

The Power of Things and the Flow of Cultural Transformations

Edited by
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DEUTSCHER KUNSTVERLAG

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Art and Culture between Europe and Asia

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Funded by the German federal and state governments' Excellence Initiative to promote science and research at German universities

within the Cluster of Excellence
*Asia and Europe in a Global Context:
Shifting Asymmetries in Cultural Flows*
at Heidelberg University

RUPRECHT-KARLS
UNIVERSITÄT
HEIDELBERG






DFG Deutsche
Forschungsgemeinschaft

Cover Illustration:
Bronze Griffin. Spain (?), 11th to 12th century. © Opera della Primaziale Pisana
Griffin. Panel, carved bone formerly gilt. Venice, 12th century. © V&A Images/Victoria and Albert Museum, London: A.74-1925

Bibliografische Information der
Deutschen Nationalbibliothek

Die Deutsche Nationalbibliothek verzeichnet diese Publikation in der Deutschen Nationalbibliografie; detaillierte bibliografische Daten sind im Internet über <http://dnb.d-nb.de> abrufbar.

Lektorat: 
Layout und Satz: Rüdiger Kern, Berlin
Gedruckt auf: 
Druck und Bindung: 

© 2010 Deutscher Kunstverlag GmbH Berlin München
ISBN 978-3-422-06978-7

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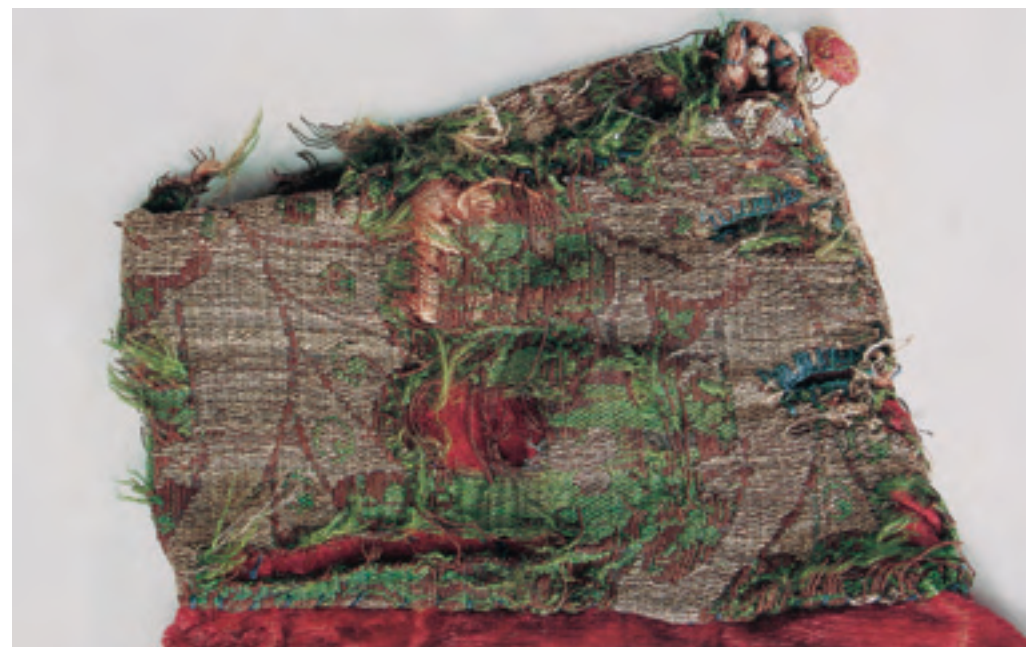
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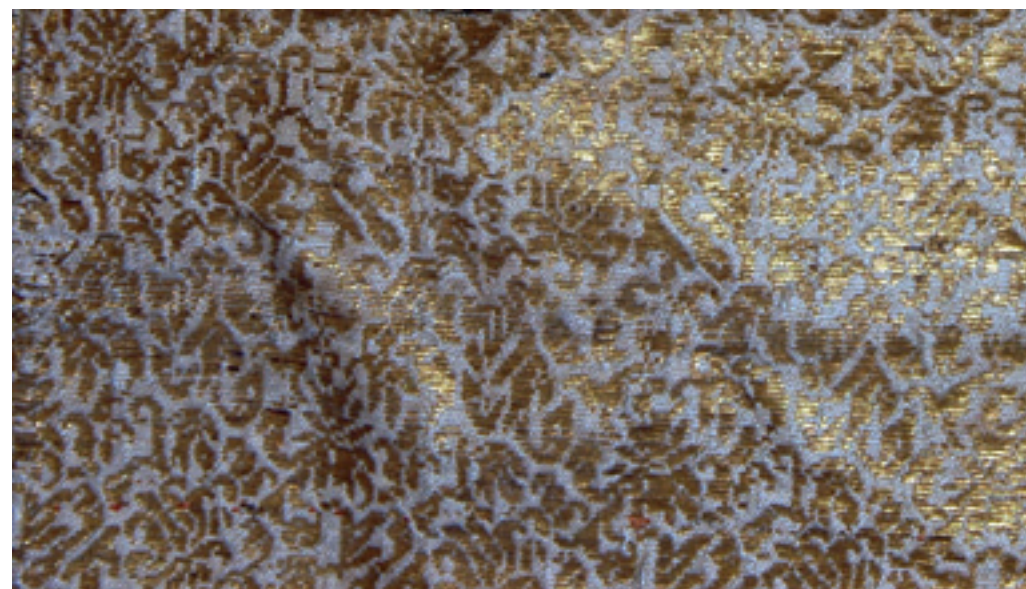
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Translocation and Transformation: Some Middle Eastern Objects in Europe

Anna Contadini

Increasing attention has been paid of late to evaluating the significance of contacts between Renaissance Europe, especially Italy, and the Islamic Middle East. Within the intellectual domain, this has ranged from the examination, say, of the reasons for the re-edition of texts such as Avicenna's *Canon* to a broader survey of the nature and cultural implications of European perceptions as reflected in the increasing flow of what might be termed ethnographic literature. Within the domain of art history, on the other hand, attention has been devoted above all to the trade in artefacts and on what one might term their afterlife, the complex ways in which, once acquired, they provoke ripples of influence. Thus, beyond essential economic questions concerning the amassing and disbursing of disposable income for the acquisition of objects of value—primarily carpets, fabrics, metalwork and glass—and the establishment and maintenance of the appropriate mercantile infrastructure, scholarship has dwelt principally upon reception, upon the ways in which, for example, Turkish rugs were incorporated in paintings as signifiers of luxury. A further focus of attention has been the cognate topic of the development of a commonality of attitude and style allowing for increasing ease of transfer, which encouraged an Ottoman sultan to commission medals and portraits from an Italian artist, or an Italian compiler of a pattern book to include Middle Eastern designs. International trade consisted in part of artefacts produced for specific foreign markets, some of them, indeed, commissioned: grand Italian families might even order metalwork salvers from Middle Eastern craftsmen with a blank field for the subsequent addition of their coat of arms. But of particular interest, from a cultural perspective, is the way in which functions might change, as with carpets, which tended to be used less on the floor, as in the Middle East, than as coverings for tables and other items of furniture. Design features, too, might occasionally be applied in unexpected contexts: an Arabic calligraphic band, for example, could reappear as a pseudo-Kufic inscription on the halo of a Madonna.

When we turn to earlier periods, we find that such shifts become the norm, with objects being placed in new environments and put to radically new uses. We have less information on what was traded, so that the mechanics of acquisition are unclear and in some cases were probably haphazard, particularly when booty and looted objects are taken into account. But with several pieces—however they may have been obtained—

we are faced with drastic forms of functional dislocation as a result of which new meanings and symbolic values are assigned and original ones obscured. Study of such objects may thus involve complex trails of inquiry not merely into how and why they were transformed and how they were perceived in their new setting, but also into what their previous function and valuation had been; and to this we may add, as a legitimate pendant, consideration of the intellectual frameworks within which scholarship has operated with regard to them.

