

Yemeni Manuscript Cultures in Peril



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Yemeni Manuscript Cultures in Peril

Edited by

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GORGIAS
JPRESS

2022

Gorgias Press LLC, 954 River Road, Piscataway, NJ, 08854, USA

www.gorgiaspress.com

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2022

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ISBN 978-1-4632-4202-2

ISSN 1935-6838

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

A Cataloging-in-Publication Record is available at the Library of Congress.

Printed in the United States of America

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OPENING YEMEN UP TO ITALY

COFFEE, TEXTILES, AND ARABIC MANUSCRIPTS

VALENTINA SAGARIA ROSSI

ITALIAN TRAVELERS, TRADESMEN, AND PHYSICIANS IN YEMEN, MID-NINETEENTH TO TWENTIETH CENTURIES

The history of Italian collections of Arab-Yemeni manuscripts is basically a story of sales and purchases, negotiations and agreements, and a bustle of adventurous journeys back and forth to Yemen, whose backdrop was Italy's hunt for a strategic position in Eritrea and in Yemen. A closer examination of the circumstances in which manuscripts were brought to Italy as merchandise reveals important aspects of the history of the reception of Arabic texts; by concentrating on the last stage of their journey, one can gain information on the multifaceted and changing relationship between Europe, on the one hand, and the Middle East and North Africa, on the other.

Italians first showed an interest in the Red Sea and strong aspirations in southwestern Arabia long before the First World War. As early as 1865, Giuseppe Sapeto, a former missionary who knew the Red Sea well, wrote in *L'Italia e il canale di Suez* (Genoa: Pellas, 1865) that the opening of the Suez Canal would benefit Italy more than any other colonial power and urged his government to establish a naval station south of the Red Sea. In 1869 Assab Bay was purchased for the Rubattino Shipping Company, the architect of the development of the Italian merchant navy, and in 1885 the towns of Assab and Massaua were occupied by Italian troops, thereby laying the foundation for the colony of Eritrea and the Italian interest in the Red Sea.¹

Despite the colonial propaganda of the Fascist regime, pre-Fascist Italian governments took far more interest in southwest Arabia than Fascist writers admitted. In 1909, in a paper on Italian policies toward Yemen, the geographer and ethnographer Antonio Baldacci confessed the inadequacy of Italian politics in the Middle Eastern area: "Chi siamo veramente noi, in confronto degli inglesi e dei Tedeschi, nel mondo islamico, tra Adriatico e l'oceano indiano?" ("Who are we compared to the British and the Germans, in the Islamic world, between the Adriatic and the Indian Ocean?"). But he also identified the relevance

¹ See John Baldry, "Anglo-Italian Rivalry in Yemen and 'Asīr 1900–1934," *Die Welt des Islams* 17 (1976–1977), pp. 155–193, here: pp. 157–160.

of establishing a political program based on the development of a market and trade between Arabia, Eritrea, and Egypt. He furthermore acknowledged Yemen as a strategic region for the entire Red Sea basin, even defining it the “chiave dell’Arabia intera” (“key to the entire Arabia”), and he deplored the blindness of the Italian government, which declined to support any scientific or commercial initiative in Yemen, on the “Yemeni question.”²

From the very first Italian landing in Yemen, exploratory and commercial purposes were intertwined without any clear distinction between the two fields. As a matter of fact, the Italian approach to the political situation in Yemen between the last decades of the nineteenth and the first decades of the twentieth century was marked not by a clearly definable position but rather individual initiatives, embodying a typical Italian pattern. It is noteworthy that up until the first post-war period the Italians who took the road to Yemen and studied its cultural heritage (Manzoni, the Caprotti brothers, Benzoni, Ettore Rossi, Griffini), were Lombards, belonging to the entrepreneurial and cultured bourgeoisie of northern Italy, who had keenly detected the great potential of that geographical Eastern area, in part thanks to their language skills.

The Italian traveler Renzo Manzoni, nephew of the famous novelist Alessandro Manzoni, explored Yemen three times between 1877 and 1880, traveling from Aden to Sanaa and vice versa. Devoted to learning Arabic, his travel account is a mine of insights on places and customs that enriched current knowledge of the history, geography, and ethnography of the country.³ The royal Italian consul, Giuseppe Bienenfeld, suggested that he visit Yemen and try to establish trade relationship. However, the effort was frustrated by the Milanese traders, who refused to trade with local merchants, including Greeks and Jews, as argued by the Africanist scholar Enrico De Leone.⁴ In 1879 Sapeto suggested that Assab might replace Jeddah as the central entrepôt of trade in the Red Sea, and by 1880 the Società Italiana di Commercio con l’Africa had an agent in Yemen for the export of coffee to Genoa. Two years later Eritrea became an Italian colony. Having consolidated its position on the western side of the Red Sea, Italy began to manifest a political interest on the opposite shore, threatening to undermine Turkish authority.

In 1884 Luigi Caprotti (1858–1889), an adventurous and exploratory tradesman lured by the prospect of making a fortune, arrived in al-Hudayda after leaving the Società Italiana di Commercio con l’Africa and became an assistant of the Società d’Esplorazione Commerciale. Since 1880 he had traveled through Sudan and practiced trade in Abyssinia, where he obtained an exemption from customs duties thanks to the good offices of the explorer Gustavo Bianchi. Following the Mahdi uprising, he was forced to leave Metemma

² Antonio Baldacci, *La questione del Yemen e la nostra politica coloniale*, Genoa: Tipografia Secolo XIX, 1909, pp. 8–13.

³ Renzo Manzoni, *El Yemen: Tre anni nell’Arabia Felix*, Rome: Tip. Eredi Botta, 1884. On Manzoni’s travels in Yemen, see also the work of another expert in Italian colonial law, Ernesto Cucinotta, “L’opera degli Italiani per la conoscenza del Yemen,” *Rivista coloniale* 21 (Sept.–Oct. 1926), pp. 414–426, here: pp. 416–418, and Enrico De Leone, “I fratelli Caprotti di Magenta nel Yemen,” *Atti del Convegno di studi su la Lombardia e l’Oriente: Milano, 11–15 giugno 1962*, Milan: Istituto Lombardo-Accademia di scienze e lettere, 1963, pp. 129–132, here: pp. 129–130.

⁴ See Enrico De Leone, “Le prime ricerche di una colonia e la esplorazione geografica politica ed economica,” *L’Italia in Africa*, vol. 2, Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, 1955, pp. 86–87.

and all his assets. Like decades later in Libya, the Italian penetration in Yemen initially showed economic targets: the opening of an agency of the Società Italiana di Commercio con l'Africa and of a branch of the Italian firm Sante Mazzucchelli & Augusto Lopez Perera in the port of al-Hudayda,⁵ of which Luigi Caprotti became an agent. He was primarily a merchant, but he soon combined enterprise and an inventive spirit into a typical Italian attitude: the art of improvising. As Enrico De Leone has argued, Luigi Caprotti's correspondence with his family shows that his main concern was to accumulate considerable capital in the shortest possible time; he appeared rather suspicious of his competition and asked his parents to maintain the utmost confidentiality on his business and his initiatives. However, his life in the Middle East was not focused exclusively on purely commercial relations; it also caused him to learn Arabic and to familiarize himself with the cultural and geographical aspects of the country, yielding short reports for the journals *Corriere della sera* and *L'espertore*. He even set up a laboratory to examine gums and resins, developing skills in chemistry and working assiduously on his activities. He was described as a self-confident businessman, friendly and hospitable to both locals and foreigners.⁶ Luigi Caprotti died of exanthematic typhus in Sanaa in 1889, at the age of just thirty years, and was buried in the small Christian cemetery outside Bāb al-Yaman in Sanaa. That same year, on 14 February, he was warmly commemorated in *La riforma* by his friend in Yemen, the Austrian Arabist and archeologist Eduard Glaser, who remembered him as "a man who honored his country and has worked to open up Arabia to Italian trade."⁷ While Luigi Caprotti was the first Italian tradesman to settle in Sanaa, his brother Giuseppe was the European who stayed in Yemen the longest.

Giuseppe Caprotti was born in 1862 in the small village of Podiga-Besana Brianza 20 km north of Milan. The brothers' parents were farmers who early on moved to Magenta west of Milan, where the father, Antonio, became an administrator of ecclesiastical property. Giuseppe attended the high technical school of via Cappuccio in Milan, where he was taught by the historian Ludovico Corio.⁸ He served for two years in the Italian army. He was devoted to learning languages and eager to travel and obtain a position of his own.⁹ In August 1885, just a few months after the Italian occupation of the city, he sailed to Massaua and then continued to al-Hudayda and Ottoman-occupied Sanaa to join his brother. The French botanist Albert Deflers, who was hosted by the brothers in Sanaa in 1887, recalled their renowned hospitality shortly after Luigi's death: "Pendant plus de deux mois j'ai vécu à leur foyer, témoin de leur vie laborieuse, ayant souvent recours à leurs bons offices. [...] Ces deux hommes excellents, perdus sur une terre lointaine, font honneur à l'Italie" ("For

⁵ Mazzucchelli was the royal consular agent in al-Hudayda.

⁶ De Leone, "Le prime ricerche," pp. 152–156; De Leone, "I fratelli Caprotti," pp. 130–131.

⁷ See the chronicle of a correspondent of the *Corriere della sera*, Salvatore Aponte, *La vita segreta dell'Arabia Felice*, Milan: A. Mondadori, 1936, p. 158. Glaser traveled in Yemen between 1883 and 1894 and brought back 858 manuscripts on several occasions (see below).

⁸ Lodovico Corio was the first to sketch a short biography of the Caprotti brothers in "Luigi Caprotti – Giuseppe Caprotti," *L'universo* 7 (1897), pp. 5–6.

⁹ In contrast to that firsthand information, De Leone stated that Giuseppe hated to travel in "L'assedio e la resa di Ṣan'ā' del 1905 attraverso il carteggio inedito di Giuseppe Caprotti," *Oriente moderno* 36 (Feb. 1956), pp. 61–81.

more than two months I lived in their home, witnessing their laborious life, often resorting to their good offices. [...] These two excellent men, lost in a distant land, do honor to Italy").¹⁰ After Luigi died, Giuseppe left the firm of Mazzucchelli & Perera and worked for seven years for the Ottoman Tobacco Régie Company, at the same time being active in the export of coffee and the import of commodities and consumer goods for which Yemen depended on trade. He carried out his activities with balance and financial acumen and contributed to knowledge of Yemen through reports sent to the Milanese Società d'Esplorazione Commerciale¹¹ and published in *L'esplorazione commerciale* and *L'universo*, a Milanese journal dedicated to the dissemination of geographical knowledge, directed by his former teacher Ludovico Corio.¹² In a short report in April 1889, Giuseppe criticized Italian trading companies for their lack of reliability and honesty with regard to purchasers. He also remarked that oil was imported to the United States in full loads and that coffee was the main Yemeni export although it was not used in Yemen, but Italian textile manufacturing was limited to very few companies.¹³ In 1891 he applauded the Turkish government for the new road built from Sanaa to the port of al-Hudayda and the introduction of the telegraph in that year; he even proposed the import of *durra* (sorghum bicolor) to Italy, expressing the hope that some transport companies might increase the traffic between the two countries and complaining of the conditions of local transport by camel only.¹⁴ In 1896, with Antonio Annoni, a geographer, member of the Società d'Esplorazione Commerciale, and shareholder in the Cassa di Risparmio di Milano, Giuseppe wrote a longer description titled "Sanaa e Hodeida (Yemen)," which first appeared in the Milanese journal *Il Sole* and was also published in 1897 in *L'universo*. It provided geographical, political, commercial, and cultural information about the country.¹⁵ Giuseppe Caprotti's reputation also reached British scholars: the archaeologist David George Hogarth, later the president of the Royal Geographical Society, declared, "Western science has found its only informant in an Italian merchant, the courageous and devoted Giuseppe Caprotti".¹⁶

In a significant passage of his description, Giuseppe reports that the local school in Sanaa had a good program of study, including the French language, and then comments on the fame of the manuscript treasures in the libraries of Sanaa: "Tutti i viaggiatori parlano delle ricchezze in manoscritti delle antiche biblioteche presso le moschee; sono tesori

¹⁰ Albert Deflers, *Voyage au Jémen*, Paris: P. Klincksieck, 1889, p. 76.

¹¹ The Società in Africa was created in 1879, with an agency in al-Hudayda. It was fully involved in the Italian industrial establishment.

¹² A biography of Giuseppe Caprotti is provided by Maria Carazzi, "Caprotti, Giuseppe," *Dizionario Biografico degli Italiani* 19 (1976), http://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/giuseppe-caprotti_%28Dizionario-Biografico%29/.

¹³ Giuseppe Caprotti, "[Corrispondenza da Sanaa, 20 aprile 1889]," *L'esplorazione commerciale* 6 (1889), pp. 201–204, here: pp. 202–203.

¹⁴ Giuseppe Caprotti, "[Corrispondenza da Sanaa, 19 maggio 1891]," *L'esplorazione commerciale* 7 (1891), pp. 249–250.

¹⁵ Eugenio Griffini, in his obituary for Caprotti, emphasized that the informative material provided by Giuseppe had represented one of the earliest firsthand reports on Yemen at that time, after Glaser's correspondence. See Griffini, "Necrologio: Giuseppe Caprotti," *L'esplorazione commerciale* 34 (1919), p. 135.

¹⁶ David George Hogarth, *The Penetration of Arabia: A Record of the Development of Western Knowledge concerning the Arabian Peninsula*, New York: F. A. Stokes, 1904, p. 204.

letterari ancora nascosti e che attendono ancora chi li studi e li riveli” (“All travellers talk about the richness in manuscripts of the ancient libraries at the mosques; they are literary treasures still hidden and still waiting for those who will study and reveal them”).¹⁷ Although he collected and sold the largest number of Arab-Yemeni manuscripts outside Yemen, this is his only published reference to them. We can assume that in view of the illegal character of his activities he did not wish to make them public. A simple hint to the Italian readers and scholars was enough.

During his stay in Sanaa, which was interrupted only by short visits to Italy, Giuseppe established friendly relations both with the Ottoman authorities and with the Arab leaders. In this way he was able to safeguard his business even during the most troubled years of the Turkish-Yemeni conflict, in 1891 and 1904, when the Zaydī rebellions placed the capital under siege. He managed to do good business with the Turkish, although after the conflict of 1904–1905 his positive assessment of the Turkish administration no longer held. Simultaneously, he enjoyed good relations with the rebels thanks to the imam, who guaranteed his security. In his interactions with the two sides, he revealed a rare talent for diplomatic relations and political skills.¹⁸ He also had contacts with the government of Eritrea, providing it with coffee seedlings and introducing the cultivation of coffee to the opposite shore of the Red Sea. The broad support he received from all sections of Sanaa’s population earned him the name “Sīdī Yūsuf al-Ṭālyānī,” سيدي يوسف الطالاني,¹⁹ which he was originally given in a pass issued by the Imam Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā Ḥamīd al-Dīn in 1893.²⁰

Giuseppe Caprotti’s relations with his motherland reflected the ups and downs of the Italians’ colonial ambitions in the Red Sea and their attempts to control the port of al-Hudayda during the Italian-Turkish war in 1911–1912.²¹ He was rather disappointed by the Italian intervention in Yemen because of his standing with both the Ottomans and the imam, getting to the point that he was expelled from the Eritrean colony. He enjoyed the imam’s confidence so much so that in 1905 Imam Yaḥyā b. Muḥammad Ḥamīd al-Dīn charged him with a diplomatic mission to the Ottoman sultan, although this had no actual effect in part because of the hesitant position of Ferdinando Sola, consul general in al-

¹⁷ Antonio Annoni and Giuseppe Caprotti, “Sanaa e Hodeida (Yemen),” *L’universo* 7 (1897), pp. 6–9, 24–27, here: p. 26.

¹⁸ The siege of Sanaa in 1905, attested by his correspondence, and his role in the struggle between the Turks and the Zaydīs are reported in De Leone, “L’assedio e la resa.”

¹⁹ This name was recorded by Fascist writers such as the journalist Salvatore Aponte, who traveled in Yemen and mentioned the popularity of Caprotti in his account, *La vita segreta*, p. 158. The first account citing “Yusuff” was that of Giovanni Battista Rossi, *Nei paesi d’Islam, in Barberia, in Egitto, il pellegrino d’Islam, El Yemen: Impressioni e ricordi*, Rocca San Casciano: Licinio Cappelli, 1897, p. 179.

²⁰ See Pier Francesco Fumagalli, “Giuseppe Caprotti (Pobiga di Besana Brianza, 1862–Magenta 1919): Quelques notes biographiques,” *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 9/28 (2019), pp. 40–45, here: pp. 42–43, where Fumagalli emphasizes Giuseppe Caprotti’s role in supporting the Jewish community in Sanaa and mentions a manuscript copy of the Torah that the community donated to him in 1898, without specifying either the holding or the collection in which the copy is kept.

