

MS 383 and Margoliouth: To Mark the Return of Arabic to New College, Oxford

Michaelmas 2024 has seen the very welcome revival of Arabic as a subject for undergraduate study at New College, Oxford, after the subject had been discontinued for many years here. The current librarian has chosen to mark this by acquiring for the collections in August 2024 a fine, portable manuscript prayer book in Arabic (and Ottoman Turkish) dating from the very early 19th century. During the course of the 2023–24 academic year, to prepare for the upcoming admittance of undergraduates to read Arabic, the library had begun building up a teaching collection to support Arabic, which will continue to develop and grow.

This beautiful and interesting manuscript, our new MS 383, is now thus a signal juncture in the college's history with the return of Arabic teaching. Associate Professor of Islamic History in the university, Dr Christian C. Sahnner, was appointed to New College in 2023 in order to spearhead Arabic's revival here, as the Margoliouth Fellow in Arabic. His fellowship is named after a former student and fellow of our college, one of the most illustrious British orientalists in recent history.

So, who was D. S. Margoliouth (1858–1940)?

The Abrahamic religions, Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in different ways shaped much of the course of David Samuel Margoliouth's life. He was born on 17 October 1858 in Bethnal Green, London into a family whose origins were Jewish: his parents, Ezekiel and Sarah (*née* Iglitzki) Margoliouth were from Suwalki, Poland. Margoliouth's father—son of Abraham Margoliouth, a rabbi—was a convert to Anglicanism, and he became a missionary to the Jews in that part of the East End. David Samuel was baptised (somewhat late) on 25 September 1859 in the Church of St John, Bethnal Green, when the family was residing at 8 Barossa Terrace; his baptismal record, also unusually, records no Godparents' names.¹

The wider Margoliouth family would become one that would include very distinguished scholars. Moses Margoliouth (*d.* 1881), a relative, likewise converted to Christianity shortly after arriving in England from Suwalki; he became a curate then a vicar, as well as a notable biblical and oriental studies scholar, and wrote *The History of the Jews in Great Britain* (1851). Moses's nephew, George Margoliouth (1853–1924), another convert, was also ordained in the Church of England, and from 1891 to 1914 was keeper of Hebrew, Syriac, and Ethiopic manuscripts at the British Museum. George's son, Herschel Maurice Margoliouth (1887–1959), went on to become a poetry scholar at Oxford.²

David Samuel Margoliouth was educated at Hackney Collegiate School, thence at Winchester College as a scholar from 1872, until coming up to New College in 1877, also with a scholarship. In the course of his school and university education he amassed an extraordinary number of prizes and accolades. A recent piece in Winchester College Society's *The Trusty Servant* sums up his Winchester achievements nicely:

¹ Register of Baptisms, Parish Registers, Saint John, Bethnal Green: Tower Hamlets (August 1849–September 1861), The London Archives, P72/JN/002.

² For useful biographical accounts see: F. L. Beeston, 'Margoliouth, David Samuel (1858–1940)', *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (28 September 2006) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/34874>> (Accessed: 9 November 2024); Jabal Muhammad Buaben, *Image of the Prophet Muhammad in the West: A Study of Muir, Margoliouth and Watt* (Leicester: Islamic Foundation, 1996); H. A. R. Gibb, 'Obituary Notice: David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940', *The Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* 72 (1940), 392–4; Arthur Jeffery, 'David Samuel Margoliouth', *The Moslem World* 30 (July 1940), 295–8; 'Margoliouth, David Samuel', *Who's Who & Who Was Who* (1 December 2007) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ww/9780199540884.013.U213581>> (Accessed: 9 November 2024); David S. Matz, 'Margoliouth, Moses (1815–1881)', *ODNB* (23 September 2004) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/18055>> (Accessed: 9 November 2024); Gilbert Murray, 'David Samuel Margoliouth 1858–1940', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 26 (1940), 389–97; and Stefan C. Reif, 'The Discovery of the Cambridge Genizah Fragments of Ben Sira: Scholars and Texts', in *The Book of Ben Sira in Modern Research: Proceedings of the First International Ben Sira Conference, 28–31 July 1996, Soesterberg, Netherlands*, ed. Panacratius C. Beentjes (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1997), pp. 1–22.

He entered College 8th on Roll and won a clutch of prizes across Classics (Goddard Scholar in 1875, gold medal for Latin essay and silver medal for Latin speech in 1877, Warden and Fellows prize for Greek iambics and Latin essay in 1876, and for Greek prose and Latin verse in 1877), Religion (Moore Stevens prize for Divinity in 1875), Modern Languages (1876), and English (Hawkins literature prize in 1877).³

The college's own magazine, *The Wykehamist*, would duly record all his prize achievements over the course of his school career. But one area where notably he did not always seem to shine was in performing and reading Shakespeare for Winchester College's Shakespeare Society! While he does have some success, nevertheless his Horatio in *Hamlet* 'hardly impressed us', he takes Julia in her passages from *The Two Gentlemen of Verona* 'too much at her word in reading them', as Ross in *Macbeth* he 'attaches undue emphasis to his words', and, to an even greater degree with *Coriolanus*, his Volumnia 'was not successful':

His voice is not capable of much variation, and, worse than this, he has that most tedious fault, easily admitting of correction, of emphasising almost every word with a vehemence that perverts the spirit of the whole.⁴

We should remember, though, that the magazine is edited by the schoolboys, so perhaps other things were at play. With a social (and ethnic) background at odds from that of most of his peers, and his never-ending stream of academic successes (galling, perhaps, to some), Margoliouth may not have received the fairest of assessments in a matter as subjectively appraised as reading aloud Shakespeare among a group of his fellow pupils.