A hitherto neglected but representative example is the object now known as the Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Clare (Pl. 1.1).¹ This is a wonderful rock crystal vessel, mounted on a high copper gilt stem with a base embellished with semiprecious stones. The flask contains the relic which gives it its name.² Saint Clare, who died in 1253, was the devoted disciple of Francis of Assisi, with whom she co-founded the closed order of the *Clarisse*, or Poor Clares.³ The relic thus is Christian; the reliquary belongs to a convent—the *protomonastero* (that is: the head house) of the nuns of Saint Clare in Assisi—and the mount is an example of western European goldsmithy. But the rock crystal is from Fatimid Egypt, so that the complex and extraordinary item of which it forms a part may suitably be considered emblematic of such processes of transformation combining embellishment, functional displacement, and effacement of any consciousness of origin. Just as European painters blithely allow the lute to be played by Christian angels,⁴ all knowledge of its Islamic cultural roots erased, this rock crystal piece and others like it have been converted into specifically Christian religious vessels, altered in their appearances by being made into composites, and decisively detached from their original milieu and function.⁵ Indeed, the flask containing the nails has been set upside down upon its mount (Fig. 1.1). The latter, a chalice of gilded copper, has a foot with six lobes onto each of which is set a strongly protruding semiprecious stone and a smooth cylindrical stem interrupted at mid-height by a knot adorned with five white pearls (there should be six, but one is missing).

The crystal itself is unfortunately chipped at the top, and also slightly at the sides, but the damage is minor, so that the full extent of its carved decoration can still be seen. Its height is nine centimetres (the total height of the reliquary being twenty centimetres) and the maximum width seven centimetres; drilled into it is a cylindrical hole,

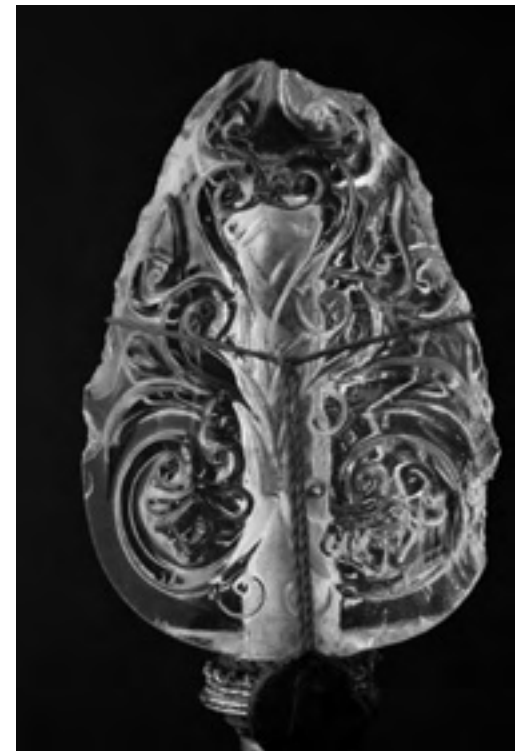


Fig. 1.1 Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Clare (see also Pl. 1.1), detail

seven centimetres long and one centimetre wide—a size that makes it a quite convenient receptacle for nail clippings. The crystal is very clear, which would, according to al-Biruni, point to it probably being of East African origin, for he tells us that African rock crystal is clearer and therefore of better quality than that from the main alternative source, Azerbaijan, which tends to be cloudier.⁶ The carving is sharp but fluid, and exhibits mastery in its curved floral decoration that allows us to relate this piece confidently to Fatimid Egypt, for it consists of the typically Fatimid multi-petalled palmette (Fig. 1.1). This motif is found not only on other rock crystals but also on ivories, as in the pattern of the dancer's robe on one of the ivory plaques in the Bargello Museum in Florence (Fig. 1.2);⁷ on lustre painted ceramics, as on a bowl in Berlin,⁸ and in manuscript illuminations, as in the Fatimid Qur'an in the Chester Beatty Library, dated 428 H/1037 AD (Fig. 1.3).⁹ There are, in addition, half palmettes and leaves, all symmetrically carved with a main stem in the centre, fastened by three 'rings' with vertical incisions on them. Several types of cut are used: straight, at an angle, and incisions; this diversity not only permits a sophisticated decoration but also allows the light to play with the crystal in different ways, making it vibrant.



Fig. 1.3 Qur'an manuscript. Fatimid Egypt (?), dated 428 H/1037 AD. Dublin, Chester Beatty Library: Is 1430

Fig. 1.2 Ivory plaque, carved in relief and openwork. Fatimid Egypt, 11th century. Florence, Museo Nazionale del Bargello: inv. no. 80c 6

Inside the hole, wrapped around the nails, there is a small parchment strip with an inscription in an 'old' hand and in a brown, slightly faded ink that identifies the relic as "De Ungulis Sanctae Clarae," while around the crystal is a thin red string with a red wax seal showing, in relief, the silhouette of Saint Clare holding a monstrance. This form of representation has been related to a story in the hagiographic accounts. According to this, in 1234, when the walls of San Damiano, the church where Clare and the other nuns lived, were breached by mercenaries in the army of Frederick II, Clare was ill in bed but reportedly rose and went to the window with a chalice containing the Blessed Sacrament. She was said to have raised the chalice towards the soldiers—some of them Saracen, or Muslim—upon which they fell backwards from the ladder they had climbed and fled.¹⁰

The metal chalice with semiprecious stones that supports the reliquary was added in Italy, perhaps in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Although the possibility that it was a readapted mount from another object cannot be totally discarded, given the good fit we may assume that in all probability it was created especially for this reliquary. The type represented by the mount of the Assisi flask—a stem with a polylobed base—re-



Fig. 1.4 Rock crystal vase with mount. Fatimid rock crystal, Egypt, 10th century; Silver gilt mount, Italian, 19th century. London, Keir Collection: Ro

curs with other rock crystal pieces of Middle Eastern origin, and the practice of providing richly worked European mounts for such vessels is a long-standing one, continuing even up to the nineteenth century. The mount of another Fatimid rock crystal object, a vase in the Keir Collection (Fig. 1.4), provides a close parallel to the foot of the Assisi mount both in terms of shape and in the way that semiprecious stones have been set on the lobes, protruding upwards and outwards. Probably executed in the nineteenth century, it constitutes a late revival of an early Renaissance type.¹¹

We thus have a group of composite objects made of disparate materials originating in different locations and assembled at different times. But for the Assisi flask the more radical transformation was undoubtedly that of function and associated meaning: what is now a sacred object, a reliquary containing the nail clippings of a venerated thirteenth-century Italian saint, was previously secular, a rock crystal of Egyptian manufacture of the second half of the tenth century that probably served as a perfume flask.¹² The common element that underpins the two and allows the transfer is thus the aesthetic, the fashioning of a rare and valuable raw material into a precious, delicately carved artefact that, having adorned a wealthy household while serving a practical purpose, was later found to be a fit container for a holy object, possibly even enhancing, through its very rarity and beauty, the sacred power of the relic within.¹³

The craftsmanship involved, and the very transparency of the crystal, could not have been matched in contemporary European artefacts, but awareness of this does not necessarily imply any consciousness of a Middle Eastern connection, and the same is true for other pieces of Middle Eastern provenance that were re-used in European contexts during the Middle Ages. We have, at the moment, huge gaps in our knowledge of the early history of such objects, so that it can be no more than a plausible conjecture to suggest that a piece which would become the Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Clare may have come to Italy as a traded object. We do, however, know something of its more recent history, for at an earlier stage in its life as a reliquary our rock crystal flask seems to have been entrusted with quite a different object, a piece of the cane believed to be used for Christ's flagellation. This appears in the 1741 account of Bishop Ringhieri,¹⁴ and from the report by Bracaloni it seems clear that in 1919 it still contained this particular relic.¹⁵ It was used to house the nail clippings of Saint Clare by 1934, as attested in the handwritten list of the relics of the Saint that Sister Chiara Lucia Rovelli compiled in that year.¹⁶ The major relics were then placed in modern walnut and glass showcases, while most of the smaller ones, including the nails now contained in our reliquary, were removed from the caskets crafted for them in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and placed in other cabinets located in the church's newly designed relic shrine situated in the Chapel of Saint George. In 1958 the relics were transferred to a smaller area, near the sacristy, at the back of the Chapel of the Crucifix of San Damiano and in 2000 the crypt of the church was expanded to make room for a much more complete exposition of the relics in new climatized showcases.