²¹ On this conflict, see John Baldry, “The Turkish-Italian War in the Yemen,” *Arabian Studies* 3 (1976), pp. 51–65.

Hudayda.²² In view of British interests in Yemeni ports, Giuseppe was in favor of an Italian countermove of expansion beyond the Red Sea, but also in this case Italian irresolution, together with the hypothesis of political power-sharing with Great Britain, prevented the launch of any wider-ranging programs.

The names of the Caprotti brothers appeared in many European travel books from the late 1880s onward, and they were always depicted as pioneers in penetrating Yemen.²³ The journalist Giovanni Battista Rossi, correspondent of the Genoese newspaper *Caffaro*, traveled to Yemen in 1891 during the local rebellion against the Turks. He reports having been hosted for three months by Giuseppe Caprotti at his house in Sanaa, “trattato come un amico carissimo e rifornito di danaro per rimpatriare” (“treated like a dear friend and supplied with money to repatriate”).²⁴ The same generous treatment was given to the botanists Deflers, mentioned earlier, to Georg August Schweinfurth, and other travelers.²⁵

In 1909 the Marquis Gaetani Benzoni from Mantua was sent as the consular agent in Mokha to recruit Yemenis for service in the Eritrean army. A son-in-law of the writer Ferdinando Martini, who had served as governor of Eritrea from 1897 to 1907, Benzoni was eager to travel and for this purpose joined the German explorer Hermann Burchardt on a trip into the interior of Yemen. The two were killed on their way to Ibb on December 19, 1909, just as Imam Yahyā's movement of revolt against the Turks and for autonomy flared up.²⁶ A traveler and photographer, Burchardt first arrived in Sanaa in 1901 and was often hosted by Caprotti. [fig. 1] On his third extensive journey in the Middle East, he joined up with Benzoni in Mokha in December 1909 and escorted the latter to Sanaa via Ta'izz and al-'Udayn. On 23 December 1909 Giuseppe Caprotti wrote a letter from al-Hudayda to Burchardt's relatives and concluded it with these words (in French): “Our poor, unfortunate friend was, by all who knew him, sincerely loved. The poor of Sana'a certainly weep over his tragic death. God will remember his kindness and charity. I know very well what he had done to comfort the poor”.²⁷ Caprotti instructed Burchardt's Arab secretary and Arabic teacher,

²² See De Leone, “L'assedio e la resa,” pp. 75–77; see also Marco Lenci, *Eritrea e Yemen: Tensioni italo-turche nel Mar Rosso, 1885–1911*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1990, pp. 101, 106–107. The Italian consular office in al-Hudayda was opened in 1904 under Sola, and shortly afterward a vice-consulate was established in Mokha as well. The British had opened a vice-consulate in al-Hudayda in 1884; see Cucinotta, *L'opera degli Italiani*, pp. 418–419, and Baldry, “Anglo-Italian Rivalry,” p. 159.

²³ See Hugh Scott, *In the High Yemen*, London: Routledge, 2011, pp. 230–231. Scott was a British entomologist who gave a fascinating account of an expedition to Yemen in 1937–1938, when the country was closed to Europeans by order of the imam.

²⁴ Rossi, *Nei paesi d'Islam*, pp. 179–181. In addition to articles on his travels, Rossi published, first in 1897 and later in 1927, detailed accounts of Yemen and its customs, with many photos. The latter publication was reviewed by Giuseppe Caprotti's teacher Lodovico Corio: “Il passato, il presente e l'avvenire della Società italiana di geografia commerciale,” *L'esplorazione commerciale* 42 (1927), pp. 233–235. See also De Leone, “L'assedio e la resa,” pp. 64–65.

²⁵ Rossi, *Nei paesi d'Islam*, pp. 21–22.

²⁶ Giovanni Battista Rossi, *El Yemen: Arabia felix o Regio aromatum; Appunti di geografia, storia, usi e costumi*, Turin: Industriale artistica di M. & G. Rossi Editrice, 1927, pp. 22–23; Cucinotta, *L'opera degli Italiani*, pp. 419–420.

²⁷ Michael Friedländer, “Hermann Burchardt: Mitteilungen aus seinen letzten Briefen,” *Ost und West: Illustrierte Monatsschrift für das Gesamte Judentum* 2 (1910), pp. 105–110, here: pp. 109–110.

Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Jarādī, who had accompanied the two unfortunate travelers, to draw up a report on the trip on the basis of Burchardt's rough travel notes. Caprotti ordered two copies, sending one to Berlin and the other to Griffini in Milan.²⁸



Giuseppe Caprotti ed H. Burchardt a Sanaa

Figure 1. Giuseppe Caprotti and Hermann Burchardt at Caprotti's house in Sanaa.

In 1889–1890 another Giuseppe Caprotti, a distant relative of the abovementioned brothers Giuseppe and Luigi and a native of the village of Monte Albiate in Lombardy, had tried to carry out his own trade in Yemen independently of the Società d'Esplorazione Commerciale, as he had done in Egypt. He had previously, in 1885–1886, attempted to export his fabrics to Aden, but without success. This time, he took advantage of the first Giuseppe's presence in Sanaa and, thanks to the latter's mediation, achieved quite substantial sales, although the quality of the fabrics sold in Yemen was not always the best. The relationship between the two Giuseppees, as it emerges from the archives of the second Giuseppe's family, was purely commercial in nature. It was active during the years 1888–1891 but then broke down, possibly as a result of the second Giuseppe's

²⁸ Eugen Mittwoch, *Aus dem Jemen: Hermann Burchardts letzte Reise durch Südarabien*, Leipzig: Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft & F. A. Brockhaus, 1926, pp. 6–7: the German scholar edited the report and translated it into German.

unscrupulous commercial strategy.²⁹ The second Giuseppe was a keen collector of books and antiquities: he possessed a large quantity of coins, stuffed birds, and exotic objects, and even a whole room furnished in the Arab way, provided to him by the first Giuseppe in 1889.³⁰ Although we can see a substantial difference in the interests of the two homonyms, the first Giuseppe combined commercial ambitions with linguistic and exploratory activities, whereas the second Giuseppe was an experienced businessman with no knowledge of the culture, language, or history of Yemen, there is no question that their business relations should be investigated more closely within the framework of the sales and exchanges of Yemeni art and manuscripts in their time. As reported by Eugenio Griffini in his obituary of the first Giuseppe, the latter was also a collector of ancient Aksumite coins and Sabeen ethnographic materials, “a worthy successor to Glaser,” who had in his house in Magenta a collection of jewelry, seals, idols in pure gold, and molds of Sabeen inscriptions—a treasure so precious that Griffini feared it would be exported out of Italy like others had been before it.³¹

Incidentally, the first Giuseppe was still in Sanaa in early 1911, when he and the English traveler A. J. B. Wavell were the only Western Europeans in the city during its three-month siege by the imam.³² During the Italian-Turkish war of 1911–1912 Italy supplied Muḥammad ‘Alī al-Idrīsī with arms for use against the Turks, and it also provided other assistance: at the conclusion of the war an Italian medical hostel was established in al-Hudayda. Italy’s attempts to assert itself in Arabia manifested in many subtle ways during the First World War; these efforts were not limited to Yemen but were apparent also in ‘Asir.³³ Giuseppe remained in Sanaa throughout the war until 1918, despite the efforts of the Turkish officials then governing the country to eject him. At the end of the war, when he was the only Italian in Sanaa, he came under suspicion from the imam and was forced to repatriate; he returned to Magenta in 1919 and died on 16 May that year. Thanks to the first Giuseppe Caprotti, Italian penetration in Yemen began in the form of commercial ventures but rapidly developed into a firm political relationship between the two governments.

After the war, Benito Mussolini made a strong bid for influence on the eastern shore of the Red Sea, seeking economic advantage, and Italy turned its attention to Yemen in pursuit of this policy. The imam’s acquisition of the Tihama ports in 1925 was followed by great Italian interest in the country. When the Idrisids ceased to be independent rulers, Italy lost an ally of some years’ standing, but this loss was compensated by the removal of a

²⁹ See Roberto Romano, *I Caprotti: L'avventura economica e umana di una dinastia industriale della Brianza*, Milan: Franco Angeli, 1980, pp. 177–179, 248–253, outlining the history of the second Giuseppe’s branch of the Caprotti industrial dynasty from Brianza. The family is the current owner of the first supermarket chain (Esselunga) established in Italy, still active in northern Italy.

³⁰ The collection’s European books and 1,168 Roman and Greek coins were sold at auction in 1908 and 1910: see Romano, *I Caprotti*, pp. 248, 253. For a very brief notice on the two Giuseppees, see Arianna D’Ottone Rambach, “Giuseppe Caprotti et son double: Entre manuscrits et monnaies yéménites,” *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 9/28 (2019), pp. 45–54.

³¹ Griffini, “Necrologio.”

³² Wavell wrote a report entitled *A Modern Pilgrim in Mecca and a Siege in Sanaa* in 1912; see Scott, *In the High Yemen*, p. 231.

³³ On Italian interests and intrigues in Yemen and ‘Asir during this period, see Baldry, “Anglo-Italian Rivalry,” pp. 161–164.

source of friction with the imam. In the hope of improving Eritrea's always weak financial position, its governor Jacopo Gasparini had strengthened relations between Italy and Yemen, implementing an economically aggressive policy and seeking oil and mining concessions in the country. His bold policy was not without risks, because it impinged on English interests in the strategic region of the Bab el-Mandeb strait; however, after three years of patient and secret work he persuaded the old Imam Yaḥyā to entrust Italy with the task of lifting the biblical country out of underdevelopment. In doing so, he beat all the other competitors, the English, the French, the Germans, and the Egyptians. On 2 September 1926 in Sanaa, Gasparini and Imam Yaḥyā signed a treaty of friendship and economic collaboration, which the Italian minister of the colonies, Pietro Lanza Branciforte di Scalea, did not hesitate to define, in a letter to Mussolini, as "the first imperial word of our colonial policy".³⁴ The Italian-Yemeni agreement was not to everyone's liking: the Italian recognition of Imam Yaḥyā as king of Yemen in the treaty (the first international agreement to acknowledge him as such) and the formation of an Italian-Arabian company for the export of petroleum products to Yemen provoked serious complications in Anglo-Italian relations.³⁵ The treaty was followed in mid-1927 by the visit to Rome of an official Yemeni delegation consisting of the imam's son Sayf al-Islām Muḥammad b. Yaḥyā al-Ḥuṣayn, the foreign secretary Qāḍī Muḥammad Rāghib, and others, which was received by the king and by Mussolini. The visit featured a program arranged for the visitors that emphasized Italy's naval, air, and military strengths; the Yemenis were received with hospitality befitting royalty and were granted official decorations. In 1937 Gasparini was in Sanaa again on a diplomatic mission to renew the treaty for a period of twenty-five years. Many scholars have considered the Italian-Yemeni treaty one of the best results of the political competition between Italy and Great Britain in the Arabian Peninsula: it generated increased trade in products both from Yemen (in particular coffee, spices, pearls, and amber) and to Yemen (in particular vehicles, machinery, and refined petrol), and it also provided a boost to the field of communications through the establishment of radio stations in the ports of al-Hudayda and Mokha and a telegraph between Mokha and Sanaa. In addition, it has been reported that Italy gave the imam annual subsidies of money and arms.

After the evacuation of northern Yemen by the Turks in 1918 and the rise of Fascism in Italy, the imam refused to allow permanent foreign diplomatic or consular representatives, and so the Italians established a small colony of strongly Fascist medical men along with a few engineers and other technicians, who set up a medical clinic in the capital; the Italian personnel came mainly from the military. A number of doctors lived together in one large establishment, and single medics were also stationed in al-Hudayda and Ta'izz. These doctors did much work, despite their political bias; they were credited, *inter alia*, with the introduction of vaccinations against smallpox. From 1929 there were also civilian doctors, such as Dr. Cesare Ansaldi, who was sent to Sanaa to supervise the hospital. He served as personal physician to the imam and treated all classes of people, and he traveled

³⁴ See Giancarlo Mazzucca [with Gianmarco Walch], *Mussolini e i musulmani: Quando l'Islam era amico dell'Italia*, Milan: Mondadori, 2017, chapter 17.

³⁵ On this topic, see Baldry, *Turkish-Italian War*, pp. 175–186.

extensively;³⁶ he returned to Italy in 1932. Other notable Italian doctors in Yemen were Lamberto Cicconi, Mario Livadiotti, and Tommaso Sarnelli. The Italian community was the largest foreign establishment in the country, whether in groups or as solitary outposts.

Many of these individuals, including Ansaldi and Sarnelli, gathered collections of antiquities that the benevolence of Imam Yaḥyā allowed them to bring to Italy. Dr. Sarnelli (d. 1972) was an Africanist scholar of native Arabic medicine and Berber linguistics as well as a medical officer. He carried out health and scientific missions to Libya and Yemen, staying in Sanaa from 1930 to 1932 as a medical officer and establishing excellent relations with the local population thanks to his dual expertise as a doctor and an Arabist. After leaving the army, he had taught for several years at the same Neapolitan Oriental Institute at which he had trained.³⁷

Thereafter, as the traveler Hugh Scott emphasizes, among the external powers Italy enjoyed paramount influence in Yemen for some time. The Italians occupied two buildings in Sanaa, a larger and a smaller one, within a big walled garden in Bīr al-ʿAzab, close to the open Sharara.³⁸

It has been documented that the operators of these facilities, including military doctors, were connected to the Italian SIM (Servizio Informazioni Militare), the military intelligence organization of the Royal Army. From 1926 to 1938, the captain and then major Dr. Emilio Dubbiosi served as the local “resident” of the SIM and was an advisor and good friend of the imam, as well as his personal physician.³⁹ After twelve years’ service, Dubbiosi retired to Italy and was succeeded by Dr. Passera. Scott describes in his travel account several kindnesses that he received from Dubbiosi when he was in Sanaa with Dr. Patrick W. R. Petrie; Dubbiosi’s aptitude for languages, including French and German; and their careful avoidance of any reference to political matters affecting Britain, Italy, and Yemen.⁴⁰

Outside the medical and military circles, the Orientalist scholar Ettore Rossi (1894–1955) also undertook two scientific missions into Yemen between spring 1936 and autumn 1937 after becoming an advisor to the Ministry of the Colonies. On the basis of his linguistic research the Yemeni dialects, Rossi wrote the first systematic grammatical description on the dialects of Sanaa. The introduction to his book *L’arabo parlato a Ṣanaʿā* acknowledges “il dottor E. Dubbiosi, Capo della Missione sanitaria italiana” (“Dr. E. Dubbiosi, Head of the Italian medical mission”) for his warm welcome during Rossi’s two trips to Sanaa, “insieme al Governo di sua Maestà l’Imam e ai medici italiani dottori Dagnino e Merucci” (“together with the Government of His Majesty the Imam and the Italian doctors Dagnino and Merucci”).⁴¹ In connection to Dubbiosi we also find the Yemeni Jewish photographer

³⁶ See his account in Cesare Ansaldi, *Il Yemen nella storia e nella leggenda*, Rome: Sindacato Italiano Arti Grafiche, 1933.

³⁷ Among his contributions is a chapter on Arab medicine (“Medicina araba”) in the volume *Caratteri e modi della cultura araba*, published in 1943 by the Reale Accademia d’Italia.

³⁸ See Scott, *In the High Yemen*, pp. 137, 231.

³⁹ See Andrea Vento, *In silenzio gioite e soffrite: Storia dei servizi segreti italiani dal Risorgimento alla Guerra fredda*, Milan: Il Saggiatore, 2014, pp. 216–217; Mazzucca, *Mussolini e musulmani*, pp. 99–101.

⁴⁰ See Scott, *In the High Yemen*, p. 138.

⁴¹ Ettore Rossi, *L’arabo parlato a Ṣanaʿā: Grammatica, testi, lessico*, Rome: Istituto per l’Oriente, 1939.

Yihye Ben-Yosef Ḥaybī, who, before becoming a photographer, used to work in the Italian clinic as a medical assistant to various doctors, including the head physician.⁴²

In such a geopolitical situation, Mussolini's apparently pro-Islam policies were clearly aimed at fueling anti-British politics and alarming British intelligence with the flow of arms from Italy to the Red Sea. The ups and downs of the relationship between Italy and Yemen were closely observed by all international powers, with special attention to events concerning Aden.⁴³

In the late 1920s and the first half of the 1930s, Italian relations with Yemen experienced a series of setbacks. The activism of Gasparini was replaced by the prudence of the new governor of Eritrea, Corrado Zoli, who was more interested in geographical exploration in North Africa than in pursuing Gasparini's strategic objectives. Riccardo Astuto di Lucchese, who succeeded Zoli in 1930, resumed the politics of Gasparini, but in the meantime the friction with Great Britain had grown.