Photograph of Winchester College scholars, 1875 [detail]—showing D. S. Margoliouth, with black wavy hair (centre)

Photograph album of group photographs of scholars, taken on the steps of College Hall, 1867–99

Winchester College Archives, Winchester, G/5/8/1

© Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of Winchester College

³ Tim Giddings, 'Eminent Victorians of Win Coll: Four Linguists', *The Trusty Servant* 129 (May 2020), 15–17, at p. 16.

⁴ *The Wykehamist* 93 (April 1876), 4; 92 (March 1876), 3; 106 (February 1877), 44; 92 (March 1876), 3.

Once Margoliouth is at New College, however, *The Wykehamist* proudly records his early Oxford triumphs—fresh from Winchester—in terms suggestive of prodigious achievement:

The Ireland Scholarship has been awarded to D. S. Margoliouth, Scholar of New College. Margoliouth, who only went up from Winchester in October last, was elected a fortnight ago to the Hertford Scholarship, and has thus achieved the very unusual feat of winning both the great undergraduate prizes in his first year, a feat last performed by the late Professor Conington, in 1844, and Professor (now Archdeacon) Edwin Palmer, in 1843, and only once approached since, in 1877, by Mr. Griffith, of Balliol, who won both Scholarships in his second year of residence.⁵

The list of prizes, indeed, went on and on at Oxford: more classical awards, but also those for other languages: Hebrew, Syriac, and Sanskrit. Accounts of his brilliant career emphasise those linguistic skills, and the sheer range of (yet more) languages he would master—Armenian, Turkish, Persian, and, of course, Arabic. New College elected him a fellow in 1881, where he gave tutorials in classics; his *Studia Scenica* appeared in 1883, and the following year his edition of Aeschylus's *Agamemnon*. (A picture postcard photograph in our archives records his appearance from around this period.)



Picture postcard photograph of D. S. Margoliouth and five others at New College in 1886
New College Archives, Oxford, NCA 11342/1

This and the following images © Courtesy of the Warden and Scholars of New College, Oxford

He published his *Analecta Orientalia ad Poeticam Aristotelem* in 1887. Yet still it was something of a surprise in 1889 when Margoliouth was appointed—by a panel including Oxford's Regius professor of Hebrew, the *Wykehamist* and New College man Samuel Rolles Driver⁶—to

⁵ *The Wykehamist* 120 (April 1878), 160.

⁶ Both Margoliouth and Driver are listed—though clumsily, as 'Margolion, D. S., Esq.' and 'Driver, Rev. J. R., Reg. Prof. Heb.'—as two of the subscribers to a book published about their two colleges, written by 'An Old Wykehamist': [Edward J. G. H. Rich], *Recollections of the Two St. Mary Winton Colleges* (Walsall: W. Henry Robinson, 1883), pp. iv, iii. A copy is held in New College Library, Oxford, at our shelfmark OX1/RIC.

be the university's Laudian professor of Arabic, a chair he held until 1937. And he remains best known today for his work on Arabic literature and Islamic studies, including his editing and translating of Arabic texts. A notable papyrologist, his *Arabic Papyri of the Bodleian Library* appeared in 1893, and a *Catalogue of Arabic Papyri in the John Rylands Library, Manchester* in 1933. With his exceptional output of publications, his university workload was extraordinarily heavy, alongside duties at New College, which for a time also extended to running the college library. *Kelly's Directory of Oxfordshire* lists him at his address of 88 Woodstock Road in 1895, for example, as 'lecturer & librarian of New college & Laudian professor of Arabic', and again in 1903 in the same terms, though now with the addition of his D.Litt.⁷ Onerous that load would have been because, though professor, he was also the university's sole teacher of Arabic, with only sporadic support from a post akin to Arabic lector.⁸

A shared Christian faith, and a devotion to scholarship and each other, were the makings of Margoliouth's happy and successful marriage to the daughter of Robert Payne Smith, the Syriac scholar and dean of Canterbury. Smith's *magnum opus* was the *Thesaurus Syriacus* (1868–1901), in which mighty undertaking he was supported expertly by his daughter, Jessie Payne Smith (1856–1933), the future Mrs Margoliouth. Robert's death in 1895 occasioned his daughter to bring her father's work to completion, and also, she is recorded as asserting to a friend of hers, to marry Margoliouth the following year, who assisted her in her academic task!⁹ Religious faith was central to Margoliouth's life. In 1899 in Liverpool, he would be ordained to the Anglican ministry (though would never take up parish duties). His persuasion and style were low-church, zealous evangelism, and he preached occasional sermons in Oxford. (These include one on 'The Sword of the Spirit'—in New College Chapel on 30 May 1920—a very rare copy of which is held in our archives.)¹⁰