How did this and the other Islamic rock crystals reach Europe? We know that many of those that are now in religious institutions in Christian Europe were not placed there directly on arrival from the Middle East: whether or not they were acquired by

Crusaders, they tended to be owned first by secular rulers and aristocratic families, only later to be donated to the church by queens, kings and doges, or even gifted to popes who subsequently passed them on as donations to the churches. Many had previously been incorporated into the Byzantine imperial treasure, arriving in Venice after the sack of Constantinople in 1204, while others probably only reached Venice after 1261, when the Venetians were forced to abandon Constantinople.¹⁷ One example is the extraordinary rock crystal vase in San Marco which arrived in Venice around the second half of the thirteenth century and was then given a mount by two Venetian goldsmiths, according to the earliest extant inventory of the treasury of San Marco, that of 1283 (Fig. 1.5).¹⁸ It is thus possible that the Assisi flask was not a traded object in the commercial sense; indeed, it might be hypothesized that when it arrived in Italy it was already the reliquary of the cane (if without its metal mount), coming either from the Holy Land or from Byzantium.

A particularly striking example of an object subjected to such a radical functional transformation before arriving in western Europe is provided by another rock crystal reliquary, a bottle in the treasury of San Marco which arrived in Venice with its relic already inside it, and could at some point have been housed in a silver casket (Pl. 1.2).¹⁹ In the mid-thirteenth century it was mounted on a gold chalice,²⁰ a change that not only enhanced the preciousness of the relic but also allowed it to be seen and displayed: gold ribbons encase the bottle without touching it, so that its decoration can be seen and appreciated, thereby emphasising the unique value of its holy contents. We know that on special occasions the archdeacon of San Marco would show the congregation this reliquary, secured around his neck by a chain reported to be three and a quarter metres long,²¹ suggesting that it could have been carried by someone else, perhaps a deacon, to bring it closer to the congregation.

At one level this is just another example of a common and enduring phenomenon: the western European acquisition of relics from the East that went on throughout the Middle Ages and was associated particularly with the relationship with Byzantium.



Fig. 1.5 Rock crystal vase with mount. Abbasid or Fatimid rock crystal, 9th or 10th century; Silver gilt mount with precious stones, Venice, 13th century. Venice, Treasury of San Marco: inv. no. 99

In the early stages the gifting of relics formed part of Byzantine diplomacy, emphasising the Empire's power and religious status, and the artistic quality of the receptacles within which the relics were housed were to have a lasting effect on Western stylistic orientations. Later, during the fourth Crusade and the sack of Constantinople (1204), relics could be appropriated or simply be pillaged, and later still, as Byzantine power ebbed away, emperors would attempt to trade them to fend off financial and military collapse.²²

We do not know the circumstances under which this particular reliquary came to Venice. The bottle is carved in relief decorated with the palmettes and scrolls typical of Fatimid, Egyptian production. It is unlikely that the Venetians were aware of its ultimate origins, even though it has an Arabic inscription around the neck in Kufic, or angular script, a type known on secular objects from the Middle East, for it is most likely that the inscription was not recognised as such, being thought of as just part of the decoration. Indeed, calligraphic/epigraphic lines are often so well intermingled with floral, arabesque-type decorative motifs that they appear to become part of it, to the extent that only a trained eye can distinguish them as an inscription. Unfamiliarity with the language, and even more with the calligraphic script used, would be sufficient to guarantee a lack of awareness of its pedigree. However, what confirms European ignorance of the original Middle Eastern cultural locus of this object, and what, in its Christian guise, confers on it a status that is truly unique, is that while the Arabic inscription simply expresses formulaic hopes for the owner's happiness and wealth, another, Latin, inscription runs around one of the gold bands of the reliquary's chalice mount, telling us that "hic est sanguis Christi."²³

Hindsight allows us to view this particular juxtaposition and the radical change of function it proclaims as startling, or even ironic. The medieval worshipper, on the other hand, may well have experienced a sense of wonder at the combination of a supremely sacred relic and a container of exquisite beauty and artistry. Textual evidence of its reception is sadly lacking, but we do have a very interesting inventory entry for one piece, the vase of the Queen of Aquitaine (Pl. 1.3), and an extraordinary inscription on the wonderful metal mount of the object itself,²⁴ which records it as being a gift from an Arab king. The vase is carved in honeycomb decoration, a technique well known in Sasanian Iran that continues into the early Islamic period. Accordingly, it can be dated between the sixth and the ninth, or possibly even the early tenth century (but it is unlikely that it is, as has been suggested, a Fatimid piece).²⁵ Written by the abbot Suger (1081–1151), the entry runs:

Still another vase, looking like a pint bottle of beryl or crystal, which the Queen of Aquitaine had presented to our Lord King Louis as a newly wed bride on their first voyage, and the King to us as a tribute of his great love, we offered most affectionately to the Divine Table for libation. We have recorded the sequence of these gifts on the vase itself, after it had been adorned with gems and gold, in some little verses: 'As a bride, Eleanor gave this vase to King Louis, Mitadolus to her grandfather, the King to me, and Suger to the saints.'

(hoc vas sponsa dedit Aanor regi Ludovico, Mitadolus avo, mihi rex, Sanctisque Sugerus).²⁶

Mitadolus may be identified as Abd al-Malik Ibn Hud Imad al-Dawla, King of Saragossa in 1110, who is mentioned in a Spanish chronicle as "Midadolan."²⁷ This 'memory' marker of a different cultural past, one of Muslim Spain, is quite exceptional. In the inventory entry Suger wrote the name Mitadolus in blue ink, against the black of the rest, and this has been taken as a possible intention to give prominence to an illustrious king, memory of whom was still vivid at the time.²⁸ The inscription and inventory are also invaluable in helping to confirm that such mounts were expressly designed to enhance the beauty of an already beautiful object and, in the case of a royal donation, to express gratitude and recognition by adding to its preciousness, all for the appreciation of the angels and the Lord.