Another long visit by the imam's son al-Ḥuṣayn to Italy in 1938 encouraged Yaḥyā to strengthen his claims on Aden; by this time, the long love story between Mussolini and "King Yaḥyā" ("re Giovanni") was destined to end. Early in 1943 Yaḥyā had interned some Italians, though not all the doctors, and closed two pro-Axis radio stations, which had been broadcasting propaganda. Though the Italians living in Yemen had been well situated to collect information for their government and had hoped to gain much from the treaties, Italy never succeeded in seriously influencing the imam's policies.

On the whole, although the Italian government did not benefit much from its foreign policy with Yemen, the Italians who settled or stayed in Yemen greatly expanded their cultural and linguistic skills in their various capacities. Much more than the representatives of any other Western power, they took advantage of the implicit immunity they enjoyed in the supply of archaeological goods. Thanks to the corruption of the Turkish administration,⁴⁴ the Caprotti brothers from Magenta paved the way for the massive transfer of cultural property from Yemen, starting the illegal export of manuscripts to Italy.

ITALIAN COLLECTIONS OF ARAB-YEMENI MANUSCRIPTS

The keen entrepreneurial spirit of the first Giuseppe Caprotti and his activities as a manuscript dealer have been summarized very effectively by Giuseppe Gabrieli, who outlines how Caprotti secretly bought manuscripts in Yemen and smuggled them to Italy: "I Caprotti, specialmente e più a lungo Giuseppe, dimorando per molti anni a Sanà, quali commercianti di caffè, comperavano di nascosto nel Jemen, di nascosto e alla ventura, i manoscritti che poi spedivano copertamente in Italia cuciti entro i sacchi o le balle di caffè:

⁴² Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper, "Rare Photographs from the 1930s and 1940s by Yihye Ḥaybi, a Yemenite Jew from Ṣanaʿ āʿ: Historical Reality and Ethnographic Deductions," *Proceedings for the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 37 (2007), pp. 135–155, here: pp. 136, 148; a photo (fig. 20) taken in an Italian doctor's household (Dubbiosi's?) gives a historical framework to this period in Sanaa, including an Italian poster of Mussolini that shows the strong Fascist orientation of the Italian medical delegation.

⁴³ For details on these relations, see Vento, *In silenzio gioite e soffrite*, pp. 219–221.

⁴⁴ See Romano, *I Caprotti*, p. 249.

acquistavano si può dire a occhi chiusi, sebbene con fiuto intelligente” (“Having long resided in Sanaa as coffee merchants, the Caprottis, and especially for a longer time Giuseppe, secretly bought manuscripts in Yemen at random and then sent them covertly to Italy, sewn into sacks or bales of coffee; they purchased manuscripts with their eyes closed, though with a sharp flair”).⁴⁵ Caprotti’s clever instinct to locate worthy collections and bargain with their local owners was the most original feature of his approach, which amounted to a real art. But that is not all: the manuscripts he acquired cover every field and discipline of Arab-Islamic knowledge and manuscript culture transmitted in the Yemeni lands between the beginning of the Islamic era and the nineteenth century. For this reason, it is hardly believable that he collected manuscripts at random. To the contrary, it can be assumed that his selection of items was enlightened and followed fairly systematic criteria relating to their content, age, and relevance, if not codicological features. Unfortunately, Caprotti left no evidence of his selection process, his negotiations with local Yemeni book suppliers, or the mediators he may have worked with. However, it is clear that he did not collect manuscripts solely for the purpose of trade, for trade in manuscripts would not have been as immediately profitable as trade in other commodities such as coffee or textiles, and the sale of manuscripts would certainly have entailed a longer and more arduous process. Identifying European amateur collectors and buyers able to understand the value of Yemen’s unique heritage would have required much time and effort. Therefore, Caprotti preferred to maintain a relatively low profile in this area, and he refrained from venturing into the world of Orientalist and Arabist scholars.

Given his 1897 note, in which he reported widespread interest among travelers of the time in the “hidden manuscript treasures in Yemeni libraries and mosques,”⁴⁶ it could be supposed that he collected manuscripts not so much for commercial reasons but rather for their extraordinary cultural value, although he was clearly aware of their monetary worth and experimented with manuscript dealing as a new form of trade. However, it is likely that the two aspects coexisted. As a cultured and talented businessman he recognized the potential value of the manuscripts in the European antiques market or in the eyes of private collectors, but he was also attracted to them as cultural artifacts thanks to his appreciation and knowledge of their context and significance.

A case that anticipated Caprotti’s later collection of manuscripts on a large scale was a sale he made in 1892. Through the mediation of the Prefetto (Head) of the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, Monsignor Antonio Maria Ceriani (who was also self-taught in the Oriental languages), Caprotti sold to the Biblioteca Braidense in Milan a manuscript containing the *Dīwān* of the prominent Ayyubid poet Bahā’ al-Dīn Abū l-Faḍl Ibn Zuhayr al-Muhallabī (d.

⁴⁵ Giuseppe Gabrieli, “Gian Bernardo De Rossi collezionista di manoscritti ebraici,” *Rassegna mensile di Israel* 7 (1932), pp. 167–175, here: p. 167.

⁴⁶ Annoni and Caprotti, “Sanaa e Hodeida,” p. 26.

⁴⁷ I am grateful to Agostino Soldati for pointing out to me the existence of this manuscript, which is not mentioned either in the main repertoires or in the catalogs; see Agostino Soldati, “I manoscritti arabi, persiani e turchi della Biblioteca Braidense,” *Istituto Lombardo – Accademia di Scienze e Lettere – Rendiconti di Lettere* 150 (2016), pp. 139–141.

1258). The codex was of Yemeni origin, dating back to the late seventeenth century.⁴⁷ The codex was the first Yemeni exemplar sold by Caprotti to a Western institution.⁴⁸

The year 1897 saw a decisive event in Caprotti's manuscript career: he met a nineteen-year-old fellow countryman, Eugenio Griffini,⁴⁹ a promising Lombard Arabist who came to play a key role in the fate of Caprotti's manuscripts. Their destinies were joined thanks to a common acquaintance, the abovementioned Corio, who had been Giuseppe Caprotti's teacher and, fifteen years later, taught Griffini history and geography. In the course of his classical studies, Griffini had studied Arabic by himself for four years and started on Hebrew and Sanskrit. Passionate about Arabic civilization and steeped in its history and literature, he traveled to Magenta, where Corio brought him to Caprotti's house and tested his knowledge of Arabic. The tradesman showed Griffini his collection of artifacts imported from Sanaa. Later, Griffini conveyed his impressions of this first visit to his maternal cousin, the architect and senator Luca Beltrami:

La casa è una quintessenza di *Arabia Felix*, il paese degli aromi e degli Homeriti [...]. Tappeti yemenici e persiani [...], pellicce e piume. Fiale con profumi ed alambicchi. Armi e bronzi. Merci di ogni genere, europee ed indiane. Ma per me, lucciolavano come astri nel nulla [...] libri, libri, oh, quanti libri! Tutta una mora, lungo una parete, e tutti manoscritti, in arabo.

(The house is a quintessence of *Arabia Felix*, the land of aromas and Homerites [...]. Yemeni and Persian carpets [...], furs and feathers. Vials with perfumes and alembics. Weapons and bronzes. All kinds of goods, European and Indian. But for me, fireflies like stars in nothing [...] books, books, oh, how many books! An entire shelf, along a wall, and all manuscripts, in Arabic.)

The young Arabist went on to describe enthusiastically the age, writing, supports, and bindings of these books:

Volumi sottoscritti, datati [...], firmati! Molti di quei codici, su grossa carta giallo-scura di cotone, mi dicevan subito della loro età: cinque, sei, sette, secoli. Di altri, me la diceva la forte pergamena, la grossa scrittura cufica, la solida rilegatura con tavolette di legno — all'abissina —: dieci secoli, un millennio! Fuori, quasi sempre forti rilegature in cuoio, con risvolto [...].⁵⁰

⁴⁸ Caprotti obtained and sold a further three copies of the work to the Ambrosiana in 1909: MS Ambr., A 111, dated 725/1361, for which see Oscar Löfgren and Renato Traini, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, vol. 2: *Nuovo Fondo: Series A–D (Nos. 1–830)*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1981, p. 57, no. 111:iii; MS Ambr. E 39, dated 1098/1687, for which see Oscar Löfgren and Renato Traini, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, vol. 3: *Nuovo Fondo: Series E (Nos. 831–1295)*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1995, p. 19, no. 869:i; and MS Ambr., E 96, dated 1035/1625, for which see Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 3, p. 49, no. 926.

⁴⁹ The Griffini *Nachlass* has recently brought to light in the Biblioteca Comunale di Palazzo Sormani in Milan. As part of a wider program of research into the archival materials of Arabists and Islamicists involved in the history and culture of Yemen between the second half of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century, the Griffini Fund is going to be investigated and published by Sabine Schmidtke and myself.

⁵⁰ Luca Beltrami, *Eugenio Griffini Bey, 1878–1925*, Milan: Tipografia Umberto Allegrretti, 1926, pp. x–xi.

(Subscribed, dated [...], signed volumes! Many of those codices, on a thick and dark yellow cotton paper, told me immediately about their age: five, six, seven centuries. Of others the rugged parchment, the large kufic script, the strong binding with wooden boards—in the Abyssinian way—told me about it: ten centuries, a millennium! Outside, almost always strong leather covers, with flap).

He was equally fascinated by their contents:

E dentro? Di tutto, di tutto. Un materiale informativo di primissimo ordine: raccolte sistematiche di tradizioni maomettane, [...] opere originali arabe classiche e medioevali, note e nuove, complete ed in tronco, di filosofia musulmana, di medicina, di veterinaria; ricettari, [...] vastissime enciclopedie e dizionari di zoologia e di botanica; e superbi canzonieri [...] vastissime cronache di annali; raccolte alfabetiche di biografie con appendici antologiche; dizionari di nomi di religioni e di sette ed esposizioni di dottrine religiose e filosofiche, teistiche e pagane; [...] opere astronomiche, trattati di algebra e di geometria, di logica formale, o di diritto successorio e testamentario musulmano, i più allegri manuali di indavolati e di miracoli di prestidigitazione.

(And inside? Everything, everything. Informative material of the very first order: systematic collections of Muslim traditions, [...] original classical and medieval Arabic works, renowned and new, complete and not, of Muslim philosophy, of medicine, of veterinary science; cookbooks, [...] very large encyclopedias and dictionaries of zoology and botany; and superb poetical works [...] huge chronicles of annals; alphabetical collections of biographies with anthological additions; dictionaries of names of religions and of sects and expositions of religious and philosophical doctrines, theistic and pagan; [...] astronomical works, treatises on algebra and geometry, formal logic, or succession law and Muslim testamentary law, the most cheerful manuals of demoniacs and of miracles of prestidigitation).

Griffini further noted that some of the books included diagrams, tables, drawings, and miniatures, and that all were “in excellent condition,” a situation that he attributed to the dry air of the Yemenite highlands, which was well suited to preserving such a perishable material as paper.⁵¹

This was not the only crucial meeting and visit that Griffini made that year. The already mentioned Arabist Eduard Glaser invited him to Munich, where the young Italian could examine study materials, photographic reliefs, and casts of Sabeen and Himyarite inscriptions gathered by the Austrian scholar in Yemen. In this time Griffini was attending the Biblioteca Ambrosiana, and in 1897–1898 he obtained a diploma in the Arabic language at the Istituto Orientale in Naples. He was also able to explore the Ambrosiana’s Ancient Fund of Arabic manuscripts thanks to the support of Monsignor Ceriani. Griffini pursued his dream of dedicating himself to the study of these manuscripts and their culture through years of study and travel in Egypt, France, and Great Britain (1899–1902) as well as Tunisia and Algeria (1905, 1907), where he came into contact with the fervent world of Oriental studies and became aware of the scientific progress and the powerful activity of

⁵¹ Eugenio Griffini, “La grande raccolta di antichi manoscritti arabi donata alla Biblioteca Ambrosiana,” *Corriere della sera*, 10 January 1910, reprinted in *L’antichità classica e il Corriere della sera: 1876–1945*, ed. Margherita Marvulli, Milan: Fondazione Corriere della sera, 1990, pp. 369–376, here: pp. 370–373.

collecting promoted by the great European institutions and the libraries of Berlin, Munich, Leiden, London, Paris, Budapest, and Cambridge. Later Griffini became member of the Arabic academies al-Majma' al-'ilmī al-'arabī, founded in 1919, and al-Majma' al-lughawī, established in Cairo in 1921, and he was one of the founders of the Jāmi'a al-rābi'a al-sharqiyya, born in Cairo in 1922.⁵²

Griffini reconnected with Giuseppe Caprotti in 1903, right after graduating in law from Genoa in 1902 with a study on the legal institution of the *waqf*. Before starting on their joint adventure, in July 1899, Caprotti had proposed to the Ambrosiana the purchase of a first group of manuscripts: “È in mie mani una raccolta di circa 80 grossi volume manoscritti arabi quasi tutti antichi [...] che portai con me dall'Arabia” (“In my hands is a collection of about eighty large-volume Arabic manuscripts, almost all ancient [...] that I brought with me from Arabia”). Shrewdly, he added that he had already begun negotiations with a German royal library for the same pieces, and he relied on Griffini's support: “l'Egregio Nob. E. Griffini, potrà dar referenze su di me” (“the nobleman E. Griffini may give a reference for me”).⁵³ We do not know the outcome of this first offer, but it is certain that in 1897 Caprotti had sent an initial lot of twenty manuscripts to Eduard Glaser in Munich, as he wrote to Griffini a day before they met at his house: “Li spedii un mese fa a Monaco di Baviera ad un orientalista mio amico, il quale ne curerà la vendita. [...] molto voluminosi, tutti antichi, alcuni di grande valore” (I sent them one month ago to Munich in Bavaria to an Orientalist friend of mine, who will take care of their sale. [...] very voluminous, all ancient, and some of great value”).⁵⁴ In 1902, 157 Arabic manuscripts from the Caprotti collection, mostly of Yemeni origin and of great antiquity, were purchased by the Bavarian State Library (Bayerische Staatsbibliothek) through Glaser's mediation.⁵⁵

In a letter dated 23 May 1903, the merchant Caprotti made an unusual offer to the young book-lover Griffini: to send his entire manuscript collection to Griffini's house in Milan so the latter could find either a depository or a purchaser for it. He acknowledged Griffini's unrivaled competence with regard to these manuscripts and the great work he had already undertaken on them, and he specified no particular price in advance:

Mi preme farle una proposta che ancora non le ho fatto a viva voce [...] e questo in merito ai Manoscritti. Io so benissimo che non sarei *en même* di trovare un collocamento senza

⁵² Carlo Alfonso Nallino, “Eugenio Griffini,” *Rivista della Tripolitania* 2, no. 2 (1925), pp. 124–132, here: p. 130, n. 2; p. 131.

⁵³ Letter from Magenta dated 22 July 1899: Milan, Ambr., W 8 inf., no. 232; Pier Francesco Fumagalli, “Raccolte significative di manoscritti: Mosè Lattes, fondo Trotti, Giuseppe Caprotti,” *Storia dell'Ambrosiana: L'Ottocento*, Milan: IntesaBci, 2001, pp. 167–211, here: pp. 198–199.

⁵⁴ On this letter, see the report of Griffini's student Angela Codazzi, “Eugenio Griffini e l'Ambrosiana,” *Atti del Convegno di studi su la Lombardia e l'Oriente: Milano, 11–15 giugno 1962*, Milan: Istituto Lombardo-Accademia di Scienze e Lettere, 1963, pp. 80–89, here: pp. 81–82.

⁵⁵ See Sabine Schmidtke, “Preserving, Studying, and Democratizing Access to the World Heritage of Islamic Manuscripts: the Zaydi Tradition,” *Chroniques du manuscrit au Yémen* 23 (2017), pp. 103–165, here: pp. 105–106. Unlike what Fumagalli claims in “Raccolte significative,” p. 199, the manuscripts were not donated but rather sold to the German library. It is noteworthy that the manuscripts that Glaser sold to the Munich State Library on behalf of Caprotti are known as the Glaser Collection, whereas the collection at Ambrosiana is named after Caprotti, not the intermediary, Griffini.

essere coadiuvato da una persona competente. Nel caso attuale la persona competente è lei [...], le propongo semplicemente di ricevere lei in consegna tutta la raccolta [...], di cercare di collocarla al meglio senza fissare una cifra da parte mia.

(I would like to make you a proposal I have not yet mentioned to you [...] with regard to the manuscripts. I know very well that I would not be able to sell them without being assisted by a competent person. In the present case the competent person is you [...], I simply propose that you receive delivery of the entire collection [...], and try to sell it in the best way, without a price being fixed on my part.)