Yet Margoliouth's time and skills also enabled him to write other volumes, perhaps less esoteric and fiercely erudite (though still standard works in their field), which could command a wider and more popular readership too. These were, namely, his *Mohammed and the Rise of Islam* (1905), *Mohammedanism* (1911), and *The Early Development of Mohammedanism* (1914). Adopting sceptical approaches, and an ironic tone, characterised some of his writings. Some opinions he provocatively alleged—most notably, in his 1925 article on 'The Origins of Arabic Poetry' for the *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, that pre-Islamic Arabic poetry was inauthentic, i.e. fabricated or forged—to a degree marred his scholarship, causing contention, scandal even, especially within the Muslim world. He was, however, lionised by that Society (as Director and Gold Medallist) and by other learned institutions, including the Persia and Central Asia Society, the Deutsche Morgenländische Gesellschaft, and the American Oriental Society. And his obituary in the Royal Asiatic Society's journal calls him not only 'the leading Arabic scholar in England', but one who commanded 'an almost legendary reputation amongst non-Orientalists and even in the Islamic countries of the East'.¹¹

What, then, of the manuscript New College Library has newly acquired? Our MS 383 is a pocket-sized Arabic and Ottoman Turkish prayer book measuring 135 x 85 mm (5.3" x 3.3"), with a text area of 85 x 45 mm (3.3" x 1.7").¹² The manuscript is written in vocalised *naskh* script in

⁷ *Kelly's Directory of Oxfordshire* (London: Kelly & Co., 1895), p. 235, and (1903), p. 262.

⁸ Beeston, 'Margoliouth', ODNB.

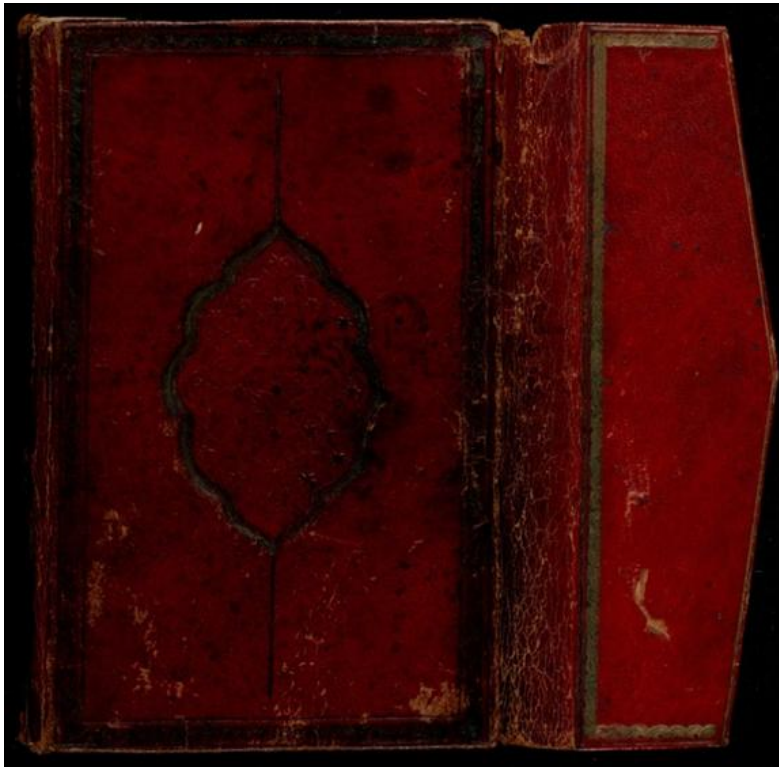
⁹ Jessie's friend, Sr. Ellen Joanna (Bruton) wrote: 'I had a letter from Miss Payne Smith last week. She finds Professor Margoliouth of Oxford so very kind and useful in helping her with her Father's book, "that she is going to marry him so that they can work at it together"—! This is exactly as she puts the fact', noted in J. F. Coakley, *The Church of the East and the Church of England: A History of the Archbishop of Canterbury's Assyrian Mission* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), p. 393, n. 303, cited by D. G. K. Taylor, 'Margoliouth [née Smith], Jessie Payne (1856–1933)', ODNB (12 November 2020) <<https://doi.org/10.1093/ref:odnb/58372>> (Accessed: 9 November 2024).

¹⁰ D. S. Margoliouth, *The Sword of the Spirit: A Sermon preached before the University of Oxford on Trinity Sunday, May 30th, 1920, in the Chapel of New College*. Printed by request and for Private Circulation (Oxford: Fox, Jones & Co., 1920), New College Archives, Oxford, NCA PA/JOS/17/1.

¹¹ Gibb, 'Obituary Notice', 392.

¹² Taking into account the bilingual nature of this manuscript, transliterations reflect the language of the sections where quotations are taken from.

black ink, with headings in gold and red.¹³ It consists of 157 folios, with the last two left blank. The text, typically organised in nine lines per page, is framed in gold and ruled in black. This book contains a selection of Qur'anic *sūrah*s (chapters) and *āyah*s (verses) (ff. 1v–65v), the beautiful Names of God (*al-asmā' al-ḥusnā*) (ff. 66r–67r), the names of the Prophet Muḥammad (ff. 67v–70r), physical descriptions (*ḥilya*) of the Prophet and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs (Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, 'Alī) (ff. 70v–73r), the names of the Prophet's Companions (ff. 136v–148v), and various invocations (*du'ā'*) throughout. The binding, which appears to be contemporary with the manuscript, shows some signs of wear, particularly at the corners and along the spine, but is overall in good condition. The boards and envelope flap of its binding are covered in maroon leather, adorned with a *şemse* (sunburst or medallion design) and ruled decorations. The borders of the binding are embellished with gold tooled patterns, known as *yekşah*, though much of the gold has rubbed away.