Unfortunately such information is quite exceptional. For most pieces we have no certain knowledge about where and how they were acquired, and the same is true, at least at the moment, for the Assisi reliquary. But we can at least place it fairly securely within a sophisticated tradition of craftsmanship centred in Fatimid Egypt, and we can also situate it within a pattern of dispersal leading to the presence of numerous rock crystal pieces in European collections. They testify to the acquisition of Islamic artefacts from an early date, and we know something of the uses to which they have been put. Rock crystal objects began to arrive in Europe at least as early as the early eleventh century, as the two inserted in the ambo of Henry II in Aachen testify,²⁹ and they continued to be acquired thereafter, being used in both secular and sacred contexts. The fact that they were given valuable mounts and put on display in noble houses and churches means that they can reasonably be considered an integral part of the widespread acquisition of Middle Eastern luxury artefacts alongside other Middle Eastern imports such as metalwork and carpets. Such acquisitions were to be particularly characteristic of the Renaissance, and especially of Renaissance Italy.³⁰

In respect to these later imports, it is possible to detect a shift of emphasis in how they were perceived. As a result, one may begin to speak of cultural influence, for they were to affect the evolution of European taste and design in ways that cannot be exhaustively discussed here.³¹ Many Renaissance imports became integral to various changes in the European perception of the Near East, especially as they were a significant element in the economically important trading relationships that survived periodic hostilities at the political level during periods of Mamluk and, especially, Ottoman domination. Oriental rugs, fabrics, and various forms of metalwork adorned wealthy noble and mercantile homes, and their characteristic design features were, in various degrees, imitated and reapplied in novel formats. This practice eventually contributed to the eighteenth-century phenomenon that has been termed *turquerie*, the featuring of elements of interior decoration and costume alongside dramatic plots of abduction and restoration set in the seraglio. Here, then, the original objects, coveted as before for their beauty, become signifiers of luxury sufficiently powerful to generate a stylistic trend, one capable both of domesticating the Other and isolating it as culturally exotic.

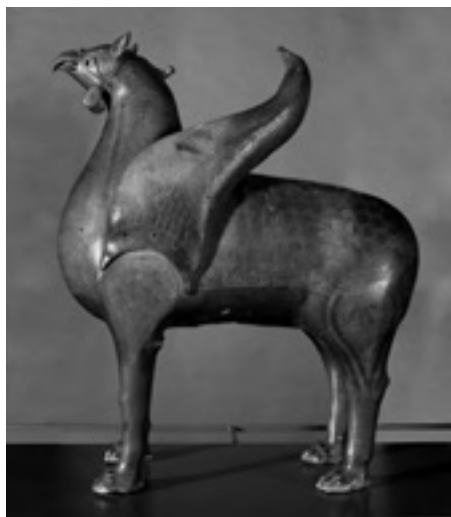


Fig. 1.6 Bronze griffin. Spain (?), 11th to 12th century. Pisa, Museo dell'Opera del Duomo

Essentialist traits could readily be attached to this view as the trend towards Orientalist stereotyping gathered pace.

There are also exceptional objects acquired at an early stage that were arguably subjected to processes of transformation driven by consciously ideological motives. Two of the most striking are found in Pisa: one is the well-known bronze griffin (Fig. 1.6; cover-illustration), the other an Andalusian marble capital (Pl. 1.4), each one placed at a different point on the roof of the cathedral. The capital, raised aloft on a short column, was situated at the end of the gabled roof of the north transept, possibly supporting, as its modern replacement does, a Pisan cross (Fig. 1.7).³² Given its relatively small size, 40 × 46 × 47 cm, the intricacy of its carving is lost to view at such a height, and the idea of placing it on the roof appears, if judged in purely visual terms, to be even more eccentric than the placing of its companion piece there, for the griffin is at least

visible, even if its details are not. Given that the capital seems to have been placed there early on, during the first or second phase of the cathedral's construction,³³ it is generally thought that it was consciously displayed as a trophy marking one of Pisa's victories, and, assuming that to be the case, it is interesting to note that it was placed on the northern side of the cathedral, facing the sea, thus connecting it with Pisa's maritime activities. More obviously, were it surmounted by a cross, this too could be understood as a symbol of Muslim defeat. However obvious such a reading may be, it should certainly not be discounted, given the existence of even bolder Christian statements: for example, the Gothic church that was implanted, under Charles V, in the middle of the *mezquita* in Cordoba, in the opposite axial direction and with a roof and cupola that protrude sufficiently to obliterate the view of the *mezquita* from the approaches to Cordoba, or the Renaissance palace that the same sovereign incongruously inserted in the middle of the Alhambra. In both cases the result was to spoil the delicate structure of the complex and create an aesthetic mess.

The capital has an Arabic inscription that says “‘amal fath al-naqqāsh ‘abdih” (the work of Fath the sculptor, his servant).³⁴ It is carved with acanthus leaves at three levels, with the inscription, in the so-called Kufic script, on the central upper band of one side. The oldest examples of the tradition of stone sculpture of Muslim Spain, to which it belongs, are capitals produced during the reigns of ‘Abd al-Rahman I and II during the late eighth and early ninth centuries; one, indeed, bears an inscription with the name of ‘Abd al-Rahman II.³⁵ The typology of these capitals has been studied by Manuel Jiménez Ocaña and Patrice Cressier, who see them as belonging to a large group of Spanish Corinthian capitals that retain characteristics of their classical models in, for



Fig. 1.7 Capital (replacement) with Pisan cross. Pisa, Duomo, end of the north transept



Fig. 1.8 Griffin (copy). Pisa, Duomo, Gable of the rear end of the nave

example, the bands of acanthus leaves, although these ones here are more stylised.³⁶ Even further removed from classical naturalistic models are the Spanish capitals of the following century, which seem, with their busier decoration style, to be of Byzantine rather than classical inspiration. The Pisan capital belongs to a well-known group from the second half of the tenth century, from Madinat al-Zahra, one which includes three splendid examples bearing the name of al-Hakam II, Mustansir bi-llah, who reigned between 961 and 976.³⁷ A dating to this period had been already advanced by Ugo Monneret de Villard on the basis of the inscription, for the same sculptor's name, Fath, occurs on capitals bearing the name of this caliph,³⁸ and its stylistic characteristics serve only to confirm it. The capital may, then, have formed part of the architecture of the now ruined complex of Madinat al-Zahra near Cordoba. Given the vastness of the site, and the fact that it has only partially been excavated, it is impossible to determine the original position of the columns to which this group of capitals belonged, although given their size and quality it would be reasonable to associate them with either the palace itself or with one of the more imposing residences cum official buildings. Although not identical, there are certainly strong resemblances between it and those in the still surviving part of the palace drawing room.

However imposing, Madinat al-Zahra was short-lived: it was sacked by rebellious Berbers in 1010, and thereafter fell into ruins. We have no information about how parts of it might have been dispersed, even less about the fate of the capital, although it is certainly reasonable to assume that plundered pieces might have been used as *spolia* in buildings elsewhere. The other possibility is that Madinat al-Zahra was not the only place at which Fath was active, and that the capital did not originate there, being sculpted at and for a different site. In any event, a century or so later the capital was in

Pisan hands: Monneret de Villard has put forward the hypothesis that both it and the griffin arrived in Pisa as part of the booty obtained from either the sack of Almeria in 1089 or that of the Balearic Islands in 1114.³⁹

Presumably once one of a group in a line of columns, the capital would have been a significant decorative element within an architectural complex enshrining grandeur and opulence, while when displayed in lofty isolation upon the cathedral roof, it could readily be understood as a projection of power, a trophy serving to mark Pisan domination.

But in the absence of contemporary documentation, exactly how it was perceived by those who placed it there is unknown, and although the ideological interpretation is compelling, the possibility of a more mundane explanation for its location cannot be



Fig. 1.9 Bronze lion. Islamic Mediterranean or southern Italy, 11th to 12th century. Mari-Cha Collection

completely excluded. If a capital was needed to support a cross matching the one at the other end of the transept, this one could have stood out among the various available pieces of mainly Roman *spolia* because of the quality of the carving and the particular shade of the marble, which blends in well with the complex coloration of the material of the cathedral. The marble of the capital is not white, but of a creamy or indeed almost pinkish colour, depending on how the light strikes it, and because the deep carving of its wonderfully stylised and distinctive floral design absorbs as well as reflects the light, it could have been selected for its potential contribution to the subtle polychrome marble effects that play a substantial role in the visual aesthetics of the cathedral.