Caprotti offered Griffini a modest percentage on the sale and tried to frame the issue as a business deal: “Il lavoro, qualunque esso sia deve essere retribuito, e tanto più il suo, che ben difficilmente potrebbe essere fatto da un altro. [...] Questo dei Manoscritti deve essere un lavoro proficuo, dunque vediamo di intavolarlo come un vero affare di commercio” (“Any work, whatever it may be, must be remunerated, and especially your work, which could hardly be done by anyone else. [...] This work with the manuscripts must be profitable, so let’s enter into it as a real business deal”). But although Griffini agreed to house the manuscripts arriving from Yemen, he categorically refused any remuneration and accepted as his only reward the chance to study the manuscripts and publish catalogs and writings on them. The agreement between Caprotti and Griffini included a search for potential buyers for the manuscripts in Italy and abroad.⁵⁶ Despite Caprotti’s claims, it is strange that a prudent businessman such as Caprotti would entrust the sale of his manuscripts to a novice Arabist without any experience in marketing and negotiation—one who was instead dedicated to the study and cataloging of manuscripts. Several questions arise: What were Caprotti’s real intentions in entrusting his manuscript legacy to Griffini, and what expectations could he have had of the ability of the young Lombard to obtain a reasonable profit on his precious merchandise? Was his choice dictated by a patriotic attachment to their common region of provenance? Why did Caprotti’s choice fall on Griffini rather than on the more accredited Glaser, thanks to whom he had already sold a set of manuscripts to the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek? Did Griffini play any role in the search for manuscript texts from Yemen? Had he ever recommended or suggested to Caprotti the purchase of any specific manuscript works useful for his research on Zaydī law and history?

Whatever lay behind Caprotti’s decisions and choices, hundreds of Yemeni manuscripts, wrapped in palm mats and coffee bags and stored in large boxes, entered Griffini’s house on via Dante in Milan, starting with the first group he saw in Magenta, which was followed by six regular shipments from 1903 to 1906, usually sent each spring and autumn. In April and November 1903 Griffini received altogether 256 manuscripts (Ambr. A 1–124, B 1–132), in May and November 1905 he received 574 manuscripts (Ambr. C 1–219, D 1–355), in June 1905 he received 465 manuscripts (Ambr. E 1–465), and in 1906 the last 315 manuscripts (Ambr. F 1–315) reached Milan. The total of 1,610 volumes contained “circa

⁵⁶ Codazzi, “Eugenio Griffini e l’Ambrosiana,” p. 83.

cinquemila e seicento opere” (“about 5,600 works”), as Griffini estimated in articles published in the *Corriere della sera* and the *Rivista degli studi orientali* in 1910.⁵⁷ The last shipment of manuscripts was accompanied by the gift from Caprotti of an ancient and rare copy of *Min kashf al-asrār al-bāṭiniyya wa-ghawār madhhabihim* by Abū l-Qāsim Ismāʿīl Aḥmad al-Bustī (GAS I, 626, not in GAL), a disciple of ‘Abd al-Jabbār, according to the friendly dedication on f. 1r: “G. Caprotti da Sanaa all’amico carissimo Dr. E. Griffini a Milano. Sanaa 8 febbr. 1906” (“G. Caprotti from Sanaa to the very dear friend Dr. E. Griffini in Milan. Sanaa, 8 February 1906”).⁵⁸

Once this impressive shipping operation was complete, the relationships between Caprotti, Griffini, and Glaser changed, and the balance between them deteriorated dramatically. Writing to Glaser from Tunis in 1907 in response to some research requests, Griffini expressed a hope that the relations between the three of them could always be as good as they had been. This statement comes across as an implicit reaction to Glaser’s disapproval of the entrustment of the Caprotti collection to Griffini rather than to him. Glaser’s hostility is confirmed in a letter sent by Griffini on 9 June 1907 to the commander Giovanni Roncagli (secretary-general of the Società Geografica Italiana), who had asked him to direct an ethnographic and botanical expedition to Yemen:

Riguardo lo Yemen in particolare, esistono tuttora difficoltà che paralizzerebbero la mia collaborazione: ineffettuabile almeno è la parte a me destinata nel programma della missione, per difficoltà che si possono più chiaramente chiamare intrighi, gelosie e insidie, che persone senza scrupoli – come per esempio il dott. Glaser di Monaco, perfettamente informato dei vostri progetti – non esiterebbero a tenderci, ricorrendo a *qualunque mezzo*. (With regard to Yemen in particular, there are still complications that would hinder my cooperation: at least the part designated for me in the mission program is impossible because of difficulties that can be more clearly called intrigues, jealousies, and snares that unscrupulous people—such as Dr. Glaser of Munich, perfectly informed of your plans—would not hesitate to set us, using whatever means).⁵⁹

Though the expedition did not take place, the old friendship between the young Italian Arabist and the experienced Austrian scholar was irreparably damaged.

During these years, before the publication of his first catalog of the Caprotti manuscripts in 1910, Griffini also drew up an inventory of seven big notebooks, regrettably arranged not by subject matter but by order of arrival, determined as the manuscripts were pulled out of the boxes: “I codici, dopo qualche mese di viaggio e di peripezie, venivan fuori

⁵⁷ Griffini, “La grande raccolta,” p. 373; Griffini, “Una lieta notizia: Il Nuovo Fondo arabo dell’Ambrosiana (1610 codici),” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 3 (1910), pp. 105–107, here: p. 107; see also Fumagalli, “Raccolte significative,” pp. 198–199, who anticipated in November 1904 the reception of series D, which in fact arrived at Griffini’s house one year later (see Griffini’s letter to Caetani below).

⁵⁸ MS Ambr., X 61 sup. (Griffini 41): Oscar Löfgren and Renato Traini, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, vol. 1: *Antico Fondo and Medio Fondo*, Vicenza: Neri Pozza, 1975, p. 137, no. 258. The codex is a factitious multiple-text and contains two texts. On this manuscript, see Valentina Sagaria Rossi, “Eugenio Griffini and Zaydi Studies in the light of his correspondence with Ignaz Goldziher, 1908–1920,” *Shii Studies Review* 5 (2021), pp. 139–199.

⁵⁹ Beltrami, *Eugenio Griffini Bey*, pp. xxvii–xxviii; a draft of the letter is contained in the diary of Griffini’s second trip to Tunisia.

di sotto le stuoie, saturi, all'uso yemenico, del forte profumo delle foglie secche d'assenzio" ("The codices, after several months of travel and troubles, emerged from under the mats saturated with the strong scent of the dry leaves of absinthe, according to Yemeni custom").⁶⁰

Once the collection arrived in Milan, its fame spread among Italian and foreign scholars. It became known as "la collezione di Milano" ("the collection of Milan"), "la collezione milanese" ("the Milanese collection") or "I manoscritti arabi di Milano" ("the Arabic manuscripts of Milan"); Griffini made a point of stressing the collection's connection to the city of Milan.⁶¹ As it grew in size to encompass around fifty boxes weighing a total of fifteen quintals, Griffini committed himself to describing the manuscripts in a vast catalog organized by subject matter. He focused his attention on the first group of manuscripts to arrive in Italy, a set of 124 codices containing 315 texts, though only a short description of the first 82 codices were published.⁶² The task Griffini was undertaking was heavy and onerous, and not only because of the amount of work it entailed. As he wrote in the introduction to his first *Catalogo*, many of the works were anonymous or written by hitherto unknown authors, sometimes acephalous or mutilated, and unaccompanied by any notices that might have facilitated identification either on the edges of the volumes or inside in the headings: "Insomma muti a tutte le domande, per quanto insistenti, del catalogatore, né tali da poter essere confrontati altrove per l'identificazione. Occorse sfogliarli ad uno ad uno, allo scopo di trarne elementi per indicarne pur sommariamente il contenuto" ("In short, they are silent on all the questions, however incessant, of the cataloger, nor can they be compared with others for identification. They must be browsed one by one in order to draw out elements to give a summary of their contents"). He highlighted the great number of a special type of codex, the miscellaneous, "dalla loro forma allungata e dall'esasperante eterogeneità dei materiali caoticamente stipati in ogni angolo usufruibile [...], raccolti in una regione che si è distinta per aver avuto per secoli a Zabīd, a Ṣa'da, a Ṣan'ā', a Ḥūṭ, ecc., grossi nuclei non solo di bibliofili, ma anche di eruditi" ("having an elongated shape and the exasperating heterogeneity of materials chaotically crammed in every usable corner [...], collected in a region that has for centuries distinguished itself with its large clusters not only of bibliophiles but also scholars in Zabid, Sa'da, Sanaa, Huth, etc."). Griffini described these meticulously assembled codices, heterogeneous by nature or by the will of their owners, as "grossi mazzi di carte isolate, e di quaderni indipendenti gli uni dagli altri, o di frammenti d'una cosa, spaccati e mischiati con quelli d'un'altra, ed il tutto rilegato e inamovibile, come un libro a sé" ("large clusters of isolated papers and notebooks independent of each other, or fragments of one thing, split and mixed with those of another, the

⁶⁰ Eugenio Griffini, "I manoscritti sudarabici di Milano: catalogo della prima collezione (125 codici, 315 numeri)," part 1, *Rivista degli studi orientali* 2 (1908–1909), pp. 1–38, 133–166; part 2, *Rivista degli studi orientali* 3 (1910), pp. 65–104, here: part 1, pp. 1–2; Codazzi, "Eugenio Griffini e l'Ambrosiana," p. 84; the inventory was delivered to the Ambrosiana (MSS Ambr. H 177–184) in 1955, in execution of Griffini's last wishes.

⁶¹ Griffini, "La grande raccolta," p. 373.

⁶² Griffini, "I manoscritti sudarabici."

whole bound and irremovable, like a book in itself").⁶³ Having devoted himself to the manuscripts, he replied to queries and research requests from many European Arabists and Islamists. The Orientalist scholars who turned to him for information on the collection and its individual codices and who acknowledged its extraordinary relevance included Ignazio Guidi, Carlo Alfonso Nallino, Giorgio Levi Della Vida, Carl Brockelmann, Hermann Rechen-dorf (with whom Griffini engaged in an extensive correspondence that is today kept at the Ambrosiana Library),⁶⁴ Ignác Goldziher, Cornelis van Arendonk, Rudolf Strothmann, Will Heffening, and Ugo Monneret de Villard. In Griffini's death notice, Levi Della Vida, who had judged some of Griffini's linguistic works severely, acknowledged Griffini's unparalleled generosity in helping others in their scientific work: he usually provided news, extracts, and photographs of "his" manuscripts to any scholar, known or unknown, who requested them. Levi Della Vida also praised Griffini's excellent edition of the *Zaydī Majmū' al-fiqh* (Milan, 1919), a text of great importance on Zaydī Muslim law.⁶⁵ In late 1908 Griffini decided to move from his apartment in via Dante to via Borgospesso 23, and he found himself forced to return the manuscripts to their owner because he had no room to house them. This event stimulated once more his patriotic vein, as he feared that the huge collection might fall into the hands of foreign buyers, as reported by his cousin Beltrami:

Sebbene avesse avuto dal Caprotti l'autorizzazione di trattarne la vendita [...], il Griffini non aveva mai preso l'iniziativa di cercarne un acquirente, ma vi era sempre il pericolo che una richiesta di cessione fosse rivolta direttamente al Caprotti, tanto più che con vari scritti il Griffini aveva cominciato a mettere in valore ed a far conoscere all'estero la esistenza di quella collezione, mentre nel Yemen continuava la incetta dei *mss* da parte di studiosi stranieri [...]: fra questi il dott. Hermann Burchardt, che era stato ospitato dal Caprotti a Sana.

(Although he had been authorized by Caprotti to deal with the sale [...], Griffini had never taken the initiative to seek a buyer, but there was always the danger that a request for transfer would be addressed directly to Caprotti, especially since Griffini had, with various writings, started to enhance the value of the collection and make its existence known abroad, while in Yemen the hoarding of manuscripts by foreign scholars continued [...], among them Dr. Hermann Burchardt, who was hosted by Caprotti in Sanaa.)⁶⁶

Beltrami's claim was not entirely true. Griffini made at least one attempt to publicize the existence of the precious collection and to find an influential admirer (and a wealthy buyer)—to none other than the renowned Islamist Leone Caetani, prince of Teano; on 17 January 1905, just after Griffini had received the series A, B, and C, he wrote a letter to Caetani to fulfill an earlier promise and to convey his hope that the collection could be preserved in Italy:

È mia premura ripetere e riconfermare la promessa già fatta alla E.V. in novembre, di inviare, non appena saranno pronti, i cataloghi o i sommari dei cataloghi seguenti; B (132

⁶³ Griffini, "I manoscritti sudarabici," part 1, p. 2.

⁶⁴ See Codazzi, "Eugenio Griffini e l'Ambrosiana," pp. 84–85.

⁶⁵ See Giorgio Levi Della Vida, "Eugenio Griffini (26 dicembre 1878–3 maggio 1925)," *Rivista degli studi orientali* 10 (1925), pp. 726–730, here: pp. 728–730.

⁶⁶ Beltrami, "Eugenio Griffini Bey," pp. xxix–xxx.

mss.); C (220 mss.) e D (354 mss.). Quest'ultima numerosa collezione D è tutt'ora in viaggio, la credo però a Genova. [...] Allorché V.E. conoscerà dai miei cataloghi sommari o generali, o de visu, la grande importanza delle collezioni (alle quali altre seguiranno, e spero possano rimanere tutta in Italia presso il Governo o presso privati) vedrà quanti e quali altri studii non meno ponderosi potrebbe compiere valendosi di questa vera biblioteca orientale che nessuno ha ancora studiata.

(It is my concern to repeat and reconfirm the promise already made to His Eminence in November to send, as soon as they are ready, the following catalogs or summaries of catalogs: B (132 MSS), C (220 MSS), and D (354 MSS). This last collection, D, is still en route, but I believe it is in Genoa. [...] When His Eminence learns, though my general or summary catalogs or directly, of the great importance of the collections (which will be followed by others, and I hope they can all remain in Italy in governmental or private hands), he will see how many studies and what other, no less ponderous analyses could be carried out using this true oriental library that no one has studied yet.)⁶⁷

We do not know what Caetani replied, but it is safe to assume that the collection aroused a shared interest among Italian Orientalists and that the scholarly community strove to retain it within the country. Documents from the Caetani archive also reveal that the Italian government, and in particular the ministry of education, initiated negotiations for the purchase of the manuscripts. On 6 July 1909, another eminent Arabist, Carlo Alfonso Nallino, wrote to Caetani:

Sa Ella se, come pare, e perché siano arestate le pratiche per l'acquisto, da parte del Ministero dell'Istruzione Pubblica, dei circa 2000 volumi manoscritti arabi raccolti dal Caprotti nel Yemen e depositati provvisoriamente in casa del Griffini a Milano? Il Caprotti, che mantiene il prezzo di 80000 lire per l'estero, si contentava del Ministero italiano di 30000 lire, pagabili anche in due o tre annualità. Sarebbe un vero peccato se si perdesse questa occasione unica d'avere una raccolta yemenita assai più cospicua di quella di Berlino e del British Museum. Già le monete himyarite ecc., i calchi d'iscrizioni, i magnifici vasi e oggetti di bronzo della dinastia dei Rasūliti che nel Yemen chiamano bronzi ghassāni, ecc., raccolti in molti anni dal Caprotti a Ṣan'ā hanno cominciato a prendere il volo per l'estero. Possibile che per le indecisioni del Ministero si debbano perdere anche i manoscritti?

(Do you know whether, as seems likely, and why the arrangements for the purchase by the Ministry of Public Education of the approximately 2,000 Arabic manuscripts collected by Caprotti in Yemen and temporarily located in Griffini's house in Milan are being run aground? Caprotti, who maintains a price of 80,000 liras for foreign buyers, would accept 30,000 liras from the Italian ministry, payable over two or three years. It would be a real shame if we missed this unique opportunity to retain a Yemeni collection much more substantial than those of Berlin and the British Museum. Himyarite and other coins, plaster casts, magnificent vessels and bronze objects of the Rasulid dynasty that are called Ghassāni bronzes in Yemen, etc., collected over many years by Caprotti in Sanaa, have already started to flow abroad. Is it possible that the manuscripts, too, will be lost because of the ministry's indecision?).⁶⁸

⁶⁷ Paola Ghione and Valentina Sagaria Rossi, *L'Archivio Leone Caetani all'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei*, Rome: L'Erma di Bretschneider, 2004, p. 223. The letter is kept in the Leone Caetani Archive, folder "Ignazio e Michelangelo Guidi" (Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, ALC, folder no. 38).

⁶⁸ Ghione and Sagaria Rossi, *L'Archivio Leone Caetani*, pp. 322–324; Rome, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, ALC, folder no. 844, "Carlo Alfonso Nallino."

