

Fishes (Hūtī)

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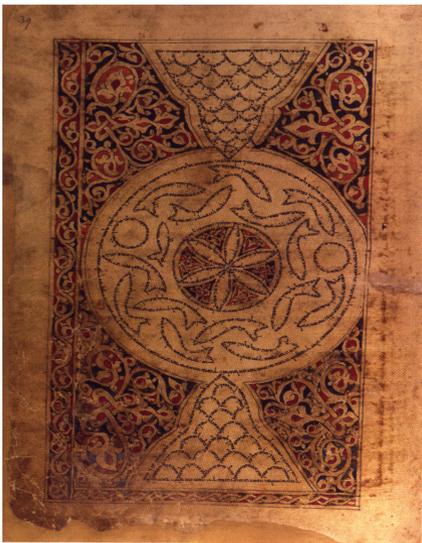


Fig. 1

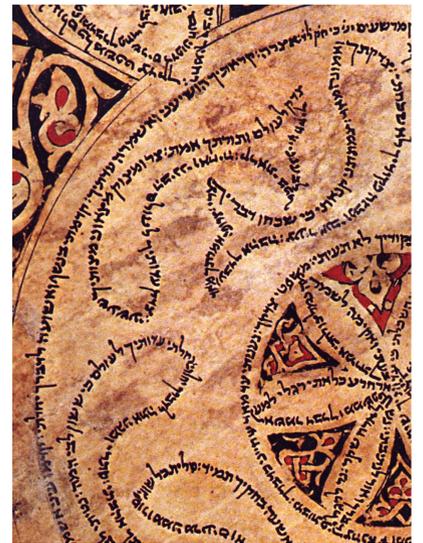


Fig. 2

Hebrew Illuminated Bibles from Yemen are famous, but hardly researched. The focus is on fishes in two 'carpet pages' from a Hebrew Illuminated Bible, San'a', 1469 (Fig. 1). My target is to show that the art model is a pair of swimming fishes originated in Yemen under the Rasūlid sultans of Yemen (r. 1229-1454), ruling from Ta'izz. Thus, even though, fishes are Jewish iconography, as well as, their unique style here is the Jewish exclusive micrography (Fig. 2). *

To prove this assumption, the 12 pairs of micrography fishes (Figs. 1, 2) are compared with the Rasūlid pair of swimming fishes from the brass tray made for the Rasūlid sultan of Yemen Muayyad Dawud (r. 1296-1321) (Fig. 3) and two coins from Aden (Figs. 4, 5). As far as I know, such juxtaposing was never done before and the similarity shows the connection. Why fishes? Fishes are Jewish iconography with the meaning of fertility and being protected, following Jacob's blessing (Genesis 48: 17). The Jewish Talmud explains that in the Jewish belief that the evil eye can not penetrate water and therefore water shields and protects fishes against it.

The art formula of a pair of swimming fishes, one swims right and the other swims left, was the brand of Aden in the Rasūlid coinage (Figs. 4, 5). As the Rasūlid money was struck in south Yemen and circulated in Yemen, this brand spread quickly and easily with no limitation of religion.

By reusing this art formula in different artistic means: big scale, multiplying the pairs of swimming fishes 12 times, micrography and redesigning the new 12 pairs of swimming fishes as the central composition of two juxtaposing 'carpet pages' in a big Hebrew Illuminated Bible, the Jewish Scribe made a clear statement (Figs. 2, 3). He switched, what was once, the Rasūlid official brand of Aden, to a Jewish brand. By doing that, he burnt in the collective mind of the Jewish community the idea of being protected and blessed following Jacob's blessing. This is the power of a brand: to promote with visual means, an idea that had been nailed in the mind. Though the term 'brand' is modern, its use in Art is antique.

* Micrography is a Jewish unique and exclusive style. It is defined as the minute Hebrew Biblical text used by the Scribe to create the contour of a form in Hebrew Illuminated Bible manuscripts. In our case - 12 pairs of swimming fishes (Figs. 2, 3).



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

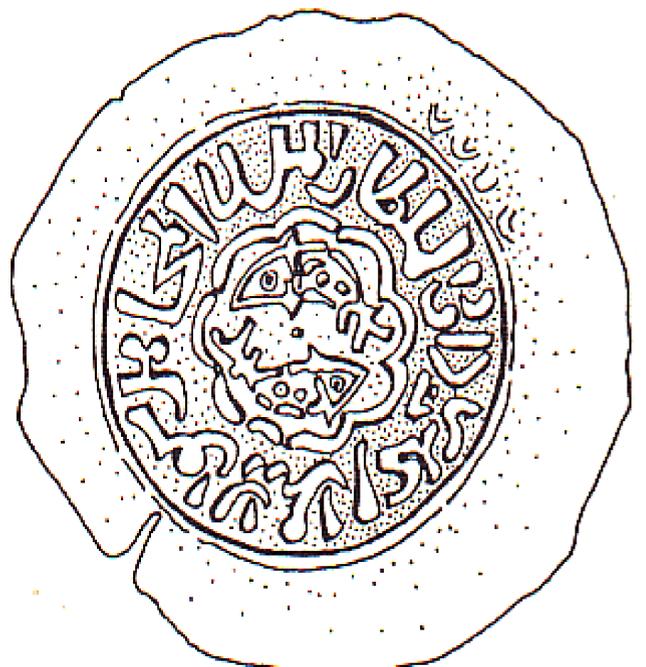


Fig. 5