Much later, in the early twentieth century, it was given a quite different function and setting. Having been taken down for restoration, it was replaced by another capital and reused in the adjoining baptistery where, in the centre of the baptismal font, it served as the pedestal for a bronze figure of Saint John the Baptist. Since the ideological impulse that may have caused it to be displayed on the roof was now no longer so urgent, if indeed it was still felt at all, it may be that the primary reason for placing it in the font was a perception of its aesthetic merit. Later still, however, during the twentieth century, it was subjected to a more knowing transformation by being housed in the museum, and here, inevitably, it has become overlaid with further strata of meaning, for apart from being yet another object of aesthetic contemplation it acquires particular mass as a focus of art-historical inquiry, being thereby endowed with a past that points out its symbolic significance within the context of current East-West (or North-South) post-colonial sensitivities. It has become, then, in its most recent phase, a highly charged cultural exhibit, both deracinated and recontextualised, a key to historical memory and a site of Andalusian nostalgia.

Whereas the provenance of the capital is assuredly Spanish, that of the griffin remains obscure.⁴⁰ We do not know exactly where it was made: indeed, scholars using the standard techniques of comparative stylistic and iconographical study have been able to venture a considerable number of suggestions, ranging from Iran to Egypt and Ifriqiyya, from Spain to southern Italy—their sheer variety suggests that with such an object this approach has certain limitations. Nevertheless, it is still primarily on stylistic grounds that scholarship has recently managed to reach a consensus, or at least a majority verdict, one that favours an Iberian/Spanish islands provenance, and thereby endorses the views of Pietro Serri and Ugo Monneret de Villard, both of whom, in 1833 and 1946 respectively, linked it to the Balearic Islands.⁴¹ But provenance is in any case only one element, and it is clear that in order to understand the object better different questions need to be asked concerning both its material, thus involving bronze casting techniques, and, beyond manufacturing processes, its original context and function. This type of approach might incidentally help us refine the issue of its provenance if a precise context is found, but its primary purpose is to investigate its cultural significance, thereby restoring for it a past against which the functional and symbolic dislocations of its later trajectory can be plotted.

These, too, require further investigation, for although scholarship on the griffin sheds some light on its reception in Italy,⁴² its significance and symbolism are still not



Fig. 1.10 Copper alloy falcon. Iran or Spain (?), 8th to 11th century. Lucca, San Frediano



Fig. 1.11 Falcon (copy of Fig. 1.10) transformed into a weathercock, 13th or 14th century. Lucca, San Frediano



Fig. 1.12 Falcon (copy of Fig. 1.10) as weathercock on a gilded globe inserted in the pole of a cross. Lucca, San Frediano, gable of the main façade

entirely clear. It has been suggested many times that, being part of the rich booty that the Pisans captured, possibly from the Balearic islands, the griffin was put on the top of the cathedral as a trophy, to mark the power of the maritime republic of Pisa after one of the successful battles that it had engaged in (Fig. 1.8). The fact that the griffin is a large bronze obviously gives it great material value, and it provides a connection with the bronze doors of the cathedral as well; to this can be added the further point that it could have been seen by the Pisans as analogous to the bronze statues that survived in Rome and were appropriated during the Middle Ages as signifiers of the imperial past.⁴³ In attempting to understand the cultural field within which the griffin would have been perceived by its captors when deciding what to do with it, it is fruitful to consider the association with royalty that griffins share with lions. The idea is of considerable antiquity in the Near and Middle East and it is intriguing to note that the one possible companion piece for the griffin, a large bronze remarkably similar in style, is, precisely, a lion (Fig. 1.9). Both griffins and lions populate the visual arts of the medieval Mediterranean, and it seems that, in a secular environment, griffins were used and understood as royal symbols. In the religious sphere, on the other hand, they were used and understood as apotropaic symbols, so that the Pisa griffin might have been thought to have value as a guardian figure. In addition, the suggestion has been made that the incised animals (two lions and two eagles) on the shield-like area between the legs and the body of the griffin would have been taken to refer to its dual nature as a combination of the most noble denizens of earth and sky, a reminder therefore of the dual nature of Christ.⁴⁴ The fact that the birds in question are more likely to be falcons than eagles might be thought to slightly weaken this Christological interpretation but,

as the above survey shows, it is clearly possible to marshal arguments to help explain why the appropriate place for the griffin was thought to be aloft a short column at the apex of the apse, above a most sacred part of the church.

A further question concerns the state of the griffin when the Pisans captured it and how they would have understood it. Had it already been isolated, detached from its setting, or was it still functioning as originally intended? The question is of relevance given that on the basis of recent research it has been hypothesised that it was originally designed as a noise-producing beast, that is, that it belonged to the class of automata, which were such a striking feature of early medieval court culture, whether Islamic or Byzantine.⁴⁵ Assuming that it was still functioning when seized, we would be in a position to refine our understanding of its symbolism in Pisa, for it could have been mounted above the cathedral expressly as a mysterious and terrifying guardian that emitted sounds, if no longer mechanically but randomly when the wind blew through its open belly and hollow body. One intriguing parallel is suggested by the big lions in gilded bronze that are reported to have been positioned at the four corners of the roof of the Ghumdan palace in Yemen and, as both al-Hamadani (early tenth century) and Yaqut (575–626/1179–1229) tell us, emitted roars when the wind passed through their hollow bodies.⁴⁶

Yet another parallel is much closer at hand: a wonderful falcon, an eighth- to eleventh-century Iranian or possibly Spanish copper alloy piece, with incised decoration (and possibly once also inlaid) and an inscription across its chest in Arabic in the so-called Kufic script, “bismillah baraka min allah” (in the name of Allah, blessing from Allah), that was installed on the apex of the roof of the church of San Frediano at Lucca (Fig. 1.10).⁴⁷ This likewise produced a noise, depending on the strength of the wind, through a funnel positioned over its beak, and prior to being taken down in 1954 it had functioned as a weather vane.⁴⁸ The hypothesis has been put forward that it came to Lucca as a result of the mission to Spain, in 1198, undertaken by Rainerio, a canon of San Frediano, under papal order.⁴⁹ But whether or not this is the case, the date of installation is unknown, and beyond the striking similarity of the architectural gesture, the parallel between the falcon and the griffin is as problematic as it is intriguing. Since the history of Lucca makes it unlikely that the falcon, which is in any case much smaller than the griffin, was meant to mark a victory over a Muslim adversary, what links the two animals is, fundamentally, the process of change to which they have been subjected, albeit one that had in each case a very different starting point, for whereas



Fig. 1.13 Exhibition hall showing the griffin and the lion facing each other. Doha, February 2009

the griffin may be related to the automata, the falcon originally had a quite different purpose, having most probably been an acquamanile.

The transformation it underwent, in the thirteenth or fourteenth century is, in fact, quite extraordinary, radically affecting not just function but also appearance: indeed, it is almost as if the falcon had been invited to a fancy-dress party, for in the course of being converted into a weathervane it was also changed into a cockerel, its head surmounted by a 'helmet' with a cockscomb at the back and a funnel-shaped sheath over the beak at the front, its body covered by a 'coat' of gilded copper, and its tail surmounted by a further, broad-bladed cock's tail (Fig. 1.11)!⁵⁰ This was designed to catch the wind and ensure rotation, and two large round holes were created in order to insert a pole around which this new weather cockerel would turn, while other, smaller holes were made to attach the new helmet and tail. But there is yet another hole in the belly, the purpose of which has not been satisfactorily explained. The suggestion that it may indicate that the falcon was created as an incense burner founders on the strong likelihood that the hole is not original,⁵¹ and I am of the opinion, rather, that it was added during the transformation process to allow the wind access in order to reverberate within the hollow body and come out through the short funnel-like tube encasing the open beak, helping to direct and amplify the sound.⁵² The beautiful falcon with an Islamic inscription thus became a Christian symbol, a reference to the Gospel story of