It appears that these attempts to find a place for the collection never went far and because of this they were most likely ignored. On the one hand, Ignazio Guidi, who introduced Griffini to Caetani, may have encouraged the young scholar to reach out to the prince, well knowing the latter's interest in Arab sources and his substantial financial means. At the same time, Nallino, the most authoritative Italian Arabist of his period and a supporter of the public management of cultural heritage in Italy, may have been pleading for the purchase of the Caprotti collection by the ministry of education in order to prevent the manuscripts from emigrating to foreign countries. The available evidence indicates that although negotiations with the ministry were opened, the process stalled and there was no more news of it. In his July 1909 letter to Caetani, advocating the ministry's intervention,⁶⁹ Nallino showed he didn't know at all the fact that the collection was being acquired by the Biblioteca Ambrosiana; the acquisition was completed later in 1909. No one had seemingly informed him of the negotiations between Caprotti and the Ambrosiana that had been going on since the end of 1908, while Nallino was still hoping for the ministry's intervention to secure public safekeeping of the manuscripts. The great reported difference in price depending on whether the collection was to be acquired by foreign buyers (80,000 liras) or Italian ones (30,000 liras) implies that the owner strongly favored a domestic sale.

In any case, Caprotti's role in these events and negotiations remains in the dark, as the final decision to leave the collection to the Ambrosiana was his; Griffini's preference for the Ambrosiana could not have been the sole factor, especially for a shrewd and sharp businessman such as Caprotti. Was he perhaps motivated by his patriotic ties to Lombardy and Milan, which he shared with Griffini?⁷⁰ Griffini's Catholic education may also have predisposed him to favor the most prestigious religious institution in northern Italy. Indeed, the link between Griffini and the Ambrosiana had its roots in the crucial role that the Milanese library had played since the beginning of his education as an Arabist.

Through the efforts of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, the Ambrosiana⁷¹ had, since its foundation in 1609, acquired a wealth of manuscript texts in Semitic languages—Arabic, Persian, Hebrew, and Syriac—belonging to both Christian Arabic and Islamic Arabic literature. In particular, thanks to the impulse provided by Antonio Giggi (Antonius Giggeius), who was enrolled in 1609 among the Ambrosiana Dottori as “Hebraicae, Syriacae, Chaldaicae, Arabicae linguae multum peritus” (“very skilled in the Hebrew, Syriac, Arabic, and Chaldean languages”), the study and collection of Oriental codices was strongly encouraged.⁷² The Austrian Orientalist and diplomat Josef von Hammer-Purgstall produced the first summary list of the Arabic manuscripts of the most ancient Fondo in 1839,⁷³ marking the revival of Arabic studies in Milan in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The Antico Fondo consists of 224 Arabic manuscripts, of which 36 are Christian works and 188 Islamic ones. The oldest is dated 621/1224 and contains three ancient texts on

⁶⁹ From 1909 to 1913 Leone Caetani served as an elected member of the Italian Parliament, and his influence over the heads of the ministry could have been decisive in pushing the purchase through.

⁷⁰ The library is named after Ambrose, the patron saint of Milan.

⁷² Giggi authored a four-volume *Thesaurus linguae Arabicae* (Milan, ex Ambrosiani Collegij Typographia, 1932); see Fumagalli, “Raccolte significative,” pp. 182–183.

⁷³ *Catalogo dei codici arabi, persiani e turchi della Biblioteca Ambrosiana* (Milan, 1839).

medicine (MS Ambr., C 59 inf.).⁷⁴ About one-sixth of the works do not appear in the common repertoires or are mentioned only with their titles. A few works are entirely unknown (such as MS Ambr., & 110 sup.); others are unica (e.g. MS Ambr., & 197 sup.:ii, containing a mirror for princes) or autographs (e.g. MS Ambr., D 272 inf., dated 805/1402, and & 80 sup., dated 1006/1598). In 1975, the then-Prefetto of the Ambrosiana, Angelo Paredi, though not an expert on the Arabic manuscript tradition, provided an introduction to this collection that highlighted its value and described it as a prelude to an even more outstanding one:

The Milanese collection, like other larger collections, points up some constants of literature in the Arabic language and of Muslim inspiration, namely the preponderance of the religious motif, Arabic language study, and the speculative approach to the scientific investigation of nature and to the interpretation of supernatural phenomena. Thus, on the one hand, the “Islamic sciences,” that is the Qur’ān, Ḥadīth or tradition, law and theology, and on the other, poetry, philology, grammatical treatises, narrative and stories; in addition, writings on medicine, mathematics, astronomy, geography, the natural sciences and magic. These texts belong mostly to post-classical literature, that is to the XI century onwards, and they bear witness to the activity that generations of learned men devoted to working over the fruits of classical Arab learning and to systematising its theory.⁷⁵

In the case of the Caprotti collection, a conjunction of factors led to the final outcome: the tradesman from Sanaa was keen to find a worthy buyer for his books; the manuscripts needed a new suitable location as an alternative to Griffini’s new house; and there was a growing fear that an appealing offer would reach Caprotti from Germany, in particular from the Berlin library through Hermann Burchardt. The relationship of trust between Griffini and the Ambrosiana’s previous Prefetto, Ceriani, continued with Ceriani’s successor Achille Ratti, who served as Prefetto of the Ambrosiana from March 1907 to 1914, then as Prefetto of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, and finally as pope, under the name Pius XI, from 1922 onward. As Prefetto of the Ambrosiana, Ratti, who had been born in Brianza (Lombardy), proved an enlightened supporter of a worldwide and open-minded cultural policy. In late 1908, through the mediation of Griffini, Caprotti was telegraphed and offered the sum of 30,000 liras for his manuscripts, the same amount mentioned by Nallino in his letter to Caetani six months later. On 11 December 1908 Caprotti sent a reply to Ratti from Sanaa, complaining that the offer was too low but expressing gratification that his collection would remain in Italy:

La somma di 30 mila franchi [...] è molto inferiore al valore reale, visto che io ho potuto acquistare una buona parte della raccolta in condizioni eccezionali e [...] non rappresenta che il costo e le spese incontrate da me, senza contare tutte quelle sostenute in

⁷⁴ Oscar Löfgren has been working on the identification and cataloging *ex novo* of the Antico Fondo since the end of the 1950s, and since 1972 he has been joined by Renato Traini. The Fondo is described in Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. 3–130, where the manuscripts of the Antico and the Medio Fondo (the most recent, despite its name) are distinguished in the catalog’s number order. Instead, the Christian Arabic manuscripts are numbered I–XXXVbis. This catalog and the subsequent three volumes were inspired by the description criteria used in Levi Della Vida’s *Elenco* of the Vatican’s Islamic manuscripts: Giorgio Levi Della Vida, *Elenco dei manoscritti arabi islamici della Biblioteca Vaticana: Vaticani, Barberiniani, Borgiani, Rossiani*, Vatican City: Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, 1935.

⁷⁵ Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, p. x (foreword).

Italia [...]. Vorrei essere in uno stato finanziario più solido per poter provare la mia deferenza a Lei, e alla venerata memoria dell'ottimo abate Ceriani, ma purtroppo un quarto di secolo in Jemen non mi permette ancora di fare il Mecenate non solo, ma l'acquisto dei manoscritti mi mise alle strette, e invece di ottenere un grosso profitto ho ottenuto tutto il contrario, ma di ciò non mi lagno affatto, perché sono oltremodo soddisfatto che la mia raccolta sia restata in Italia, e per di più in Milano all'Ambrosiana.

(The sum of 30 thousand francs [...] is much lower than the real value, since I was able to purchase a large part of the collection under exceptional conditions and [...] it represents only the cost and expenses incurred by me, excluding all those incurred in Italy [...]. I would like to be in a more solid financial state so as to prove my deference to You and to the blessed memory of the excellent Abbot Ceriani, but unfortunately a quarter of a century in Yemen does not allow me to be solely a patron, as purchasing the manuscripts put me on the spot, and instead of making a big profit I got the opposite; but I do not complain at all, because I am exceedingly satisfied that my collection has remained in Italy, and what is more in Milan at the Ambrosiana.)⁷⁶

Caprotti saw himself as a patron and was proud to leave his manuscripts in Italy, especially to the prestigious Milanese Ambrosiana. It remains unclear where the manuscripts were between the end of 1908 and 1909, since most of the codices were no longer in Griffini's house at that time; they were probably transferred to Caprotti's house in Magenta, from whence forty-seven crates were dispatched to the Ambrosiana between 24 November 1909 and 8 January 1910.

Since the institution did not have the financial means to pay for the manuscripts but nonetheless wished to keep the Caprotti collection within the boundaries of the Italian state, Ratti, with the essential support of Beltrami, devised a non-public subscription scheme, according to which the amount needed was divided into ten equal parts, to be covered by ten donors. Within a few days twenty-five Milanese donors⁷⁷ joined the scheme, and the Banca Commerciale Italiana decided to complete the donation to bring the total to 30,000 liras, the amount requested by Caprotti as the price of the manuscripts. Thanks to the farsightedness and network of Ratti, who was sympathetic to the modernist movement in the liberal and progressive Milan, the acquisition of this remarkable new fund of Arabic manuscripts of Yemeni provenance was applauded and celebrated as a special gift to the Ambrosiana from the city on the third anniversary of the library's foundation on 8 December 1609. On the anniversary, 8 December 1909, Ratti officially announced the purchase of the entire Milanese Arab library, totaling sixty-one crates of books, as Griffini disclosed to the general public in his already mentioned article in the *Corriere della sera* on 10 January 1910 and in his subscription call addressed to Milanese citizens published in the *Rivista degli studi orientali* in the same year.⁷⁸ Ratti also placed a memorial plaque at the entrance to the reading hall of the library

⁷⁶ Ambr., W 8 inf., no. 252. In his long letter, Caprotti also announced the shipment of other manuscripts as gifts to Ratti and Griffini; see Fumagalli, "Raccolte significative," pp. 199–201.

⁷⁷ Among the subscribers we find a variety of illustrious citizens: prelates, nobles, bankers, the newspaper *Corriere della sera*, the mayor of Milan, and Beltrami. The donors are listed on a plaque displayed at the library; Renato Traini, *Catalogue of the Arabic Manuscripts in the Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, vol. 4: *Nuovo Fondo: Series F–H (Nos. 1296–1778)*, Cisinello Balsamo: Silvana Editoriale, 2011, p. xiv.

⁷⁸ Griffini, "La grande raccolta," pp. 374–375; Griffini, "Una lieta notizia." The first catalog or short description of at least one-third (550) of the manuscripts of the Nuovo Fondo (series A–F) was accomplished by Griffini during

on 7 December 1909. For its opening he chose a *ḥadīth* from Sufyān b. ‘Uyayna, inscribed in Kufic characters: إذا دخلت خزانة فاجتهد أن لا تخرج منها حتى تعرف ما فيها (If you enter a library try not to get out of it without knowing what is inside). A commemorative inscription in Latin follows, written in capital letters: “Commendat Ambrosiana Bibliotheca in aevum illorum nomina qui ei tria ab ortu exacta saecula gratulati Arabicos libros M.DC.X manu scriptos e Iemenica regione a I. Caprotti advectos aere suo collaticio doctoris E. Griffini iuvante sollertia coëmentes munificentissime donaverunt” (“The Ambrosiana Library honors for all eternity the names of those who exactly three centuries after its foundation donated 1,610 Arabic manuscript books brought at his own expense by G. Caprotti from the Yemeni region with the help and support of Dr. E. Griffini”). A dedicated ex libris was affixed to each codex of the Caprotti collection that entered the Ambrosiana. [fig. 2]

There were further offers from and negotiations with Caprotti, with Griffini continuing to argue for the purchase of works such as the compendium of Zaydī law by Zayd b. ‘Alī, to whose study Griffini had dedicated himself. He presented the work to Ratti, justifying himself in a letter for showing interest in the codices before negotiating: “È stato più furbo del solito, e mi ha preso alla sprovvista facendosi così dire in anticipo se sono o no quello che si cerca” (“He was shrewder than usual, and he caught me off guard, making me tell him in advance whether or not they were what was sought”). Griffini suggested paying no more than 50 liras for the two codices.⁷⁹ We can assume that during this late period Griffini was searching for Zaydī works and had commissioned Caprotti to find them, keeping some dozens of manuscripts for himself. At least one manuscript was donated by Griffini to the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in this period according to a note written by Ratti and dated 28 July 1912, on the last page of a rather old exemplar of Yemeni provenance containing the *Dīwān* of Dhū l-Rumma.⁸⁰

Donations of manuscripts collected by Caprotti continued. On 12 May 1914 the generous benefactor Luca Beltrami donated to the Ambrosiana 180 further codices in Arabic (156 MSS), Turkish, and Hebrew that Caprotti had acquired in Sanaa, Najran, and Iraq during the years 1910–1913 and brought to his home in Magenta. These manuscripts were added to the Nuovo Fondo, series H.⁸¹ [figg. 3-5]

the years 1908–1920: Eugenio Griffini, “Lista dei manoscritti sudarabici Nuovo Fondo della Biblioteca Ambrosiana di Milano,” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 3 (1910), pp. 253–278, 571–594, 901–921; 4 (1911–1912), pp. 87–106, 1021–1048; 6 (1914–1915), pp. 1283–1316; 7 (1916–1918), pp. 51–130, 565–628; 8 (1919–1920), pp. 241–367. In 1960 Ṣalāḥ al-Dīn al-Munajjid, director of the Ma’had al-makḥṭūṭāt al-‘arabiyya in Cairo, published some notes about 220 MSS of series D (D 220–440): al-Munajjid, *Fihris al-makḥṭūṭāt al-‘arabiyya fi l-Ambrūziyānā bi-Mīlānū*, vol. 2, part 1: *Dāl, min raqam 220–420*, Cairo: Jāmi‘at al-duwal al-‘arabiyya, Ma’had al-makḥṭūṭāt al-‘arabiyya, 1960.

⁷⁹ The letter is dated 11 September 1911 (Ambr., W 20 inf., no. 111).

⁸⁰ MS Ambr. G 2; Traini, *Catalogue*, p. 191, no. 1610. On the same date Griffini wrote to Ratti announcing his intention to give to the library the ancient and correct copy of the *Dīwān* as a travel souvenir (letter dated 28 July 1912: Ambr., W 20 inf., G.III, no. 120).

⁸¹ They are described in Eugenio Griffini, “Die jüngste ambrosianische Sammlung arabischer Handschriften,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 69 (1915), pp. 63–88.

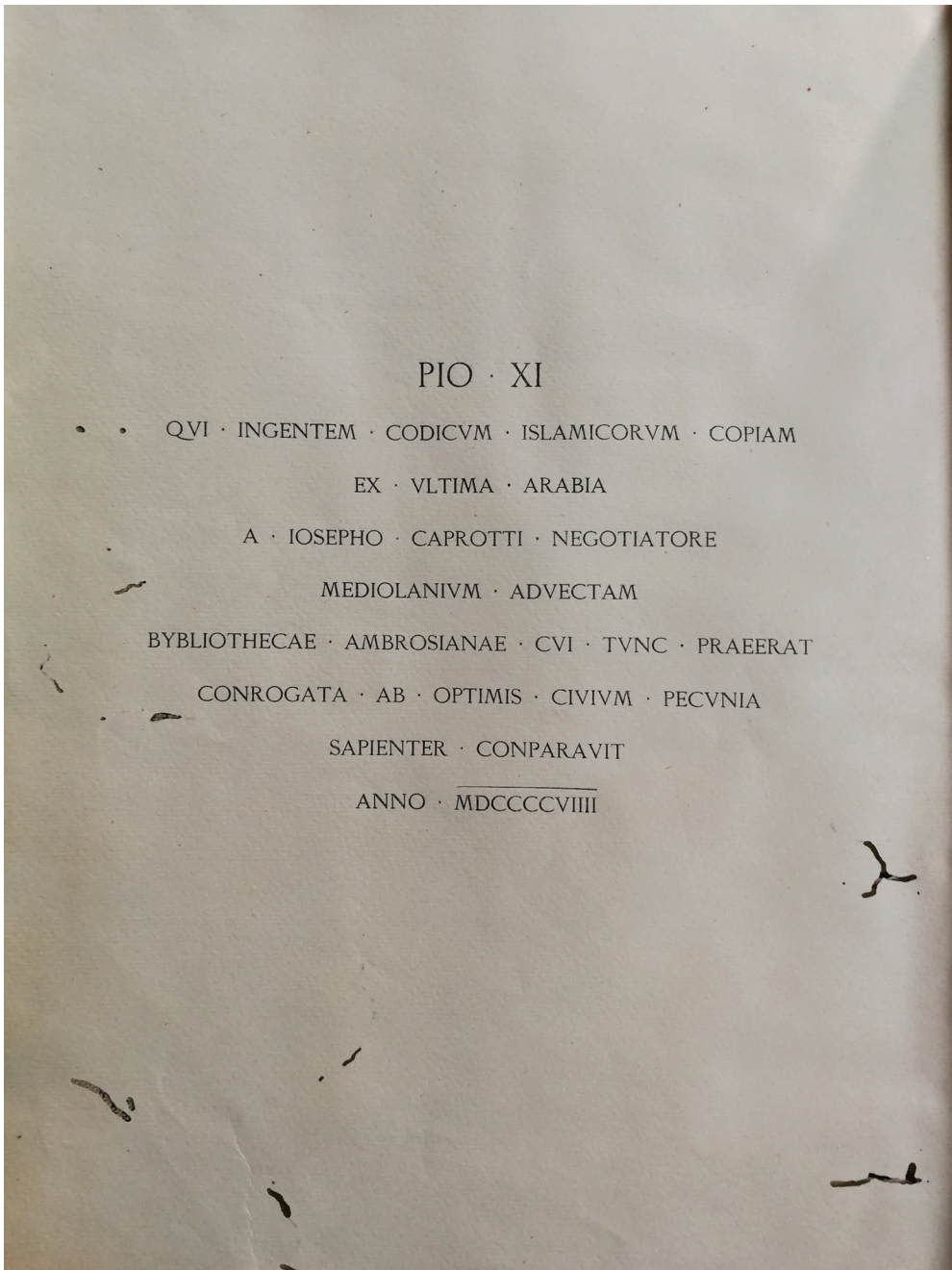


Figure 2. The Latin label affixed over each manuscript purchased by Caprotti and kept in the Ambrosiana Library displays the following words: «Once collected the money from the wealthiest citizens, Pius IX wisely provided the Ambrosiana library, of which he was then prefect, a great abundance of Islamic codes brought to Milan from Extreme Arabia by the merchant Giuseppe Caprotti. – In the year 1909».

