropomorphic letters appear comparatively late, but early enough to be contemporary with Byzantine and Armenian manuscripts. The highest degree of perfection in the artistic decoration of the initials was reached by Irish monks, who greatly influenced the Carolingian revival of book-art. We know that they travelled as far as Egypt in the sixth century A.D., and they may have been able to see the marvellous production of Alexandrian book-art, of which almost nothing has remained. So their manuscripts of the eighth to the ninth centuries A.D., which have been connected with the popular art of the Celts and Teutons, may reflect some Oriental influence which is unfortunately not so tangible, as one would wish, for the lack of comparative material of this period. Possibly the Arabic pieces shown here form steps on the long road of crossing and intersecting influences originating from Greco-Roman and Oriental art, as does the colophon of the Haggadah of the fourteenth century A.D. ⁽³⁹⁾, in which all Hebrew letters are composed of human bodies only.

(37) *M. Lanci*, op. cit., vol. III, Pl. XLIII., 1; *J. von Karabacek*, *Susandschird*, p. 129.

(38) *M. Lanci*, op. cit., vol. III, Pl. XLV, XLVI. 2.

(39) Cf. *S. Grayzel*, *A history of the Jews* (Philadelphia, 1948), fig. 41, p. 382.

PLATE I



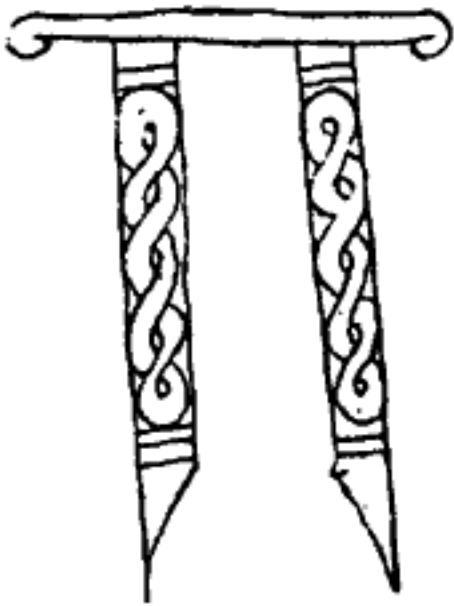
1. Orosius-Codex
VIIth cent. A.D.



2. Psalter (Paris)
VIIIth cent. A.D.



3. Lectionary.
VIIIth cent. A.D. (Rome)



4. Coptic Lectionary
VIIIth cent. A.D. (Rome)



5. Greek Ms.
902 A.D. Paris



6. Greek Ms.
Xth cent. A.D. (Paris)



7. Latin Gospels, Cod.
lat. 206, Paris, Bibl.
Nat. VIIIth cent. A.D.



8. Initials from a Ms.
in Laon, VIIIth cent. A.D.



9. Ms. Gree
No. 277, VIIIth cent.
A.D. (Paris).

PLATE II



1. Ms. Grec. No. 64.
Bibl. Nat. Paris,
Xth cent. A.D.



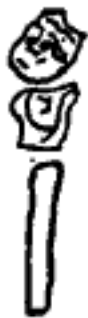
2. Armenian bird-initials
(1375 A.D.)



3. ABC to PER Inv.
Ar. 17631
(XIII cent. A.D.)



4. Bronze-Kettle in
the Hermitage Museum
(Leningrad) 1163 A.D.



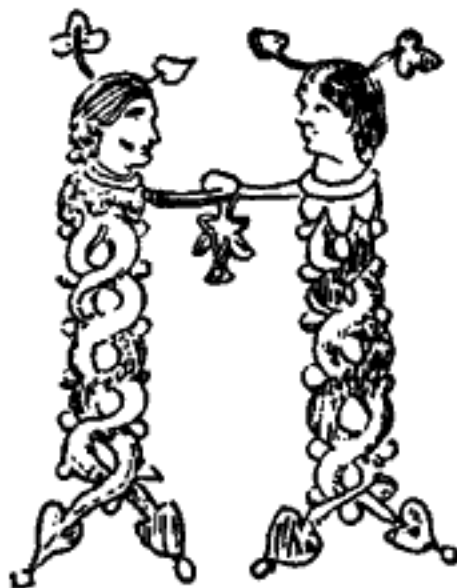
5. Bronze-ewer
XII/XIIIth cent. A.D.
(Teherân, Gullstan
Palace Museum)