New College Library, Oxford, MS 383, binding

This bilingual illuminated prayer book exemplifies a popular genre of devotional texts commonly produced in the Ottoman realm during the 18th and 19th centuries.¹⁴ Some scholars refer to this type of prayer book as *En'ām-ı şerif*, named after its inclusion of Sūrat al-'An'ām, the sixth chapter of the Qur'an.¹⁵ Ottoman prayer books span a wide spectrum of luxury, ranging from

¹³ The *naskh* script is a rectilinear bookhand commonly used for copying small Qur'ans and other types of texts. Regional variations of the *naskh* developed over time. See: Sheila S. Blair, *Islamic Calligraphy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), pp. 165–7; Adam Gacek, *Arabic Manuscripts: A Vademecum for Readers* (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 162–5.

¹⁴ Christiane Gruber, 'A Pious Cure-All: The Ottoman Illustrated Prayer Manual in the Lilly Library', in *The Islamic Manuscript Tradition: Ten Centuries of Book Arts in Indiana University Collections*, ed. Christiane Gruber (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010), pp. 117–53.

¹⁵ Alexandra Bain, 'The En'ām-ı Şerif: Sacred Text and Images in a Late Ottoman Prayer Book', *Archivum Ottomanicum* 19 (2001): 213–38; Alexandra Bain, 'The Late Ottoman En'ām-ı Şerif: Sacred Text and Images in an Islamic Prayer

illustrated and illuminated commissions for the court and the elite to simpler, text-only manuscripts. This range reflects the broad patronage of such works and highlights how certain expressions of piety permeated different levels of Ottoman society.



MS 383, ff. 1v–2r

The manuscript opens with a double-page illuminated frontispiece (ff. 1v–2r), featuring the first chapter of the Qur'an (Sūrat al-Fātiḥah, 'The Opener'), and the first four verses of the second chapter (Sūrat al-Baqarah, 'The Cow'). The text is framed by borders of orange and red quatrefoils, with small white and gold floral motifs, all set against a dark blue background. The chapter headings, which are not part of the Qur'anic revelation, are written in gold within polylobed cartouches at the top of the frames. The inscription *sab'u al-masānī* [sic] is inscribed in the polylobed cartouche at the bottom of the frame on f. 1v, referring to the nearly homophonous *sab'u al-mathānī* ('the seven repeated verses'), another name for the opening chapter of the Qur'an. On the facing page, the cartouche contains the inscription *mā'itān āyāt* (200 verses), although the second chapter actually contains 286 verses (*mā'itān wa-sitta wa-thamānūn āyāt*).

What follows (ff. 2v–63v) is not the remainder of Sūrat al-Baqarah, but eight other chapters: Sūrat al-'An'ām (Q 6), Sūrat Yā-sīn (Q 36)¹⁶, Sūrat al-Dukhān (Q 44), Sūrat al-Faṭḥ

Book' (PhD thesis, University of Victoria, 1999). In this manuscript, this *sūrah* is given an illuminated headpiece (f. 2v). For the copying and recitation of Sūrat al-'An'ām in the Ottoman context, see also Simon Rettig, 'The Rise of the En'ām: Manuscripts of Selections of Suras in the Early Sixteenth-Century Ottoman Empire', in *The Word Illuminated: Form and Function of Qur'anic Manuscripts from the Seventh to Seventeenth Centuries*, ed. Simon Rettig and Sana Mirza (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Scholarly Press, 2023), pp. 185–212.

¹⁶ ff. 34–37 are out of order due to a mis-binding.

(Q 48), Sūrat al-Raḥmān (Q 55), Sūrat al-Wāqī‘ah (Q 56), Sūrat al-Mulk (Q 67), and Sūrat al-Nabā’ (Q 78). Verses within each chapter are separated using gold circles with black and red dots. For each chapter, the scribe indicates the number of verses in it,¹⁷ and/or whether it was revealed in Mecca or Medina. The selection of Qur’anic chapters in this manuscript is typical of the genre.¹⁸ On ff. 64r–65v, one finds the so-called ‘Seven Verses’, also known in some prayer books as *ayat šerif* (noble verses). These verses (Q 9:51, 10:107, 11:6, 11:56, 29:60, 35:2, and 39:38) are believed to have a protective function. For instance, Q 9:51 states: ‘Say, “Only what God has decreed will happen to us. He is our Master: let the believers put their trust in God.”’¹⁹ The inclusion of recitation marks in red—such as the letter *ta’* (ط), denoting a mandatory full stop—reveals that the text is intended to be read aloud.

The manuscript’s primary function as a liturgical text certainly does not detract from its value as an aesthetic object. It features a variety of geometric compositions painted in polychrome using shades of blue, red, orange, pink, brown, black, and gold. On ff. 70v–73r one finds descriptions of the physical and moral attributes (*ḥilya*, or *hilye* in Ottoman Turkish) of the Prophet Muḥammad, followed by those of the Rightly Guided Caliphs. The basic layout of the calligraphic *ḥilya* was codified in the Ottoman world by the late 17th century.²⁰ Typically, the top panel contains the *basmala*; the main text of the descriptions is placed within a central circle, surrounded by the names of Muḥammad or the four Rightly Guided Caliphs in the corners. Below the circle would be Qur’anic verses relevant to Muḥammad and/or prayers for him. In this manuscript, the format of the *ḥilya* is greatly simplified. On f. 70v, a panel bordered in gold is divided into three sections coloured in dark blue and pink. An inscription in the upper section introduces the text: ‘This is the noble *ḥilya* of our master and protector Muḥammad’ (*bādhā al-ḥilya al-sharīfa li-sayyidinā wa-mawlānā Muḥammad*). The middle section contains a large circle with the verbal



MS 383, f 70v

¹⁷ This convention stems from debates over the number of verses in Qur’anic chapters, such as whether the *basmala* at the beginning of nearly every chapter should be counted, or the impact of variant readings that may result in an additional verse.