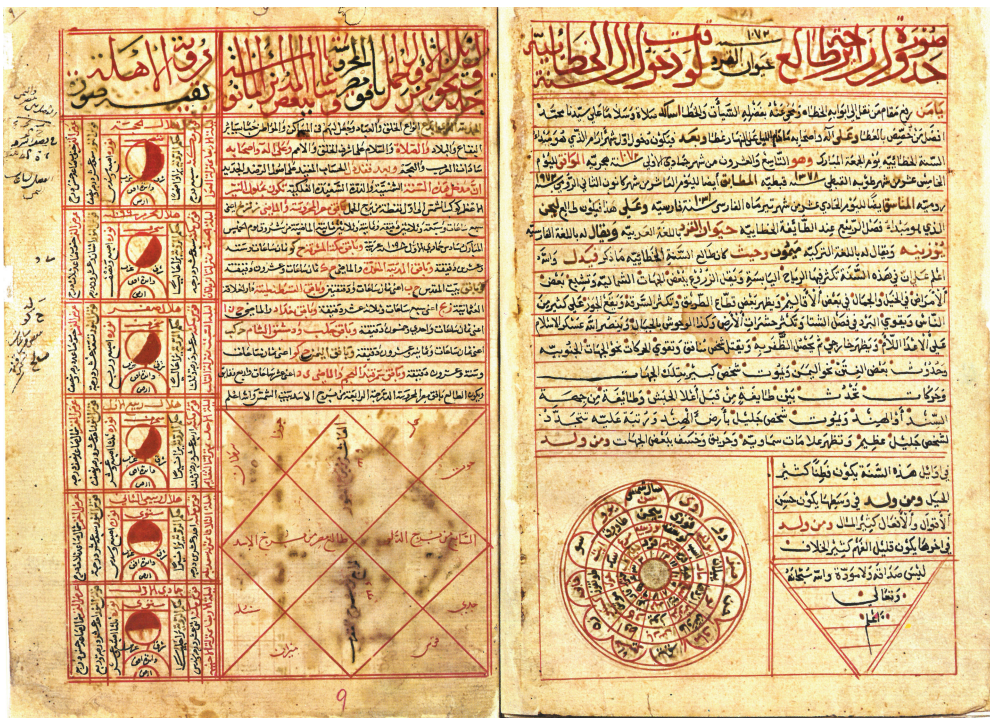


Figure 3. MS. Milan, Ambrosiana, C 85 (ff. 8v-9r): Rules from prognostics from an untitled astronomical and astrological work, probably autographed by ‘Abd al-Mun‘im al-Nabtiti al-Ḥanafī in 1072-3/1662-3.

Next in the chronological order of acquisitions and donations of Caprotti manuscripts, in April 1922, shortly after Caprotti's return to Magenta and his death at home in 1919, another 280 codices were sent by Senator Beltrami to the Vatican Apostolic Library as a tribute to the newly elected Pope Pius XI, Achille Ratti.⁸² If we assume that Caprotti had not given up his book-trading activities, the events surrounding Beltrami's acquisition of the last Caprotti manuscripts remain unclear. Levi Della Vida simply stated that this batch was the last remaining stock of the huge assortment of manuscripts put together by Caprotti in Sanaa.⁸³ The 280 codices contain about 520 texts: fragmentary Qur'āns and commentaries, prayers, works on *ḥadīth*, logics, grammar, Zaydi *furū'* (practical law) and poetics, for the most part duplicating what was already preserved in the Ambrosiana. The most ancient exemplar is dated 537/1143, *al-Muntakhab min al-fiqh*, the responses by the Zaydi Imam al-Hādī Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn al-Rasī to Muḥammad b. Sulaymān al-Kūfī (MS Vat.Ar.1071). As was the case with the Caprotti manuscripts of the Ambrosiana an ex libris was affixed to each codex collected by Caprotti and donated by Beltrami to the Vaticana. [fig. 6] It is noteworthy that neither the Caprotti manuscripts preserved at the Ambrosiana nor those at the Vatican library bear his stamp of possession (fig. 7), suggesting that they were intended for sale and not to be kept in his personal possession.

⁸² The Caprotti manuscripts at the Vatican Library have been incorporated into the Codici Vaticani Arabi (nos. 946–1206, 1357–1375) and catalogued by Levi Della Vida in *Elenco dei manoscritti*: MSS Vat.Ar. nos. 1357-1375 are fragmentary texts.

⁸³ Levi Della Vida in *Elenco dei manoscritti*, pp. viii–ix.

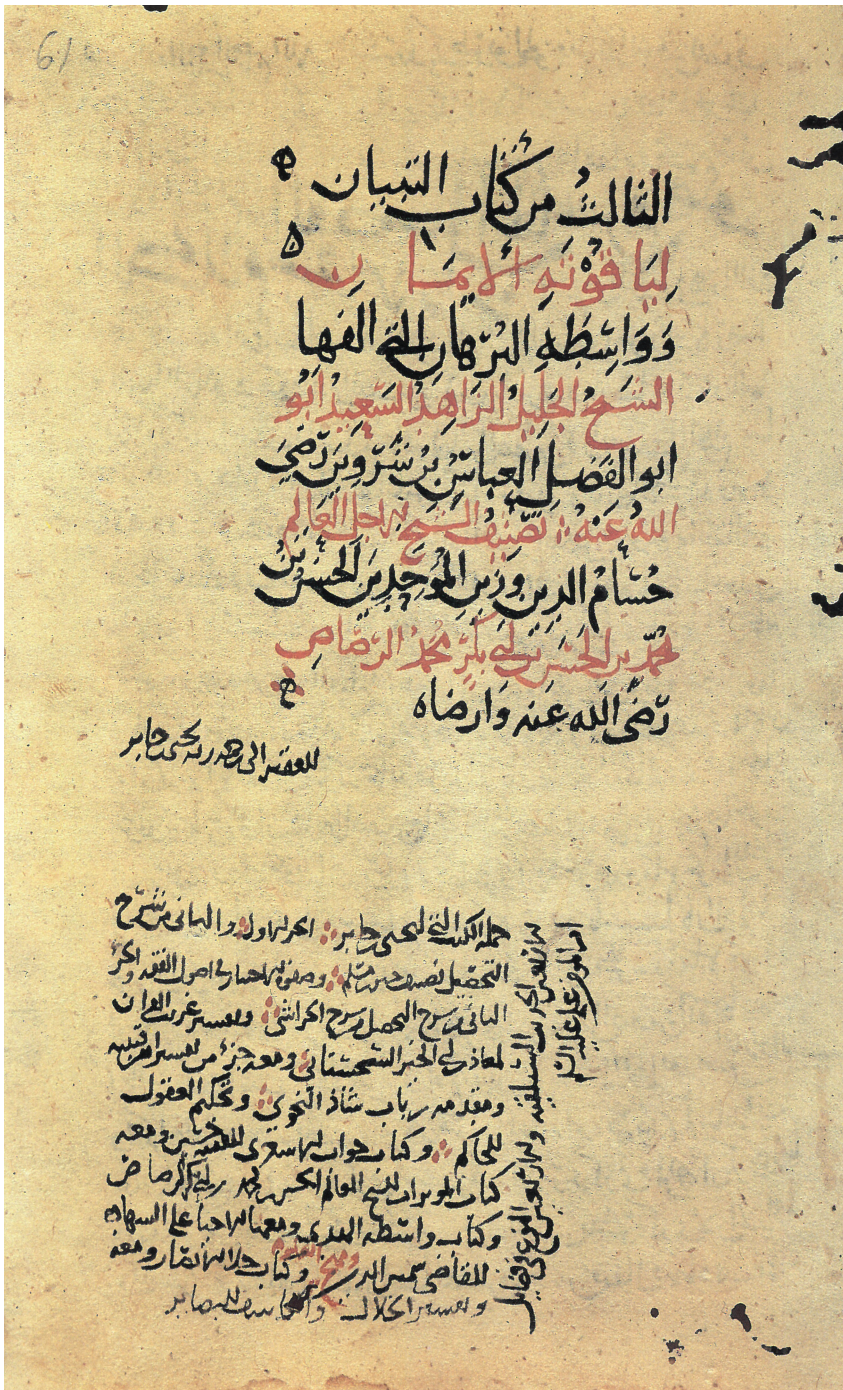


Figure 4. MS. Milan, Ambrosiana, E 208 (f. 61r): Secondary title-page of the third *juz'* of *al-Tibyan li-yāqūt al-īmān wa-wāṣiṭat al-burhān*, by Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. Ḥasan al-Raṣṣāṣ, showing a list of the books (about fifteen) which belonged to the copyist, who transcribed the text in 620/1223.



Figure 5. MS. Milan, Ambrosiana, F 178 (f. 21r): Anonymous *jadwal* to be used for knowing the *qibla*, in each of the twelve regions, according to the mediaeval cosmography (*Qawl 'alā ma'rifat jihāt al-qibla min al-buldān*), transcribed in the mid-12th/18th century.

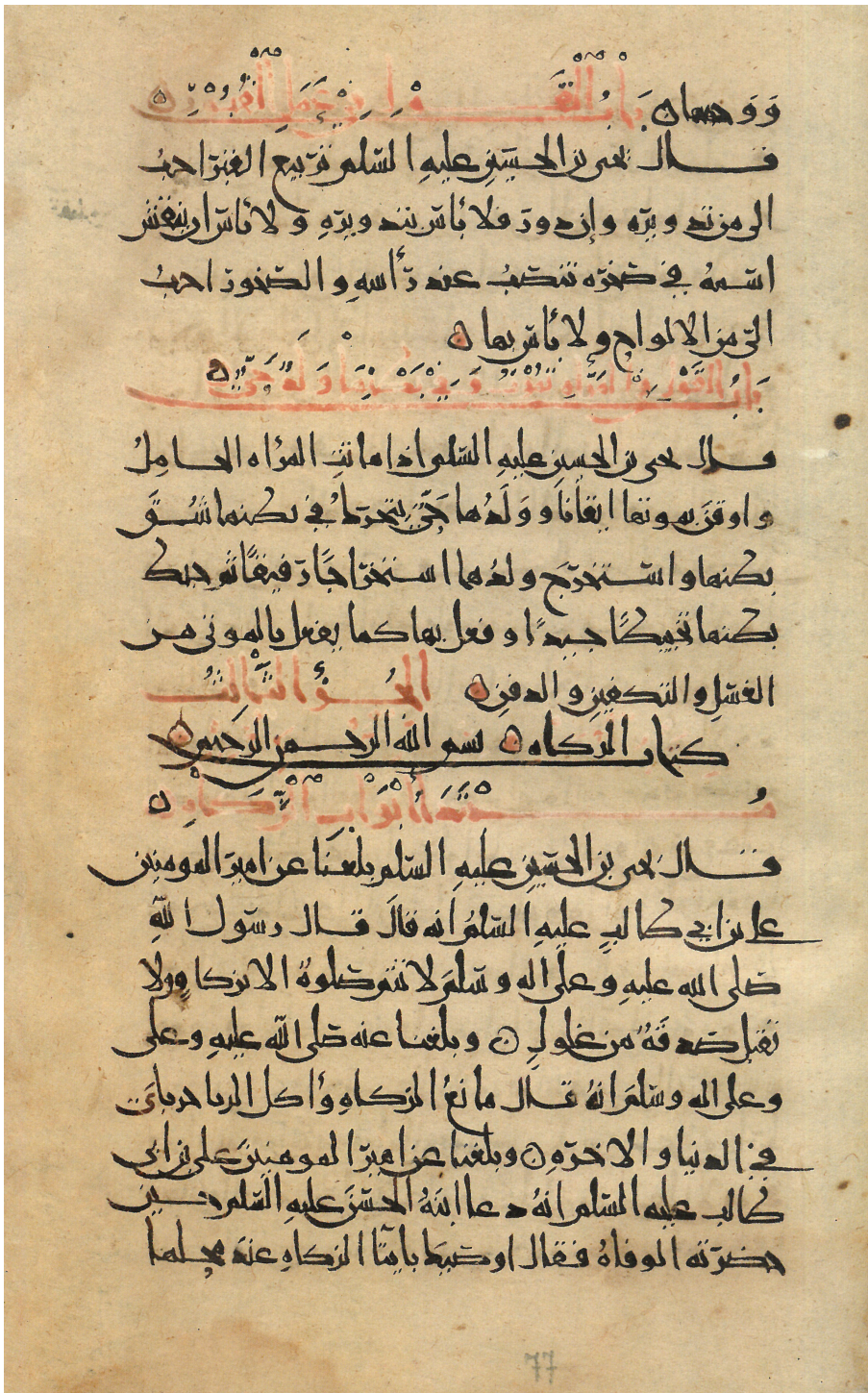


Figure 6. MS. Milan, Ambrosiana, H 138 (f. 77r): The beginning of the *bāb* on the *zakāt* of *Jāmi' al-ahkām*, by al-Hadī ilā al-Ḥaqq Yaḥyā b. Ḥusayn b. Qāsim (d. 298/911), transcribed in 418/1027 in a very ancient *naskhī*.