Saint Peter, who denied Christ three times as the cock crowed, and at the same time a reminder, as it turned in the wind, of human inconstancy (Fig. 1.12).⁵³

Until recently, the art-historical literature surrounding the griffin, from its beginnings in the nineteenth century, had been dominated by the standard obsession with taxonomy, with stylistic groupings and issues of provenance. More recently, it has gradually become an integral part of the intercultural discourse on art and cultural exchanges between East and West, with an emphasis on the Mediterranean.⁵⁴ As in the case of the capital, its place in this discourse is an inescapable aspect of its status as a museum exhibit. It is a striking example of an Islamic artefact that, given the time of its capture, provides a symbolic crux, embodying on the one hand sophistication and skill as the product of a previously superior culture and polity, and on the other military defeat at the hands of Christians, the beginning of a fundamental shift in the balance of power in the western Mediterranean. But during the late twentieth and the early twenty-first centuries, we have witnessed a further shift, one in which, at the intellectual and ideological level, scholars have increasingly come to regard the Mediterranean in terms not of opposition and political domination but of negotiation and mercantile exchange. Simultaneously, at the practical level the leverage of oil revenues has enabled Middle Eastern collections, whether state or private, to be enhanced by the acquisition of Middle Eastern artefacts, and has made possible arrangements of exhibitions drawing on Western holdings. It was with the associated 'cross-boundaries' discourse in mind that, to mark the occasion of the opening of the new museum of Islamic Art in Doha in 2008, the griffin was asked to 'fly' to Qatar and figure in a special exhibition called *Beyond Boundaries: Islamic Art Across Cultures*.⁵⁵ The centre-stage position that the griffin had shared, in that exhibition, by the Mari-Cha lion, so that for the first time these two big and most striking bronze sculptures of the medieval world could be seen together, face to face (Fig. 1.13). They thus invite Arab (but also Western) visitors not merely to admire them as aesthetic objects but to experience through them something of the changes they have undergone, something of the rich history that they enshrine. But also, since the knowingness of the modern gaze can rarely divest itself of irony, they may be tempted to reflect on the still unresolved puzzles of provenance that in their turn signal complexities of cultural interaction, for whereas the capital is surely from Muslim Spain and the griffin probably so, the lion—which almost has the air of a counterpart to the griffin, so that one could well imagine them together as part of a group of resplendent bronze beasts—may well hail from southern Italy.⁵⁶ Its 'Islamic' identity thus perhaps needs to yield to the Islamicate, and so encompass the fruitful interactions and transformations this term suggests.

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Notes

1 It is my pleasure to thank the Sisters of the Protomonastero of Saint Clare in Assisi for giving me permission to study the reliquary and for allowing access to it during the summer of 2008. My thanks are also due to my cousin Maurizio Ciriachi, who photographed the reliquary. Furthermore, I should like to mention the late Ralph Pinder Wilson, who encouraged me to study the reliquary, but sadly died not long after my research in Assisi was completed. The reliquary introduced here will be the subject of a more ample, monographic study that I am currently preparing.

2 Emma Zocca, *Catalogo delle Cose d'Arte e di Antichità di Assisi* (Rome: Libreria dello Stato, 1936), 203, fig. at p. 205; Kurt Erdmann, "Islamische Bergkristallarbeiten," *Jahrbuch der Preussischen Kunstsammlungen* 61 (1940): 128–30 and fig. 3; Francesco Gabrieli and Umberto Scerrato, *Gli Arabi in Italia* (Milan: Garzanti-Scheiwiller, 1979), no. 520.

3 The name is sometimes also spelt Claire and Clair in English. The spelling Clare, which I use here, is the version found in the *Catholic Encyclopedia*. Saint Clare was born Chiara Offreduccio, 16 July 1194, and died on 11 August 1253.

4 See, for example, Fra' Angelico, Christ Glorified in the Court of Heaven, 1423–24, London, National Gallery, NG663.1, where the angels play musical instruments of both Middle Eastern and Western origin.

5 For a general overview of this phenomenon, see Avinoam Shalem, *Islam Christianized: Islamic Portable Objects in the Medieval Church Treasuries of the Latin West*, Ars Faciendi 7 (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1996); for a study of contextualization of objects in museum settings, see Eva Hoffman, "Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century," *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 17–50; and for a theoretical approach to the subject in general, Ivo Kopytoff, "The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Social Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 64–95.

6 See Kurt Erdmann, "'Fatimid' Rock Crystal," *Oriental Art* 3, no. 4 (1951): 142–46.

7 Museo Nazionale del Bargello: inv. no. 80c6; see colour reproductions in Anna Contadini, "Fatimid Ivories Within a Mediterranean Culture," in *The Ivories of Muslim Spain*, 2 vols., ed. Kjeld von Folsach et al., special issue, *Journal of the David Collection* 2 (2005): vol. 2, esp. fig. 134.

8 Museum für Islamische Kunst: inv. no. I. 36/64; see Marianne Barrucand, ed., *Trésors fatimides du Caire*, exh. cat. (Paris: Institute du monde arabe, 1998), 175, no. 116.

9 Dublin, Chester Beatty Library: Is 1430; see detail in Anna Contadini, *Fatimid Art at the Victoria and Albert Museum* (London: V&A Publications, 1998), fig. 8.

10 *Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), vol. 4, s. v. Clare of Assisi (Paschal Robinson).

11 Berlin, Museum für Islamische Kunst: Sammlung de Unger, R10; see Ralph H. Pinder-Wilson, "Rock Crystals," in *Islamic Art in the Keir Collection*, ed. Basil W. Robinson (London: Faber & Faber, 1988), 301–03 and col. pl. 61. I am grateful to Richard De Unger and Stefan Weber for photographic help with this piece.

12 The use of such rock crystal objects as make-up and perfume containers is attested in the Geniza documents, see S. D. Goitein, *A Mediterranean Society*, vol. 1 *Economic Foundations* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967), 99–100.

13 Holger A. Klein, "Eastern Objects and Western Desires: Relics and Reliquaries between Byzantium and the West," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 58 (2004): 299–300, similarly argues this in connection with Byzantine reliquaries.

14 See Ottavio de Conti Ringhieri, *Tesoro delle Sacre Reliquie di S. Chiara d'Assisi* (Bologna: Longhi, 1741), 18, where he discusses a reliquary that can be identified as ours, but containing a piece of the cane, and p. 11 where he discusses the nail clippings preserved in the relic cabinet (and not in any specific reliquary). I am grateful to the Sisters of the Protomonastero of Saint Clare in Assisi for pointing this out to me.

15 Leone Bracaloni, "Le sacre reliquie della Basilica di S. Chiara in Assisi," *Archivum Franciscanum Historicum* 12 (1919): 413. This reference was kindly supplied by the Sisters of the Protomonastero of Saint Clare in Assisi.

16 The list is preserved in the Protomonastero of Saint Clare in Assisi, the reliquary mentioned on page 5.

17 Anna Contadini, "The Cutting Edge: Problems of History, Identification and Technique of Fatimid Rock Crystals," in *L'Egypte fatimide, son art et son histoire*, ed. Marianne Barrucand (Paris: Presse de l'Université de Paris Sorbonne, 1999), 325.

18 Inv. no. 99. Hans R. Hahnloser, ed., *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, vol. 2: *Il Tesoro e il Museo* (Florence: Sansoni Editore, 1971), cat. no. 123.

19 Whether it also came inside a silver container in the form of the church, with keys, “ecclesia argenti facta cum clavis,” mentioned in the 1325 inventory of the Basilica (Hahnloser, *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, 117, cat. no. 128), is not clear, as the treasury of San Marco also houses another reliquary of the Holy Blood (ibid., cat. no. 172 and Antonio Pasini, *Il Tesoro di San Marco* [Venice: Ferdinando Ongania Editore, 1885–86], 1: 24–25, cat. no. 34, and 2: pl. 27) and there seems to be some confusion between the two. In any case, it may be that the reliquary’s container, whatever it may have been, was added once it arrived in Venice.