6. Bronze-ewer,
British Museum
XII/XIIIth cent. A.D.



7. Brass-ewer
(Louvre)
XII XIIIth cent. A.D.



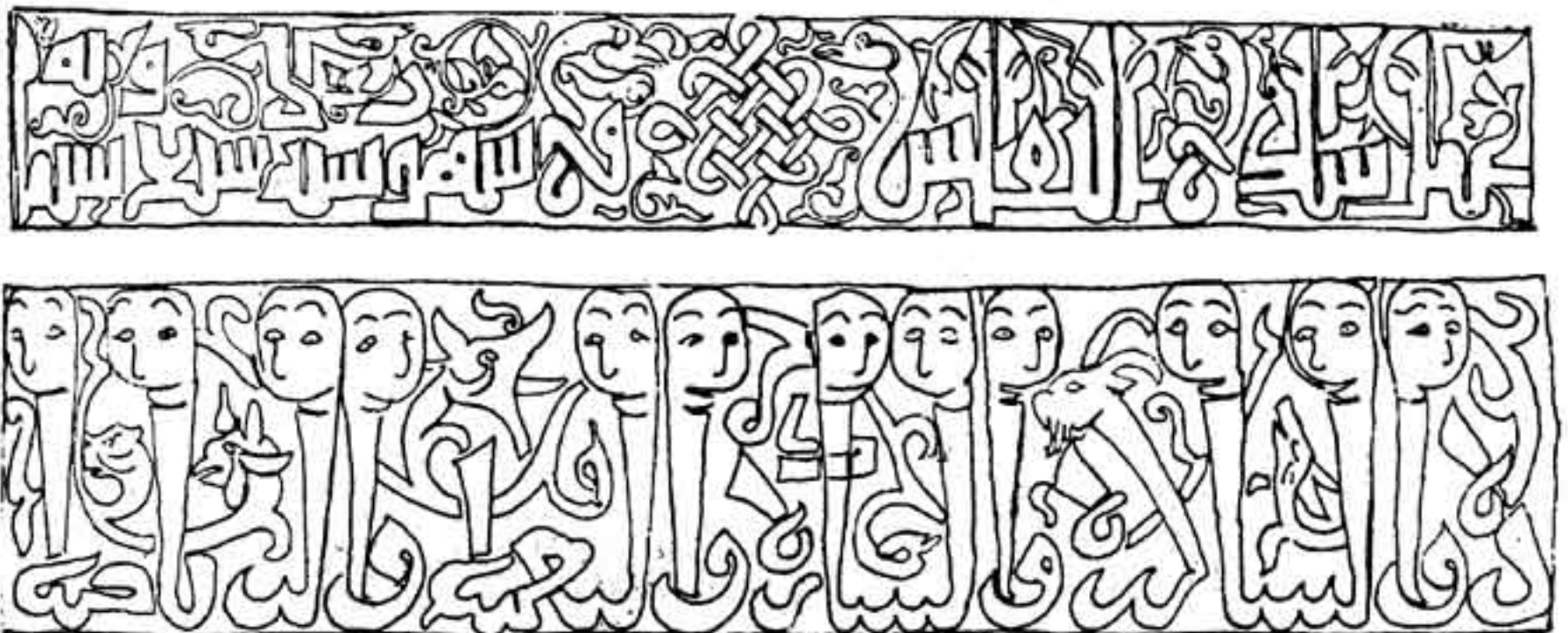
8. Greek Ms. 654
in the Bibliothèque
Nationale, Paris,
Xth cent. A.D.



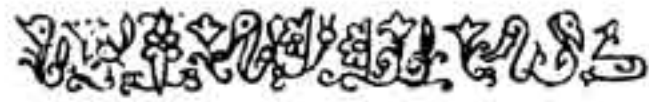
9. Gold-vessel in the Rota-Collection.