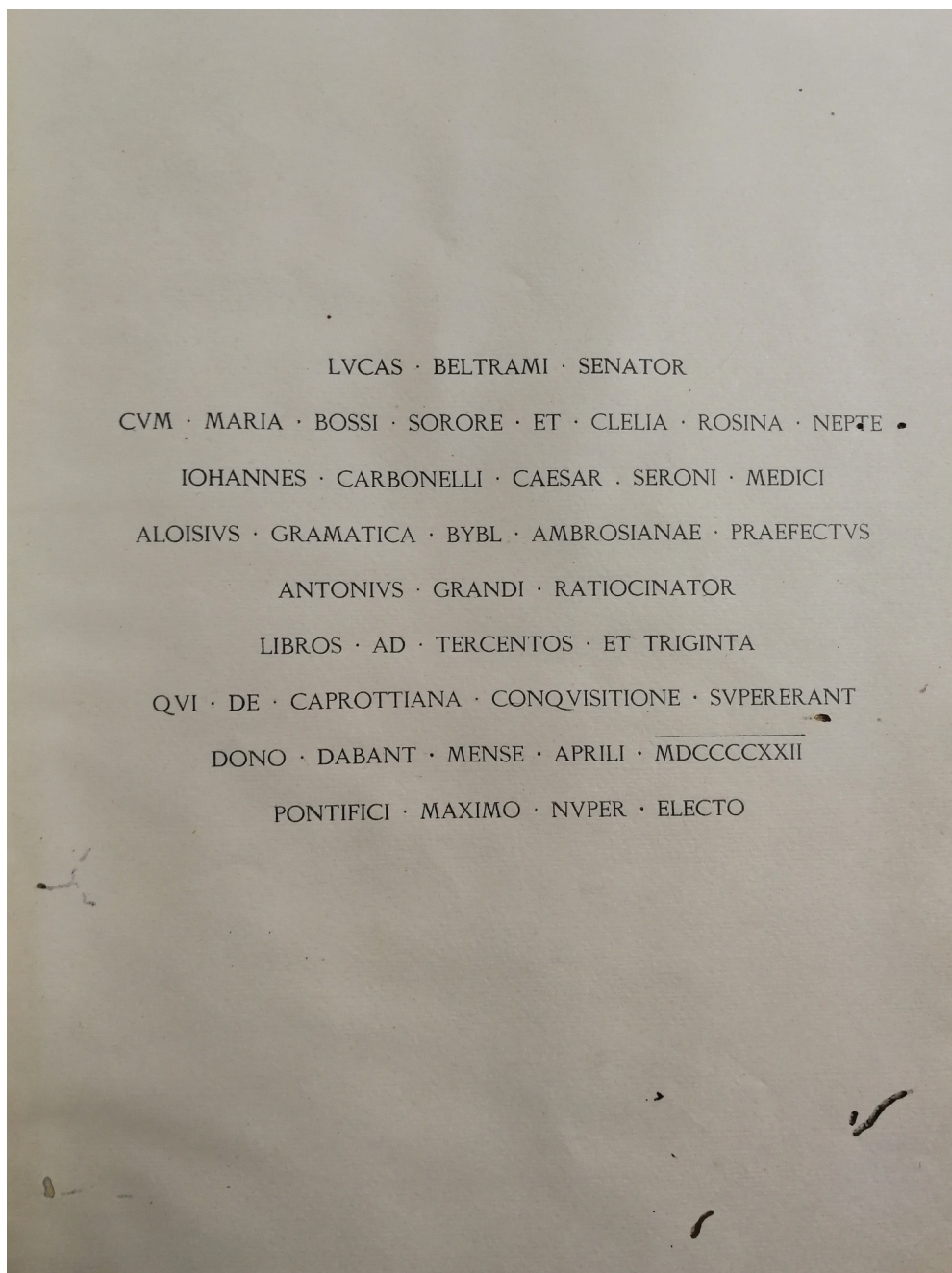


Figure 7. The Latin ex libris on the manuscripts given by Luca Beltrami as a gift to the Vatican Library, and formerly collected by Caprotti: «The senator Luca Beltrami, with his sister Maria Bossi, his nephew Clelia Rosini, the physicians Giovanni Carbonelli and Cesare Seroni, the prefect of the Ambrosiana Luigi Gramatica, and the accounting administrator Antonio Grandi gave [to the Vatican Library] about three hundred and thirty surviving books from the Caprotti collection, in April 1922, shortly after the Pope [Pius XI]’s election».

In total, the collection of Arab-Yemeni manuscripts assembled by Caprotti over the course of almost thirty years from 1890 to 1919 consists of 2,215 manuscripts (2,267 if we do consider also the fifty-two manuscripts he gave to Griffini). These have been divided among three libraries: the Staatsbibliothek in Munich (157 MSS),⁸⁴ the Biblioteca Ambrosiana in Milan (1,778 MSS) and the Apostolica Biblioteca Vaticana (280 MSS) in Vatican City.

One last batch of Arab manuscripts of Yemeni provenance was given to the Ambrosiana after Griffini's premature death in Cairo in 1925. His mother fulfilled his wish by arranging for his Oriental books and manuscripts, in all probability provided by Caprotti over the latest decades, to be donated to the Ambrosiana; his archive and study materials entered the library later.⁸⁵ The fifty-two Yemeni manuscripts collected by Griffini were ignored by scholars (even by Brockelmann in his *Supplementbände*) until Löfgren uncovered them and included them in the first volume of the catalog of the Ambrosiana Arabic manuscripts and designated them as part of the Medio Fondo,⁸⁶ together with forty-two other codices (from Tripoli in Libya and northern Africa) donated in 1927 by the Milanese patron Gustavo Adolfo Nosedà (1870–1951) and another thirty-eight manuscripts from various donors dating from the 1930s. With its 1,830 Arab-Yemeni manuscripts (1,778 from Caprotti and 52 from Griffini) the Biblioteca Ambrosiana holds the largest and most relevant collection of Zaydī Yemeni manuscripts outside Yemen. The Nuovo Fondo⁸⁷ is entirely of Yemeni origin,⁸⁸ and it offers wide-ranging documentation of Zaydī and Yemeni literature in general, reflecting the extremely peculiar culture established in the region since the end of the third/ninth century.

The legal rigor of the Zaydī branch of Shi'ism, its ethical puritanism, and the theological rationalism derived from Mu'tazilism have stimulated its prodigious textual production, whose character appears to be more technical than literary, even in its handwritten layout; it has endured for more than a millennium, with peaks of particular intensity between the seventh/thirteenth and eleventh/seventeenth centuries. The Nuovo Fondo's enormous corpus of texts also includes religious works of the Shāfi'i school and secular scientific works together with South Arabian and Sufi poetry, which flourished luxuriantly despite Zaydī opposition. It is worth recalling Traini's inspiring description of these works

⁸⁴ The Caprotti Arabic manuscripts in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich have been incorporated into the main library collection with the signatures Cod. arab. 1179–1334/2. Of the codices, 70% contain works on Zaydī law, traditions, dogma, and poetry; Florian Sobieroj, *Arabische Handschriften der Bayerischen Staatsbibliothek zu München unter Einschluss einiger türkischer und persischer Handschriften*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2007, pp. 267–511.

⁸⁵ Angela Codazzi published a catalog of this donation, following Beltrami's initiative: *Catalogo dei libri a stampa ed elenco sommario dei mss. dal Dr. Griffini legati alla Biblioteca Ambrosiana*, Milan: Tipografia Umberto Allegretti, 1926.

⁸⁶ They were marked with X sup. signatures, denoting later donations; Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. xxix (concordances of the Medio Fondo), 27, 130–162 (nos. XXV, CCXLIII–CCXCIV).

⁸⁷ The manuscripts of the Nuovo Fondo retain the signatures assigned by Caprotti: series A–D (Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, nos. 1–830); series E (Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 3, nos. 831–1295); series F–H (Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 4, nos. 1296–1778).

⁸⁸ There are a few exceptional manuscripts not transcribed in Yemen, but these codices were brought to Yemen by owners who integrated them into Yemeni collections. An example is MS A 80 (Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 2, pp. 42–43, no. 80), a unicum text of ancient Arabic proverbs (*Kitāb al-amthāl*) by an Isfahani traditionist scholar, Abū l-Shaykh al-Iṣbahānī (d. 369/979), dated 708/1309 and seemingly copied in Syria.

as “testi che sono testimonianze di una cultura, quella dell’antica Arabia Felice nella sua posteriore stagione, segnata dall’Islam, la cui ‘pietas’ combinò singolarmente, sul suolo del Yemen, asprezze di lotta politica con rigori di mistica ascesi, la minuziosa elaborazione del sapere giuridico con una razionale disciplina di speculazione teologica” (“texts that are evidence of a culture, that of the ancient Arabia Felix in its later season, marked by Islam, whose ‘piety’ singularly combined on the soil of Yemen the harshness of political struggle with the rigors of mystical asceticism, and the meticulous elaboration of legal knowledge with a rational discipline of theological speculation”).⁸⁹

Unfortunately, Löfgren and Traini’s meritorious *Catalogue*, which has played a crucial role in opening up this large body of texts, does not record notes or stamps of previous owners or paleographic features that would allow glimpses into their places of production; indexes of dates and subjects are provided instead.

Paleographically, the codices exhibit a general severity in their graphic and textual features with few decorative artifices, though the clarity and solidity of the archaic Yemeni script produce an irresistibly attractive, austere elegance, particularly in the most ancient exemplars. The oldest dated manuscript of the Ambrosiana Yemeni collection is a basic treatise on Zaydī law, *Jāmi’ al-aḥkām fī l-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥaram* by Hādī Yaḥyā b. Ḥusayn b. Qāsim (the founder of the Zaydī imamate in Sanaa), dated 418/1027.⁹⁰ Another group of fifty-one codices are dated to the seventh/thirteenth century or earlier. The eleventh/seventeenth century is the best represented among the dated codices, with 78% originating in this century.

In the content of the Caprotti collection, the Zaydī strand decisively prevails, especially in works on theology and law (which make up 43% of the collection); in these two areas Zaydī works account for 75% and 90% of the total, respectively. Nearly half of the material thus falls within the realm of the religious sciences, including also texts on ethics and Sufism. The other half, pertaining to profane knowledge, addresses the “Arab sciences” of grammar, lexicography, history and historiography, poetry, and various scientific subjects. The collection’s value is further strengthened by the originality, if not the absolute rarity, of a considerable number of its texts: about 230 are otherwise unknown, about 300 are unique, and 32 are autographs.

In terms of their codicological structure, the 1,830 Ambrosiana codices (the Caprotti and Griffini collections) contain more than 2,700 identified texts, with 46% of the codices consisting of a single text each and about 43% being composite multitext codices. The latter include both single-block manuscripts, produced in a single working session, and multiple-block manuscripts, produced in several distinct working sessions (whether organized or factitious). The collection also contains other miscellanies (*majmū’āt*), such as poetic anthologies or medleys of various texts, at times by the same authors.

When we consider the orientation revealed by Caprotti’s choice of manuscripts from the beginning to the end of his activity in Sanaa, it is possible to detect a shift in tastes and interests, likely due to Griffini’s influence. The first manuscripts he sold to the Staatsbibliothek in Munich were mostly on Zaydī law, whereas his later acquisitions, which were

⁸⁹ I am indebted to my teacher Renato Traini for sharing with me the typewritten draft of his address on the occasion of the presentation of the third volume of the *Catalogue* on 19 November 1996 at the Biblioteca Ambrosiana.

⁹⁰ MS Ambr. H 138; Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 4, pp. 294–295, no. 1760.

shipped to Griffini in Milan and later ended up in the Ambrosiana, show an expansion in the areas of knowledge covered and in the associated disciplines. The fifty-two Griffini codices, although limited in number, deal with a wider range of subjects: religious sciences (thirty texts, including only two on Zaydī law), ethics and politics (six texts), the sciences (ten texts), history (eight texts), the Arabic language (nine texts), poetry (thirteen texts), and *adab* and prose literature (twelve texts).⁹¹

Beltrami's 1922 donation of 280 codices to the Vaticana after Caprotti's death represented Caprotti's final contribution, although it is not known when and how these texts were acquired in Sanaa nor when they were sent to Italy. The Vatican's Yemeni collection comprises 520 individual works, with a higher percentage being preserved in multitext codices, and the distribution of subjects is quite heterogeneous, with works related to Zaydism (114 texts on law and 34 on theology) and poetry (134 texts) predominating, followed by works on language (56 texts), the sciences (54 texts), history (42 texts), the Qur'ānic sciences (38 texts), prayers (36 texts), and other subjects.

Beyond quantitative analysis, the Caprotti collection as a whole constitutes an extraordinary 360-degree observatory on the prodigious cultural transfer and propagation in Yemen from the third/ninth century onward, and on Yemeni manuscript production, whose historical, literary, codicological, paleographic, and material aspects are still in need of systematic study.⁹²

Seven years after Caprotti's death, in 1926, the abovementioned doctor and advisor to the imam, Emilio Dubbiosi, landed in Yemen, where he collected 225 Arabic manuscripts, mainly with medical and zoological content.⁹³ In 1990 the Dubbiosi family donated his collection of manuscripts and books to the library of the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO) in Rome. The IsMEO's holdings were subsequently transferred to the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, with which the IsMEO merged in 1995, and they are currently conserved by the National Central Library of Rome (BNCR).⁹⁴ Dubbiosi's collection is a treasure trove of unique and rare texts on medicine, pharmacology, and astronomy, [figg. 8-11] recently discovered and soon available to scholars through the Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) project initiated jointly by the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, thanks to Sabine Schmidtke, and the Hill Museum and Manuscript Library

⁹¹ The subject index of the Griffini collection has been included in the general classified index of the Nuovo and Medio Fondo (Löfgren and Traini, *Catalogue*, vol. 1, pp. 239–250).

⁹² It is unfortunate that the Caprotti manuscripts at the Ambrosiana, although fully digitized in recent years, have so far not been included in the ZMT project; those kept at the Vatican Library have so far not been digitized.

⁹³ Dubbiosi was interested in zoology to the point of gathering a collection of reptiles, the first of its kind, collected around Sanaa between 1928 and 1929; it was donated to the School of Military Health in Florence, which sent it to the zoologist Giuseppe Scortecci. See Giuseppe Scortecci, "Rettili dello Yemen," *Atti della Società Italiana di Scienze Naturali e del Museo Civico di Storia Naturale in Milano* 71 (1932), pp. 39–49, here: p. 39.

⁹⁴ I am very grateful to Adriano Valerio Rossi, president of the new IsMEO-Associazione Internazionale di Studi sul Mediterraneo e l'Oriente, who enabled the inclusion of the Dubbiosi manuscripts in the ZMT project early this year, and to Lorenzo Declich, librarian at the IsMEO, who has been very cooperative and helpful in implementing the project.



Figure 10. MS. Rome, BNCR-ISIAO, Dubbiosi 137 (ff. 4v-5r): Illuminated front page of the systematic handbook of medicine *Tadhkira fī l-ṭibb* (*Tadhkira ulī al-albāb wa-l-jāmi' li-l-'ajab al-'ujāb*), by Dā'ūd b. 'Umar al-Anṭākī al-Ḍarīr (d. 1008/1599), transcribed in 1149/1736.

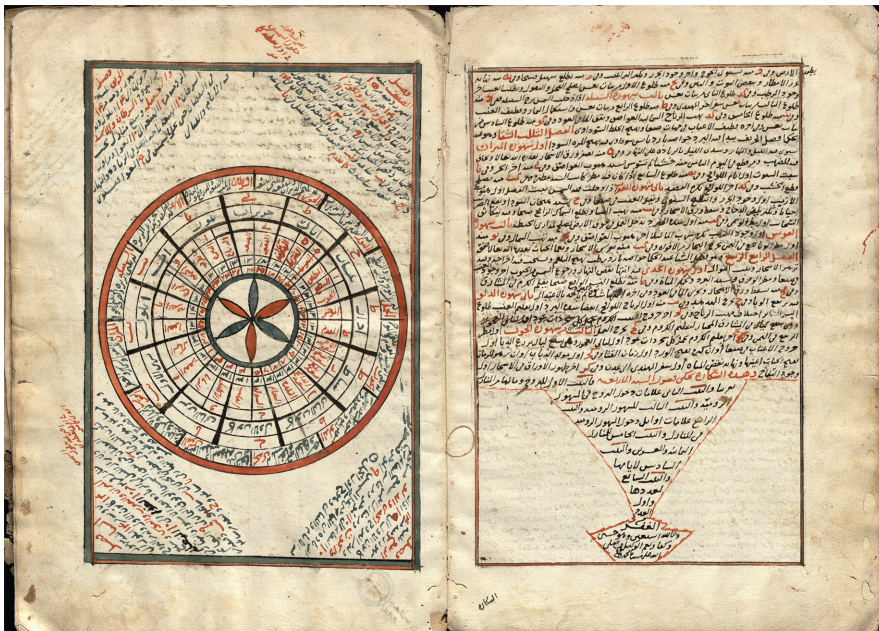


Figure 11. MS. Rome, BNCR-ISIAO, Dubbiosi 226 (ff. 16v-17r): Astrological correspondence table from the eschatological work on the meaning of astrology *Tafriḡ al-mahmūm fī 'ilm al-nujūm* (*Faraj al-mahmūm fī ma'rifat nahj al-ḥalāl wa-l-ḥarām min 'ilm al-nujūm*), by the Shī'ī Raḡī al-Dīn Abū al-Qāsim 'Alī b. Mūsā b. Ja'far Ibn Ṭāwūs al-Ṭāwūsī al-'Alawī (d. 664/1266), copy of the 12th/18th century.

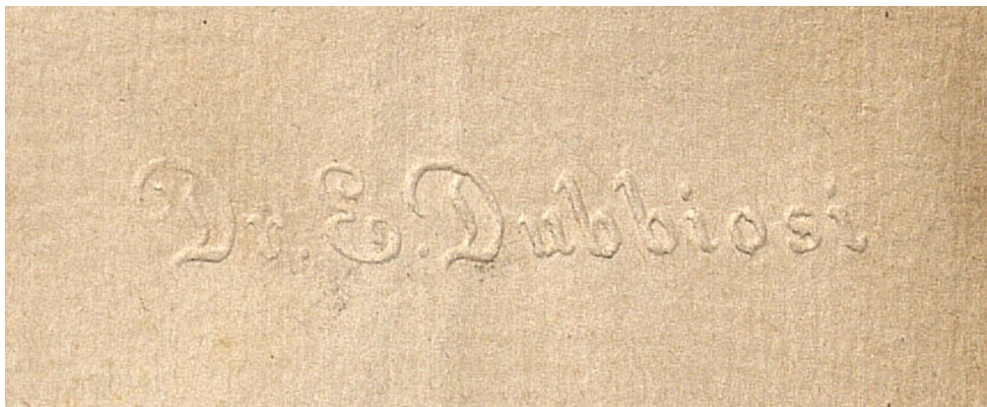


Figure 12. The Emilio Dubbiosi dry stamp, which he embossed on some of his manuscripts collected in Sanaa (MS. Rome, BNCr-IsIAO, Dubbiosi 5, f. 151v).