¹⁸ For Qur’anic chapters in various Ottoman prayer books, see: Florian Sobieroj, ‘Repertory of Sūras and Prayers in a Collection of Ottoman Manuscripts’, *Mélanges de l’Université Saint-Joseph* 59 (2006), 365–86; Kinga Dévényi, ‘Manuscripts of En’ām-ı Şerif in the Oriental Collection of the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences’, *The Arabist: Budapest Studies in Arabic* 37 (2016), 9–23.

¹⁹ M. A. S. Abdel Haleem, *The Qur’an: English Translation with Parallel Arabic Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 196.

²⁰ Christiane Gruber, ‘The Rose of the Prophet: Floral Metaphors in Late Ottoman Devotional Art’, in *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Essays in Honor of Renata Holod*, ed. David J. Roxburgh (Leiden: Brill, 2014), pp. 223–49; Tim Stanley, ‘From Text to Art Form in the Ottoman Hilye’, in *Filiz Çağman’a armağan*, ed. Ayşe Erdoğan, Zeynep Atbaş, and Aysel Çötelioğlu (Istanbul: Lale Yayıncılık, 2018), pp. 559–70.

descriptions, while the lower section is inscribed with a supplication to the Prophet. The *hiya* serves as a verbal portrait, allowing the reader to visualise and reflect on the figure of the Prophet. At the same time, the calligraphic diagram itself may hold talismanic significance.²¹ The interplay between geometric shapes and colours is further elaborated in a section dedicated to the names of the Prophet's Companions (*al-ṣaḥābah*) (ff. 136v–149r). These names, which are frequently inscribed on talismanic objects, are inscribed in a series of small roundels arranged in rows of three in alphabetical order (image below, left). The scribe alternates between blue, pink (below, right), red, and orange backgrounds, creating a colourful rhythm punctuating the otherwise unillustrated text.



MS 383, f. 136v



MS 383, f. 141r

The manuscript features numerous bilingual invocations and supplications (*du‘ā*). The prayer texts are primarily written in Arabic, accompanied by Ottoman Turkish commentaries (*şerh*) which provide guidance on how to perform each prayer—such as the frequency, timing, and location of recitation—as well as its virtues, benefits, and rewards. By providing explanatory texts in Ottoman Turkish, the manuscript makes these prayers become more accessible and their spiritual meaning clearer, particularly for readers more familiar with Turkish than Arabic. The

²¹ The Prophet Muḥammad is widely considered to be a ‘talismanic force’, and as such a verbal embodiment of him is often believed to have prophylactic powers. W. E. Staples, ‘Muhammad, a Talismanic Force’, *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 57 (1) (1940), 63–70; Christiane Gruber, ‘Bereket Bargains: Islamic Amulets in Today’s “New Turkey”’, in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. Liana Saif et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 572–606, at p. 579.

section on the ‘Greatest Name of God’ (*ism-i a‘zam*), beginning on f. 85v, offers significant insight into the linguistic diversity of Ottoman society. It is recounted that God’s noble name is endless as it is uttered (*telaḥḥuz olunur*) in Arabic (*‘Arabî*), Hebrew (*‘İbrânî*), Judeo-Persian (*‘Emrânî*), Syriac (*Suryânî*), Persian (*Fârsî*), and many other languages (*ve dahi niçe diller*).²²



MS 383, f. 85v

²² The Ottoman Empire was a multilingual society, with an estimated number of around 100 languages and dialects spoken. See Christine Woodhead, ‘Ottoman Languages’, in *The Ottoman World*, ed. Christine Woodhead (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), pp. 143–58, at pp. 146–7. Three languages are particularly important: Arabic, as the language of the Qur’an, held a high status and was used for religious studies. Persian was the language of poetry, while Turkish was



MS 383, f. 76r



MS 383, f. 108v

The manuscript's diverse prayer content reflects the belief that God is the sole source of help, guidance, and healing in all facets of life. It contains supplications for protection against various adversities, such as enemies, the devil (*iblis*, *şeytân*) (image above left), accidents, troubles, violence, sorrow, sleeplessness (image above right), fear, the evil eye (*nazar*), and illness. Another prominent theme, devotion and worship, is represented through prayers associated with religious festivals and rituals, including fasting (*oruç*), animal sacrifice (*kurban*), and Friday prayer. For instance, on ff. 116v–117r (image below), there is a supplication for the 'Night of Decree' (*Laylat al-Qadr* in Arabic, *Kadir Gecesi* in Turkish), which is considered the occasion when the Qur'an was first revealed to the Prophet Muḥammad and is believed to fall on one of the last ten nights of Ramadan. The commentary in Ottoman Turkish explains that the Prophet shared this prayer with his wife and companion, 'Ā'isha, in response to her question about what she should say on that sacred night. The text also highlights its general applicability beyond specific times and clarifies that one recitation suffices, though repeating it multiple times is praiseworthy. In this way, it balances the encouragement of abundant recitation with the reassurance that even a single heartfelt invocation holds significant merit. The explanation also demonstrates the accessibility of God's mercy, emphasising sincerity over quantity in acts of worship.

used for administration and official correspondence. The Turkish language was written in the Arabic script throughout the time of the Ottoman Empire, until it was replaced by the modern Turkish alphabet in 1928 as part of the modernist reforms of Mustafa Kemal Atatürk (1881–1938).



