
TEXT AND ITS CULTURAL INTERPRETATION

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UNUSUAL AND NOT-SO-USUAL DECORATIONS ON YEMENI BINDINGS

Doing research on early Islamic bindings for several years, and, since living in Yemen, also looking at Yemeni bindings in the process, I came to recognize distinct features which set the Yemeni ones apart from other Islamic bindings. This paper is a preliminary attempt to list these differences and to draw attention to a not yet much documented group in an otherwise well explored realm of Islamic art.

I was first inspired to look more into the specifics of Yemeni bindings by seeing some very unusual cruciform decorations on two bindings from Yemen in the University Library in Leiden. I was so stunned by the extravagant design, and so were, consequently, some eminent historians of Islamic art to whom I showed these decorations, that I concentrated on finding out more about them. My colleagues at the Dār al-Maḥṭūṭāt (the House of Manuscripts) in Ṣana‘ā’ quickly came up with another example from the collection, and I also found two other published examples. Delving more into the issue I came to identify three other patterns of Yemeni bindings which, although not as distinct as the first one, constitute a veritable body of designs spe-

cific to Yemen. I also obtained the privilege to make a survey of the bindings in the library of the Great Mosque in Ṣana‘ā’, and I want to present the four different types of decorations with one example each from the holdings of that mosque library [1]. The figures show rubbings of these bindings. All the Yemeni bindings are blind-tooled without any trace of gold on any of the bindings I have seen. As it seems the leather is mostly goat.

Connecting links between the four types of bindings are the individual stamps used to create the overall design, and many of these stamps also seem to be unique amongst the stamps used on bindings produced in the Islamic world.

General characteristics of the four types:

1. the very unusual cruciform design;
2. the characteristic 8-petaled rosette with *overlapping* petals as a central motif;
3. a central motif composed of individual stamps;
4. a central mandorla composed of individual stamps.

Description of Types

Type 1 — Cruciform (*fig. 1*)

The double symmetrical cruciform design is not necessarily confined within a central panel surrounded by borders, although this is possible as well, but in many cases it extends over the whole book cover and is only surrounded by one or more rows of small circular stamps between single lines.

The design is composed of four 3-petaled palmettes, surrounded by bulb-shaped forms (which could be compared to “onion skins”) and aligned along the horizontal and vertical axes. The stems of these palmettes form an 8-pointed star in the center in which four other 3-petaled palmettes are aligned with the outer ones, and are either pointing inwards or outwards. Tendrils reach from the stems of the upper and lower outer palmettes diagonally towards the edges, and from the “onion skin” sheaths of these palmettes towards the center, forming a shape somewhat reminiscent of a heart. The remaining space is filled

with split leaves and other leaf-like shapes, sometimes with additional circular forms.

I want to emphasize that a double symmetrical cruciform design with 3-petaled palmettes is not really strange in Islamic art, it can be found in the oval-shaped center pieces on many Islamic bindings, especially those from Turkey; it also is a decorative element found on Islamic metalwork, carpets, etc. The Yemeni specialty is that this component is taken out of its usual context, is greatly enlarged and made into the dominating element of the binding. There is only one somewhat similar cruciform design I have seen, with many tendrils filling the space on the cover - a manuscript from Karaman [2].

The most striking feature of this type of design from Yemen is the suppression of the whole background with closely set small circular stamps (not bigger than 1—2 mm), which render the actual design in bold relief. There are examples where, in addition, the background is painted