(HMML) at Saint John's University, Collegeville, Minnesota, and since 2018 successfully extended to Italian libraries.⁹⁵ In rare cases we have found a dry stamp with the name "Emilio Dubbiosi" embossed on manuscripts in his collection. [fig. 12]

The name of another physician mentioned earlier, Tommaso Sarnelli, is associated with the partly uncatalogued collection of Arabic manuscripts at the University of Naples "L'Orientale," which includes manuscripts, mostly on medicine, that Sarnelli himself brought back from Yemen in 1932 and donated to "L'Orientale" in 1950,⁹⁶ as well as later acquisitions. His manuscripts are marked by his decorated Arabic ex libris on the pastedown of their front plates [fig. 13]. Thanks to the ZMT project I was able to locate the forty-two manuscripts transcribed or produced in Yemen within the library's entire Arabic Fund, which consists of 259 codices from northern Africa, Egypt, Turkey, Syria, Central Asia, and Yemen; 256 items have been digitized in 2019 and are going to be available in the HMML's virtual reading room.⁹⁷ Noteworthy among the Sarnelli manuscripts is a particularly ancient and rare exemplar, first uncovered and reported by Sarnelli himself: a unique and unedited *Kitāb al-Lum'a al-kāfiya fī l-adwiyā al-shāfiya* [fig. 14], which is an autograph by the author, al-Malik al-Afḍal al-ʿAbbās b. ʿAlī b. Dāwūd al-Ghassānī, the Rasulid king

⁹⁵ ZMT encompasses an online digital platform of digitized Yemeni Zaydī manuscripts from all participating institutions; with regard to Italy, see Valentina Sagaria Rossi and Sabine Schmidtke, "The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition (ZMT) Project: Digitizing the Collections of Yemeni Manuscripts in Italian Libraries," *COMSt Bulletin* 5, no. 1 (2019), pp. 43–59, and, more generally, Sabine Schmidtke, "The Zaydi Manuscript Tradition: Virtual Repatriation of Cultural Heritage," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 50 (2018), pp. 124–128.

⁹⁶ Sixteen of Sarnelli's manuscripts have been described by Giuseppe Celentano and Clelia Sarnelli Cerqua in "I manoscritti di medicina araba dell'Istituto Universitario Orientale di Napoli," *Studi in onore di Francesco Gabrieli nel suo ottantesimo compleanno*, ed. Renato Traini, Rome: Università di Roma "La Sapienza," Dipartimento di studi orientali, 1984, pp. 211–236.

⁹⁷ I wish to thank Roberto Tottoli, Rector of the University "L'Orientale," Stefania Castanò and Antonella Muratgia of the library system's Asiatic section for their fundamental and generous collaboration that allowed the library to join the project.



Figure 13. The label with the Arabic ex libris created by Tommaso Sarnelli and affixed on his manuscripts donated to “L’Orientale”: «من جملة كتب الحكيم سرنلي».



Figure 14. MS. Naples, Università “L’Orientale”-SiBA, ARA 49 (f. 1r): Title page of the medical and hygiene compendium *Kitāb al-lum‘a al-kāfiya fī l-adwiya al-shāfiya*, by al-Malik al-Afḍal al-‘Abbās b. ‘Ālī b. Dā‘ūd Ibn Rasūl al-Ghassānī (who ruled in Yemen from 764/1363 to 778/1377), copied at the end of the 8th/14th century (autograph?), and dedicated to Sarnelli from the ‘āmil in Sanaa al-Sayyid Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd al-Qādir in 1350/1931 (upper left).



Figure 15. MS. Naples, Università “L’Orientale”-SiBA, ARA 10 (ff. 10v-11r): Decorated front page of the compendium of pharmacology *Kitāb al-mu’tamad fī l-adwiya al-mufrada* (*Kitāb al-mu’tamad fī l-mufradāt fī l-ṭibb*), by al-Malik al-Ashraf Mumahhid al-Dīn ‘Umar b. Yūsuf b. ‘Umar b. ‘Alī b. Rasūl al-Ghassānī (who ruled in Yemen from 694/1294-5 to 696/1296-7), dated 1154/1741.

who ruled from 764/1363 to 778/1377).⁹⁸ The work is a compendium on medicine and the hygiene of food, drinks, and pharmacology, and it betrays the influence of Ibn Sīnā’s *Qānūn*. The manuscript was a gift to Sarnelli by the *āmīl* of Sanaa, Muḥammad b. Ḥusayn b. ‘Abd al-Qādir in 1931, as we read in the dedication on f. 1r. The Yemeni manuscripts of the “L’Orientale” can be mostly dated back to the eleventh/seventeenth and twelfth/eighteenth centuries. [fig. 15-17]

While exploring for the first time the Italian libraries to discover Yemeni manuscripts, I found other codices given by Sarnelli as gifts to his friends: two to Alfonso Gallo, founder of the Italian Institute for the Restoration of Books and Archives (ICRCPAL), and two to the scholar of the history of medicine Adalberto Pazzini, who later became director of the Institute for the History of Medicine at the University of Rome “La Sapienza” (BSM); these manuscripts are currently held by their recipients’ respective institutions.⁹⁹ The first two codices are on religious subjects: an ancient copy of al-Nawawī’s commentary on the *Ṣaḥīḥ*

⁹⁸ Naples, UNIOR-SIBA, MS ARA 49: see Tommaso Sarnelli, “Il *Kitāb al-lum’ah al-kāfiyah fī l-adwiya aš-šāfiyah* di al-Abbās b. ‘Alī b. Rasūl al-Ghassānī, re del Yemen (sec. XIV),” *Rivista degli studi orientali* 24 (1949), pp. 78–91; Ce-lentano and Sarnelli Cerqua, “I manoscritti di medicina araba,” pp. 226–227.

⁹⁹ Their respective signatures are Rome, ICRCPAL, Bib. 1058, and Mus. 770-65; Rome, BSM, Rari 19, and Rari 20.

of Muslim, dated to the early eighth/fourteenth century, and a collection of Shi'ite prayers dated to the eleventh/seventeenth century (recently subjected to diagnostic analysis and restored). The latter two manuscripts at the library of the Institute for the History of Medicine, contain rare works on medicine (sixth/twelfth century) and were transcribed during the eleventh/seventeenth century. None of these four are mentioned in the repertoires, but each one has now become part of the ZMT project.

The renowned Arabist Carlo Alfonso Nallino (1872–1938) also collected a few manuscripts, which are today part of his legacy at the homonymous Istituto per l'Oriente “Carlo Alfonso Nallino” (IPOCAN) in Rome. To his six Arab-Yemeni manuscripts can be added the six codices collected in Yemen by the abovementioned Orientalist Ettore Rossi during the years 1937–1938, which were purchased by IPOCAN in 1958. The thirty-two Islamic manuscripts of the IPOCAN have been recently cataloged,¹⁰⁰ and in 2019 the twelve Yemeni exemplars among them were included in the ZMT project. The IPOCAN's Arab-Yemeni manuscripts are almost entirely modern copies of the thirteenth/nineteenth and fourteenth/twentieth centuries, containing texts on Zaydī law and polemics, history, genealogies, and poetry. [fig. 18]



Figure 16. MS. Naples, Università “L’Orientale”-SiBA, ARA 10 (ff. 1v-2r): Front page of the treatise on pharmacology *Kitāb majma’ al-khulāṣa fī l-ṭibb* (*Majma’ al-ḥikam*), by al-Sayyid Faṭḥī al-Mukharriz al-adīb, dated 1114/1702 (unicum ?).

¹⁰⁰ Laura Bottini, *Islamic Manuscripts from the Library of the Istituto per l'Oriente Carlo Alfonso Nallino (Rome)*, Rome: Istituto per l'Oriente, 2017. The Arab-Yemeni exemplars are marked by catalog numbers 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, 15, 16, 18, 20, 21, 28, and 31.



Figure 17. MS. Naples, Università "L'Orientale"—SiBA, ARA 214 (ff. 161v-162r): Last page and colophon of the treatise of Zaydi theology *Kitāb al-khulāṣa al-nāfi'a (bi-l-adilla al-qāṭi'a fī fawā'id al-tābi'a)*, by Shihāb al-Dīn Aḥmad b. al-Ḥasan b. Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Raṣṣāṣ (d. 621/1224), dated 733/1333.



Figure 18. MS. Rome, IPOCAN, RR Ar. I, 46 bis, 14 (ff. 58v-59r): Explicit of the chronicle of early Ottoman southern Yemen *al-Iḥsān fī dukhūl mamlakat al-Yaman taḥta zill 'adlāt al-'Uthmān*, by Shams al-Dīn 'Abd al-Ṣamad b. Ismā'īl b. 'Abd al-Ṣamad al-Mawza'ī (d. after 1031/1621), transcribed in 1318/1900.



Figure 19. MS. Rome, IPOCAN, CAN Ar. I, 46 bis, 20 (f. 1r): *Dīwān* by an unknown author, with Caprotti's round red stamp (upper left), in Italian and Arabic, «Giuseppe Caprotti – Sanaa – Yemen-Arabia – يوسف قاروتي صنعاء».

A fairly unexpected discovery was that a couple of Caprotti's manuscripts found their way to Rome, as evidenced by his red stamp of possession with his name in Arabic, impressed on two copies [fig. 19] that had belonged to Nallino.¹⁰¹ They contain short, fragmentary poetic texts transcribed in the eleventh/seventeenth century and supposedly given to Nallino by Griffini or directly by Caprotti himself.

In Rome, the Biblioteca dell'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei preserves another group of sixty-eight manuscripts attesting to the heterogeneity of the manuscript culture flourishing in Yemen. The Lincei Yemeni collection was mostly built up by two already mentioned figures, the Orientalist Rossi¹⁰² and the physician Cesare Ansaldi; the latter stayed in Yemen from late 1929 to May 1932 and is author of a historical outline of the country.¹⁰³ Rossi collected fifty-five Arabic manuscripts in Sanaa and donated them to the Accademia in 1938; another eight manuscripts were sold by Ansaldi to the Accademia in 1953; two were donated in 1933 by Benito Mussolini, who had received them as a gift from Ansaldi; and a further two codices were from unknown owners.¹⁰⁴ The oldest dated codex is a copy of the first part of the *Majmūʿ fi l-Muḥīṭ bi-l-taklīf* [fig. 20] by al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad Ibn Mattawayh (d. 469/1076), dated 691/1292, on Muʿtazilī theology, but about half of the texts date from the eleventh/seventeenth to thirteenth/nineteenth centuries. Twenty-eight of the texts are devoted to Yemeni political history and biography, sixteen to Zaydī law, ten to Zaydī theology, seven to Qurʾānic sciences and traditions, and two to ethics; many are *rasāʾil* by the Zaydī imams, and there are also a few Muʿtazilī treatises, one work on geography, one on veterinary science, and some poetical and narrative texts. In addition, seventeen codices contain general works and texts not specifically related to the Yemeni milieu on grammar, law, medicine, and the natural and occult sciences, as well as encyclopedias and well-known poetical texts. [figg. 21-23]

Last but not least, Leone Caetani gave to the Accademia a rare manuscript of Yemeni origin (BANLC, Or. 78a) containing the seventh *juzʿ* of one of the most important grammatical Qurʾān commentaries, *al-Tafsīr al-basīṭ* by ʿAlī b. Aḥmad al-Wāḥidī al-Nishābūrī (d. 468/1076), dating back to the mid-eighth/fourteenth century. Caetani had purchased it during one of his travels in the Middle East, seemingly without knowing that it had a Yemeni origin and had been transcribed by a Yemeni hand.

¹⁰¹ Their signatures are Rome, IPOCAN, CAN Ar. I, 46bis, 19 (f. 7v), and CAN Ar. I, 46bis, 20 (f. 1r); see Bottini, *Islamic Manuscripts*, pp. 93–95.

¹⁰² Ettore Rossi graduated in Greek in 1920, but after meeting Griffini and attending his courses at the University of Milan in 1917 and 1918, he reoriented his interests toward the Arab-Muslim world. In those years, Griffini, in conflict with the Italian academic world, moved to Egypt in 1920, and he provided Rossi a post as translator and interpreter to the government of Tripolitania (not yet Libya) for two years, which allowed Rossi to improve his knowledge of the Arab world and its language.

¹⁰³ Ansaldi, *Il Yemen nella storia e della leggenda*.

¹⁰⁴ Their signatures are Rome, BANLC, MSS Or. 301–365, 371–372, 78a; see Renato Traini, *I manoscritti arabi di recente accessione della Fondazione Caetani*, Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1967, pp. 1–109, 114–115, and Carlo Alfonso Nallino, “Due manoscritti arabi di storia del Yemen appartenenti alla Fondazione Caetani,” *Rendiconti della Reale Accademia dei Lincei, Classe di scienze morali, storiche e filosofiche* 4, no. 9 (1933), pp. 669–684, who described Or. 264 and 265, given to the Accademia by Mussolini. The Lincei manuscripts were the first in Italy to join the ZMT in 2018 and are fully available on vHMML (<http://hmml.org/digital-copies-rossi-ansaldi-caetani-yemeni-manuscript-collections-now-available-vhmml-reading-room/>).



Figure 20. MS. Rome, BANLC, Or. 320 (ff. 42v-43r): Front page of the third juz' of the treatise on Mu'tazili theology and metaphysics *Majmū' fī l-Muḥīṭ bi-l-taklīf*, by Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Aḥmad Ibn Mattawayh (d. 469/1076), dated 691/1292.



Figure 21. MS. Rome, BANLC, Or. 3351 (ff. 1v-2r): First page of the exposition of Zaydi doctrine *Kitāb al-bisāt*, by al-Imām al-Nāṣir li-l-Ḥaqq al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan b. 'Alī al-Uṭrūsh (d. 304/916), dated 1052/1642 (rare copy).



Figure 22. MS Rome, BANLC, Or. 321 (f. 1r): Title page of the well-known Arabic grammar *al-Mufaṣṣal fī 'ilm al-'irāb*, by Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakhsharī (d. 538/1144), dated 786/1384, the second oldest exemplar of the work.

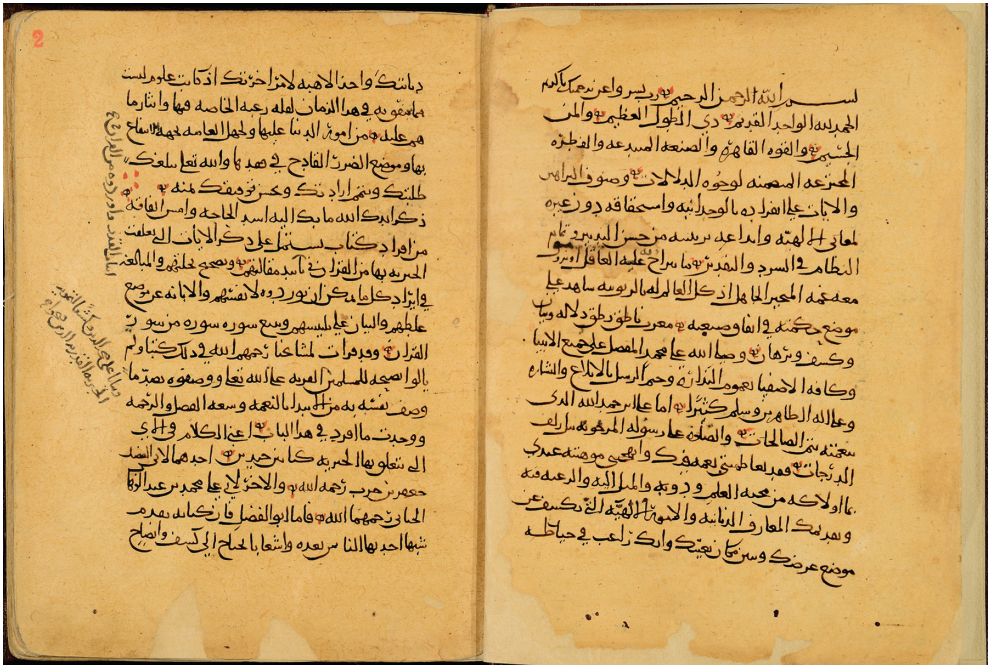


Figure 23. MS. Rome, BANLC, Or. 332 (ff. 1v-2r): First page of the rare Mu'tazili work of Qur'anic exegesis *al-Radd 'alā al-jabriyya al-qadariyya fī-mā ta'allaqū bihi min mutashābih āy al-Qur'ān al-karīm*, by al-qāḍī Abū 'Umar Aḥmad b. Muḥammad b. Ḥaṣṣ al-Khallāl al-Baṣrī (d. after 377/988), transcribed at the end of the 6th/12th century.