20 As per the 1283 inventory of the Basilica: Hahnloser *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, 117, cat. no. 128. The gold top in the shape of a flame seems to be a later addition, as the inventories record that the reliquary was surmounted by a pearl.

21 Pasini, *Il Tesoro di San Marco*, 1: 25–26, cat. no. 36, and 2: pl. 28.

22 Patrick J. Geary, “Sacred Commodities: The Circulation of Medieval Relics,” in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Social Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 169–91.

23 The original form is XRI.

24 For the mount of the object, see the interesting article by Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, “Suger’s Liturgical Vessels,” in *Abbot Suger and Saint-Denis*, ed. Paula Lieber Gerson (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1986), 282–93.

25 Daniel Alcouffe, ed., *Le trésor de Saint-Denis*, exh. cat. (Paris: Bibliothèque nationale et al., 1991), 168, no. 27, suggests a Sasanian origin, sixth to seventh century, or ninth to tenth century under the Abbasids. George T. Beech, “The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase: Its Origins and History to the Early Twelfth Century,” *Ars Orientalis* 22 (1992): 69–79, argues for an Iranian, Sasanian origin, fifth to seventh century.

26 As reported and translated in Erwin Panofsky, trans., *Abbot Suger: On the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis and its Art Treasure* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1946), 78–79. See also Françoise Gasparri, trans., *Suger: Œuvres*, vol. 1 (Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1996), 151–53, chapter 19.

27 George T. Beech, “The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase, William IX of Aquitaine, and Muslim Spain,” *Gesta* 32, no. 1 (1993): 3–10; also Danielle Gaborit-Chopin, “Vase d’Aliénor: Monture,” in Alcouffe, *Le trésor de Saint-Denis*, 170–72, no. 27.

28 Beech, “The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase” (1993), 9 n 19. More generally on the exchange of gifts between

Byzantines and Arabs, see Anthony Cutler, “Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab and Related Economies,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 247–78.

29 The rock crystal bowl and the dish on the ambo are the subject of a study which I am preparing. The literature on the ambo, which often includes reference to the crystals, is vast. For an updated list, see Karen Rose Mathews, “Expressing Political Legitimacy and Cultural Identity Through the Use of ‘Spolia’ on the ‘Ambo of Henry II,’” *Medieval Encounters* 5, no. 2 (1999): 156–83. For a recent study of the ivory plaques on the ambo see Herta Lepie and Ann Münchow, *Elfenbeinkunst aus dem Aachener Domschatz* (Petersberg: Michael Imhof Verlag, 2006).

30 Anna Contadini, “Middle Eastern Objects,” in *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, ed. Marta Ajmar-Wollheim et al. (London: V&A Publications, 2006), 308–21.

31 Anna Contadini, “Artistic Contacts: Current Scholarship and Future Tasks,” in *Islam and the Italian Renaissance*, ed. Charles Burnett et al., Warburg Institute Colloquia 5 (London: Warburg Institute, 1999), 1–60, and more generally all the articles in this volume.

32 The original was taken down in 1918 for conservation reasons and later replaced by another in similar style.

33 As suggested by Cinzia Nenci, “Scheda 1863,” “Scheda 623,” in Peroni, *Il Duomo di Pisa*, 3: 611–12 and 415 respectively.

34 This belongs to a well-known group of signed capitals from Madinat al-Zahra. See Anna Contadini, “Capitello in marmo,” in Curatola, *Eredità dell’Islam*, 122–23, no. 39, with relevant bibliography; Almut von Gladis, “Komposit-Kapitell,” in *Europa und der Orient*, 606–7, no. 4/106; Mariagiulia Burrese and Antonino Caleca, “Presenze islamiche nell’arte a Pisa,” in *Arte Islamica: Presenza di cultura islamica nella Toscana costiera*, ed. Burrese et al., exh. cat. (Pontedera: Bandecchi e Vivaldi, 1995), 52, and fig. on p. 67; Nenci, “Scheda 1863,” and “Scheda 623” for the capital that has been put on the roof, replacing the Andalusian one.

35 Patrice Cressier, “Les chapiteaux de la grande mosquée de Cordue (oratoires d’ ‘Abd ar-Rahman I et d’ ‘Abd ar-Rahman II) et la sculpture de chapiteaux à l’époque émirale: Première et deuxième partie,” *Madrider Mitteilungen* 25 (1984): 216–81, and ibid. 26 (1985): 257–313. The one with the name of ‘Abd al-Rahman II is now in Madrid, Museo Arqueológico Nacional: 51.627, see Manuel Gómez-Moreno, “Capiteles árabes documentados,” in *Al-Andalus* 6 (1941): 422–27,

no. 6, fig. 2a; and *El arte árabe español hasta los Almohades: Arte mozárabe* (Madrid: Ed. Plus-Ultra, 1951), 51–54; Henri Terrasse, “Chapiteaux oméiyades d’Espagne à la mosquée d’al-Qarawiyyin de Fès,” *Al-Andalus* 28 (1963): fig. 15; *The Arts of Islam*, exh. cat. (London: Hayward Gallery, 1976), 305, no. 484; Jerri Lynn D. Dodds, ed., *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, exh. cat. (New York: Abrams 1992), no. 34.

36 For the tenth-century capitals, see the studies of Manuel Ocaña Jiménez, “Capiteles epigrafiados de Madinat al-Zahra,” *Al-Andalus* 4 (1936–39): 158–68; and “Capiteles fechados del siglo X,” *Al-Andalus* 5 (1940): 437–49. For Cressier’s studies, see the previous note.

37 Two are in Cordoba, Museo Arqueológico Provincial: 30.151 and 30.149, and one is now in Kuwait, Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya: LNS 2 S; see reproductions in colour in Marilyn Jenkins, ed., *Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum: The al-Sabah Collection* (London: Sotheby, 1983), 44, and Dodds, *Al-Andalus*, nos. 38 and 30, in both these publications the name of the sculptor is given as Falih, instead of Fath, the surely correct reading established by Ugo Monneret de Villard, “Le chapiteaux arabe de la cathédrale de Pise,” *Compte Rendus de l’Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres* (1946): 20; Manuel Ocaña Jiménez, “Obras de al-Hakam II en Madinat al-Zahra,” *Al-Andalus* 6 (1941): 160.

38 Monneret de Villard, “Le chapiteaux arabe,” esp. 20.

39 Ibid., 1, p. 23. That the griffin should have come to Pisa with the booty from the Balearic Islands is also the view of Giuseppe Scalia, “Pisa all’apice della gloria: l’epigrafe araba di S. Sisto e l’epitafio della regina di Maiorca,” *Studi Medievali*, 3rd ser., 48 (2007): 809–28, esp. note 58, where he associates it with an epigraphic slab in Arabic with the name of al-Murtada, a Balearic emir. Datable to the eleventh century, this is now in the Church of San Sisto in Pisa, and Scalia suggests that it would have come together with the griffin.