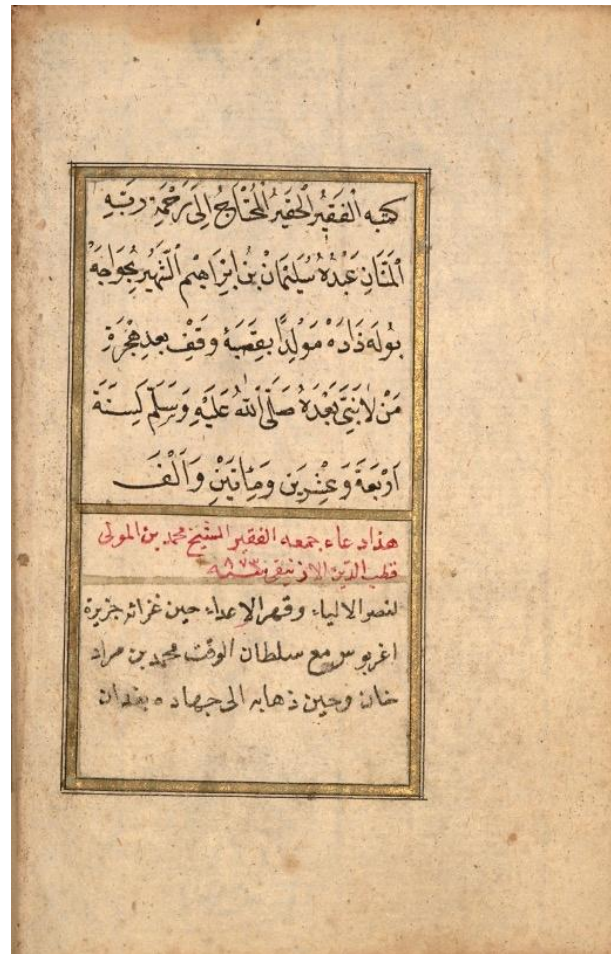
MS 383, ff. 116v–117r

The manuscript also includes prayers for assistance with personal matters, such as seeking refuge in God, requesting good fortune, and fulfilling personal wishes. For example, on f. 120r, a prayer for guidance (*ṣalāt al-istikhārāh*) is provided, intended to seek God's direction when making decisions. The accompanying commentary explains that two units of prayer should first be performed, followed by the recitation of the *istikhārāh* supplication. It also references Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh, a companion of the Prophet. Such authoritative figures are often cited in narrations to enhance their credibility and significance.



MS 383, f. 120r

Thanks to the colophon on the upper half of f. 149v, the manuscript can be securely dated to 1224 AH (1809–1810 CE). The name of the scribe, Sulaymān b. Ibrāhīm, is also provided. While little is revealed about his identity, his title suggests that he may have been a religious teacher (*khawāja*).



MS 383, f. 149v

The colophon reads as follows:²³

kataba-hu al-faḡīru al-ḥaḡīru al-muḥtāju ilā raḥmati rabbi-hi
al-mannāni 'abdu-hu Sulaymān b. Ibrāhīm al-shahīru bi-ḥawājah [bi-khawājah]
būlahdhādah [būlahzādah] man'lidan bi-qasabah' [bi-qasabat] waqfi [vakfi?] ba'd hijrati
man lā nabī ba'dahu, sallā Allāhu 'alayhi wa-sallama li-sanat
arba'a ['arba 'a] wa-'isrīn wa-mi'atayn wa-alf [wa-'alf]

Written by the poor and humble, he who is in need of the mercy of his Lord the Benefactor, his servant, Sulaymān son of Ibrāhīm, known as Khawāja Bulazade (?), from [lit. born in] the town of Vakf (Vakf?), after the migration of He, there is no prophet after Him, peace and blessings be upon Him, in the year 1224.

²³ The transliteration reflects the fully vocalised inscription, which is erroneous in many places. Corrected readings are provided in square brackets.

While Sulaymān's name is recorded in the manuscript, indicating his primary responsibility for the production of this manuscript, certain features suggest the involvement of more than one scribe. Variations in the shapes of certain letters, such as the *lām-alif*, and inconsistencies in the use and style of catchwords suggest that multiple hands were at work. For instance, while a catchword is placed at the bottom of every other page in the Qur'anic sections, no catchwords appear in the sections of invocations between ff. 64r and 75r, except on ff. 67v and 68v where catchwords are present but in a different location.