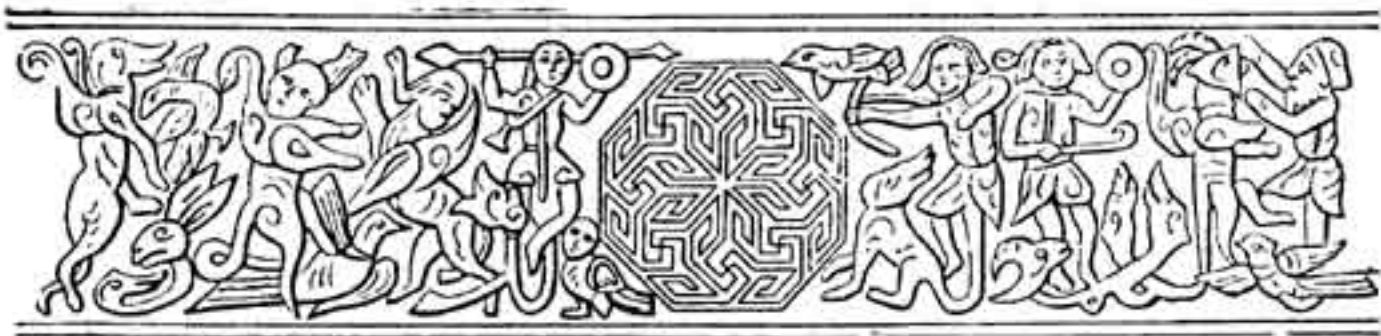
1. Above: gold-ewer in the Rota-Collection,
below: gold plate in the same Collection.



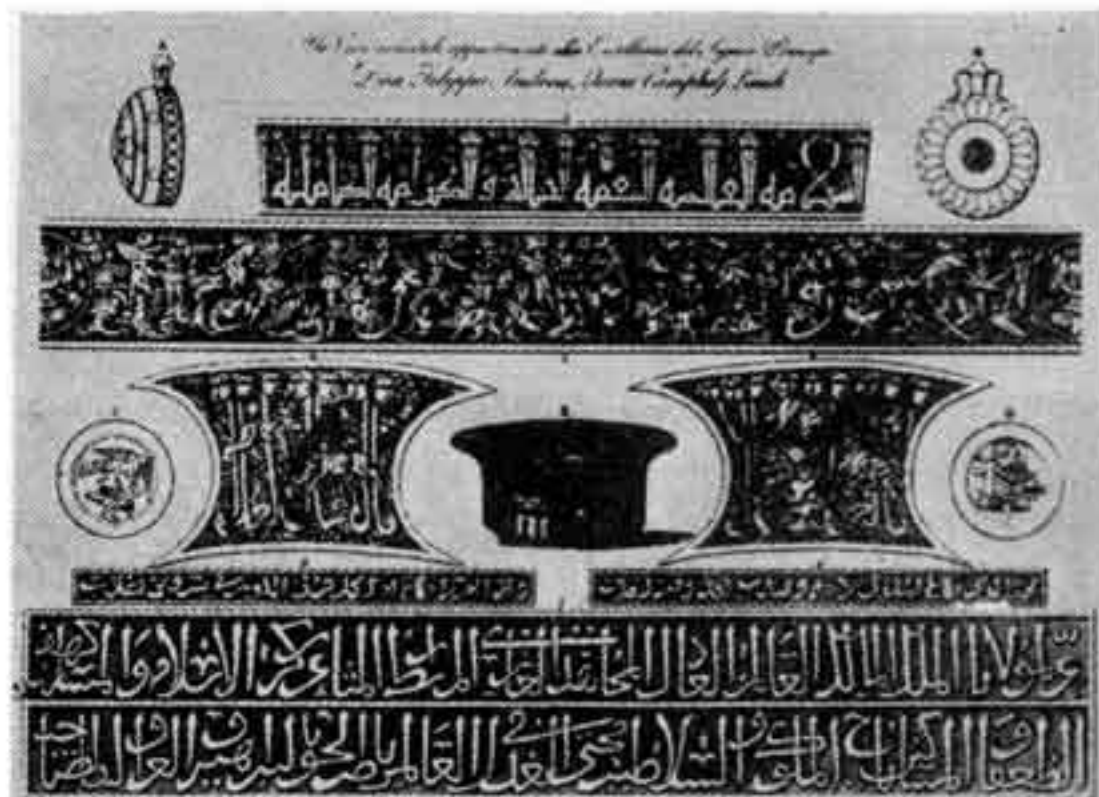
2. Pen-case, dated 607 A.H. (1210 A.D.), Freer Gallery of Art.



1. Inscription on a seal, VIIth cent. A.H. (XIIIth cent. A.D.)



2. Bronze-vessel in the Collection of the Duc de Blacas.



3. Vessel in the Collection. Don Philipp Andrea Doria.