40 The griffin is the subject of a project I am currently leading with Pisa Opera del Duomo, Pisa University, Oxford University, and the Istituto Superiore del Restauro e Conservazione in Rome, which will lead to a monographic publication and an exhibition. See Contadini, “Il grifone di Pisa,” in Curatola, *Eredità dell’Islam*, 126–31, no. 43, and Contadini, Richard Camber, and Peter Northover, “Beasts that Roared: The Pisa Griffin and the New York Lion,” in *Cairo to Kabul: Afghan and Islamic Studies presented to Ralph Pinder-Wilson*, ed. Warwick Ball et al. (London: Melisende, 2002),

65–83, with a comprehensive bibliography on the bronze. See also Antonio Milone, “Grifone,” in *I Marmi di Lasinio: La collezione di sculture medievali e moderne nel Camposanto di Pisa*, ed. Clara Baracchini (Florence: S.P.E.S., 1993), 143–44, and Milone, “Scheda 1864,” “Scheda 489,” in Peroni, *Il Duomo di Pisa*, 3: 612–3 and 402–3 respectively, the latter on the cement copy of the griffin; Hubert Bari, ed., *Beyond Boundaries: Islamic Art Across Cultures* (Paris: Assouline, 2008), 56–58.

41 See Pietro Serri, *Nuova Guida per La Città di Pisa* (Pisa: Ranieri Prosperi, 1833), 153–54, where he discusses the griffin among the antiquities of the Camposanto, as by 1833 the bronze had been already taken down from the roof and placed in the Camposanto where it stayed until it was moved to the Diocesan Museum in 1986; Monneret de Villard, “Le chapiteaux arabe,” 21–23.

42 Contadini, “Il grifone di Pisa,” 128–30, no. 43, and “Beasts that Roared,” 66–67.

43 This point has been made by Antonio Milone, “‘Arabitas’ pisana e medioevo mediterraneo: Relazioni artistiche tra XI e XIII secolo,” in *Fibonacci tra arte e scienza*, ed. Luigi A. Radicati di Brozolo (Pisa: Cassa di Risparmio, 2002), 110, and note 15.

44 Luca Carletti, “Grifo,” in *Pisa e il Mediterraneo: Uomini, merci, idee dagli Etruschi ai Medici*, ed. Marco Tangheroni (Milan: Skira, 2003), no. 116.

45 Contadini, “Beasts that Roared,” 69 n 42.

46 Ibid., 69, and n 39.

47 I am grateful to Maria Teresa Filieri for allowing me to study the falcon during a research trip to Lucca in May 2010. My colleague Peter Northover has preliminarily suggested that it is probably made of a leaded gunmetal similar to that of the Pisa griffin. The falcon deserves a monographic study and will be included in the ‘Griffin project’ (see note 40). The latest publication on the piece is Romano Silva, *La Basilica di San Frediano a Lucca: Immagine Simbolica di Roma Cristiana* (Lucca: Maria Pacini Fazzi, 2010), 223–26, col. pls. CXIV–CXVI and 77 and 79. Scholars have discussed the falcon in connection with three other pieces, including one in Saint Petersburg (Anatoly Ivanov, ed., *Masterpieces of Islamic Art in The Hermitage Museum* [Kuwait: Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyya, 1990], 20–21, no. 1) with an inscription giving the name of the maker, Sulayman, dating it to 180 H/796–97 AD and giving a place of origin, the reading of which is disputed. An Iranian provenance is nevertheless accepted. The Lucca falcon may be of a later period and, as Silva has suggested (*La Basilica di San Frediano* 2010, 224), may be of Iranian inspiration but Spanish manufacture.

48 The tradition of weathervanes in the form of a cockerel might have originated with that of Saint Peter in Rome dating to 752–57 (once on a bell tower and now in the Treasury of the Vatican Basilica): Silva, *La Basilica di San Frediano* 2010, 225 and col. fig. 79.

49 Silva, *La Basilica di San Frediano* 1984, 278–79; and *La Basilica di San Frediano* 2010, 224.

50 I am very grateful to Romano Silva for discussing this piece with me and explaining that the ‘coat’ of gilded copper is formed by several pieces of a (relatively) thin sheet of copper gilded with an amalgam of gold and mercury which were secured over the body of the falcon by a number of small nails.

51 That the hole is most probably not original was commented upon by Peter Northover while we were examining the object. Scerrato, among others, sug-

gested a function as incense burner: Francesco Gabrieli and Umberto Scerrato, *Gli Arabi in Italia*, 491, no. 530.

52 Scerrato in *Gli Arabi in Italia*, 1979, no. 530 reports that when the wind was blowing the falcon emitted a high pitched whistle. The falcon/cockerel presently on the roof of San Frediano is a copy of the original ensemble (falcon with cockerel costume).

53 As already suggested by Romano Silva, *La Basilica di San Frediano*, 2010, 225–26.

54 See Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability,” 18–19.

55 The exhibition (24 November 2008 to 22 February 2009) was curated by Oliver Watson and the catalogue edited by Hubert Bari.

56 Richard Camber, “The New York Lion,” in Contadini, Camber and Northover, “Beasts that Roared,” 73–74.

The Impact of Oriental Silks on Italian Silk Weaving in the Fourteenth Century

Lisa Monnas

A colourful two-sided altarpiece by Meo da Siena, painted in 1330–33 for the Benedictine Abbey of San Pietro, Perugia, displays a wealth of figured silk designs offering an intriguing juxtaposition of tradition and innovation.¹ On one side, Christ is enthroned flanked by the twelve apostles and, on the other, the enthroned Virgin is flanked by twelve saints, with a kneeling donor, Abbot Ugolino. While Saint Bartholomew wears a mantle figured with a geometric interlace suggesting a Hispano-Moresque fabric that would not have looked out of place in the late thirteenth century, Saint Stephen is depicted in a new style of silk, a swirling design of grapevines with stylised foliage (Fig. 2.1).² The cloth of estate behind Christ and Saint Peter’s pontifical vestments are embellished with wonderful and curious animals, with wild-looking birds worn by Saint Peter, and fish behind Christ (Fig. 2.2).³ In choosing this fish motif, the artist may have been consciously evoking the traditional symbol of Christ,⁴ but these are not the static fish of early Christian art, as they have the vivacity of the Asian dragon-fish (*makara*) or Chinese flying fish (*fei yu*).⁵ Similar fish can be seen on the cuffs of a tunic in Brandenburg Cathedral made out of a fourteenth-century Italian half-silk (Pl. 2.1).⁶ Meo’s exuberant designs reflect the style of fabrics imported from the Mongol Empire and copied by Italian weavers.

The taste for these textiles formed part of a wider appreciation of Eastern craftsmanship manifest in the intricate inlaid metal basins from Ilkhanid Iran and from the Moslem Levant and rare examples of Syrian glass and Chinese porcelain traceable to the European market or European ownership in the late medieval period.⁷ As they were less fragile than porcelain or glass, and were major items of trade, imported in greater numbers, and widely used in the church where they have been preserved over the centuries, it is the silks that have survived in greater quantities. Examples have been found among noble burial clothing and church vestments in Italy, Spain, France, the Low Countries and Northern Europe, including Scandinavia and England, with important finds in Germany. They were the preserve of an elite clientele and have been found among the belongings of princes, popes and emperors.

Silks from the Mongol Empire reached Europe from the mid-thirteenth century onwards, either as objects of trade or as diplomatic gifts. In the hundred years between 1300 and 1400, thanks to the influence of these imported fabrics, Italian silk design un-

Other Worlds (2002) and *Phantasmagoria: Spirit Visions, Metaphors, and Media* (2006), a study of phantasms and modern technologies. She has been a Visiting Professor at Erasmus University, Rotterdam, a Visiting Scholar at the Getty Humanities Centre, and a Visiting Fellow at All Souls, Oxford. She was appointed Professor of Literature, Film, and Theatre Studies at the University of Essex in 2004. Her research into fairy-tales and magic continues with a study of the influence of the *Arabian Nights* (*Stranger Magic*, forthcoming). As of 2009, Warner is also Distinguished Visiting Professor in the Humanities, Queen Mary, University of London, and a Visiting Professor to the Department of Animation at the Royal College of Art. In 2005 the British Academy elected her a Fellow and in 2008 she was awarded a CBE. She is president of the British Comparative Literature Association.

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