As the manuscript changed hands, later owners left their marks through some additions. The final prayer, starting just after the colophon on f. 149v and extending to f. 155r, was most likely added by a subsequent owner of the book. In addition to the handwriting, the aggressive and military tone of this section differs significantly from the rest of the manuscript, which predominantly highlights piety and humility. The note in red ink at the beginning of this section cites the name of the Ottoman scholar Quṭb al-Dīn al-Iznīqī (also known as Mehmed b. Mevlā Kutbüddin İznikī) (d. 885 AH/1480 CE) as the source of this prayer. It is indicated that this prayer was recited by the Ottoman Sultan Mehmed II 'the Conqueror' (r. 1444–46, 1451–81) before departing for his holy war, seeking the support of saints to defeat his enemies during the conquest of the island of Eğriboz (modern-day Euboea, Greece) (f. 149v). The following pages contain various Qur'anic verses and invocations against infidels or disbelievers (*kāfir*s), such as a verse from Sūrat al-Baqarah, which states: 'And when they met Goliath and his warriors, they said, "Our Lord, pour patience on us, make us stand firm, and help us against the disbelievers"' (Q 2:250).²⁴

Quṭb al-Dīn al-Iznīqī, who is known to have participated in Mehmed II's campaigns to Eğriboz (875 AH/1470 CE) and Bogdan (modern-day Moldavia) (881 AH/1476 CE), states in his work *Münevvirü'd-da'avāt* that he compiled prayers for Ottoman soldiers to recite for the army's victory during these campaigns.²⁵ Notably, the note on f. 155r confirms that this section is an excerpt from Iznīqī's work:

Min kitāb munaḥḥidh al-da'avāt [sic] li-l-'arif bi-llāh al-shaykh Muḥammad [Mehmed] b. Mawlānā Quṭb al-Dīn al-Iznīqī al-mutawaffā 884 H

From the book *Münevvirü'd-da'avāt* by the knower of God, Shaykh Mehmed ibn Mawlānā Quṭb al-Dīn al-Iznīqī, who passed away 884 AH (1479–80 CE).

It is likely that a later owner of this manuscript, having participated in one of the many wars fought by the Ottomans during the 19th century, added the prayer compiled by Iznīqī in hopes of securing victory and protection from the perils of the battlefield. Islamic tradition attributes particular significance to certain *sūrah*s and *āyah*s due to their distinctive virtues (*ḥaḍā'il*) or perceived occult benefits (*keḥawāṣṣ*), often linked to their content.²⁶ Qur'anic chapters and verses with martial themes are believed to offer protection in warfare, which, as Christiane Gruber argues, explains their frequent appearance on amulets, talismanic shirts, or books carried or worn by soldiers during battle.²⁷ Having examined a large corpus of evidence, A. Tunç Şen demonstrates that carrying books on military campaigns for spiritual support and protection was a common practice not only

²⁴ Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, p. 50.

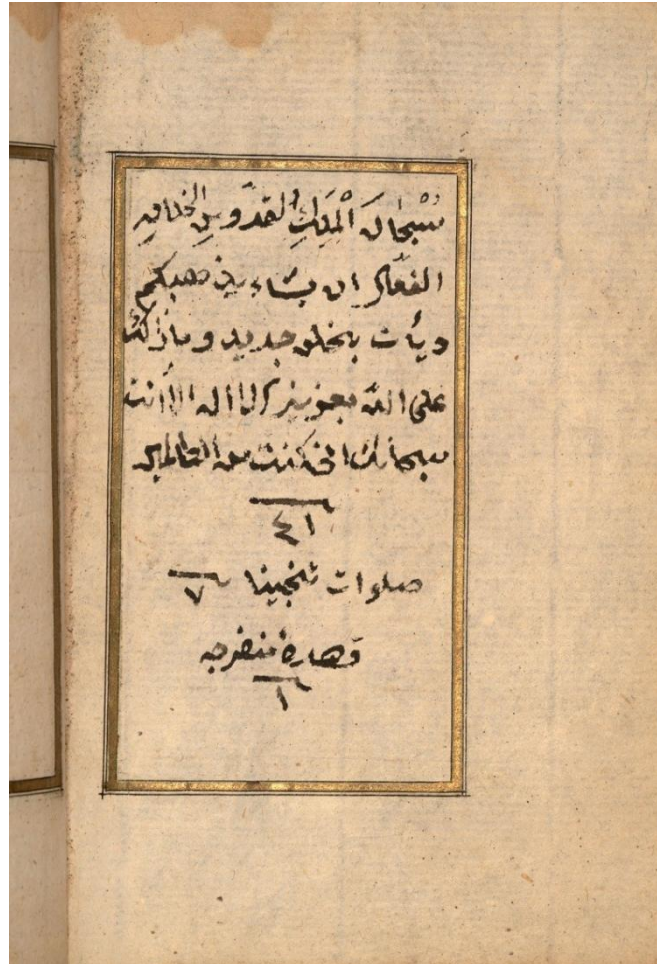
²⁵ MS Istanbul Suleymaniye Library, Ayasofya, no. 1802, f. 85v. Reşat Öngören, 'Kutbüddinzâde İznikî', in *TDV İslâm Ansiklopedisi*, vol. 26 (Istanbul: TDV Yayınları, 2002), 489–490, at p. 489.

²⁶ Gruber, 'A Pious Cure-All', p. 124.

²⁷ *ibid.*, p. 124. Parallel to this, for a recent study on talismanic materials and formulas on Islamic arms and armour, see: Maryam Ekhtiar and Rachel Parikh, 'Power and Piety: Islamic Talismans on the Battlefield', in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. Liana Saif et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 420–53.

among Ottoman sultans and high-ranking officials but also among regular soldiers.²⁸ Numerous Qur'ans and prayer books are known to have made their way into European collections from various battlefields.²⁹

If the manuscript did indeed enter a war zone, it seems to have returned safely, although it is unknown whether it remained with the same owner. The inscription on f. 155v, positioned just after the final prayer and preceding the two final leaves left blank except for gold frames, appears to have been written—with untidy handwriting—by another owner or reader of the book.



MS 383, f. 155v

The inscription consists of a series of prayers, beginning with a verse glorifying God, followed by excerpts from Sūrat Ibrāhīm (Q 14:19–20) and Sūrat al-Anbiyā' (Q 21:87).³⁰ Below these, a note instructs the recitation of these verses forty-one times. This is followed by *salawāt tunjinā*,³¹ to be

²⁸ A. Tunç Şen, 'Manuscripts on the Battlefields: Early Modern Ottoman Subjects in the European Theatre of War and Their Textual Relations to the Supernatural in Their Fight for Survival', *Aca'ib: Occasional Papers on the Ottoman Perceptions of the Supernatural* 2 (2021), 77–106.

²⁹ For copies of the Qur'an and prayer books in manuscript collections in East Germany—most of which were acquired as war booty during conflicts with the Ottomans in the Balkans, particularly in the 16th and 17th centuries—see: Sobieroj, 'Repertory of Sūras and Prayers'. For similar examples in the Southeast Asian context, see: Farouk Yahya, 'Illustrated and Illuminated Manuscripts of the *Dalā'il al-Khayrāt* from Southeast Asia', *Journal of Islamic Manuscripts* 12 (2021), 529–81, esp. pp. 541–2.

³⁰ 'He could remove all of you and replace you with a new creation if He wished to: that is not difficult for God.' (Q 14:19–20); 'There is no God but You, glory be to You, I was wrong.' (Q 21:87). Abdel Haleem, *The Qur'an*, pp. 259, 330.

³¹ Found on f. 75v of this manuscript.

recited seven times, and *Qaṣīdat al-Munfarījah*, to be recited once. *Ṣalawāt tunjīnā* is an invocation that calls upon God to bless and grant peace to the Prophet Muḥammad, asking for protection from afflictions, fulfillment of needs, purification from sins, and the attainment of ultimate goodness in both this life and the hereafter.³² Similarly, *Qaṣīdat al-Munfarījah*, a poem-prayer attributed to the 11th-century Maghribi scholar and saint Ibn Naḥwī, appeals for divine intervention and hope during times of hardship.³³



Leather case for MS 383

The manuscript is preserved in a leather protective case, hung on a red strap and decorated on its lower edges with three golden brown cord tassels. A flap closure folds over the top. The case is embroidered in silver thread with the tughra of the Ottoman Sultan Abdulaziz (r. 1861–76). A tughra (*tuğra*), or a calligraphic emblem, was used on royal decrees and legal documents, coins, buildings, and various other objects in the Ottoman empire. Every Ottoman ruler has his own personal tughra. The earliest known tughra dates to the 14th century and the form remained in use until the reign of the last Ottoman sultan, Mehmed VI (r. 1918–22). The tughra on this case says: ‘*Abd al-‘Azīz Khān ibn Maḥmūd al-muẓaffar dā’imā* (Abdulaziz Khan, son of Mahmud, the eternally victorious), allowing us to date it to the reign of the sultan between 1861 and 1876, just over half a century after the bulk of the manuscript was written.

This bilingual illuminated prayer book exemplifies the rich devotional and textual traditions of the Ottoman world during the 18th and 19th centuries. By combining Qur’anic verses and prayers and Arabic, with interpretative commentaries in Ottoman Turkish, the manuscript reflects both the spiritual aspirations and the linguistic diversity of its time. The combination of Arabic and Ottoman Turkish not only demonstrates the practical aim of facilitating understanding for those less proficient in Arabic but also underscores the enduring prestige of Arabic as the language of the Qur’an and religious scholarship in Ottoman society. And given the linguistic prowess of New College alumnus D. S. Margoliouth, this bilingual element indeed makes this manuscript an especially fitting one to honour him, as we mark the return of Arabic to New College, Oxford.

³² Francesca Leoni, ‘A Stamped Talisman’, in *Islamicate Occult Sciences in Theory and Practice*, ed. Liana Saif et al. (Leiden: Brill, 2020), pp. 527–71, at pp. 540–41.

³³ ‘Al-Munfarījah, The Poem of Relief’, Harvard University (25 July 2014) <<https://archive.blogs.harvard.edu/sulaymanibnqiddees/2014/07/25/al-munfarījah-the-poem-of-relief/>> (Accessed: 23 December 2024).

The aesthetic features of the manuscript—polychrome illumination, calligraphic embellishments, and geometric compositions—highlight its dual function as a liturgical text and an object of beauty. The inclusion of the beautiful Names of God, physical descriptions of the Prophet and the four Rightly Guided Caliphs, and the names of the Prophet’s Companions further underscores its role in fostering personal devotion while reinforcing communal identities through shared traditions. It also conveys a deeply rooted belief that cures and solutions must be sought solely in and through God, emphasising reliance on divine power rather than supernatural or magical means.

The manuscript’s later additions, such as prayers for military victory drawn from Qūtb al-Dīn al-Iznīqī’s works, reveal its evolving significance to successive owners, adapting to the spiritual and practical needs of their era. This prayer book serves as an excellent example of the widespread interest in such devotional works, illustrating how they resonated with and were utilized by individuals from various levels of Ottoman society. Together, these features position the manuscript as a testament to the dynamic interplay between text, art, and devotion in Ottoman manuscript culture, offering insights into the piety, creativity, and historical experiences of its creators and users.

Naide Gedikli Gorali	Jessica Rahardjo	Christopher Skelton-Foord
DPhil Student	Postdoctoral Research Associate	Librarian
Khalili Research Centre, Oxford	Khalili Research Centre, Oxford	New College, Oxford