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THE FALL OF AL-MADĀʾIN: SOME LITERARY REFERENCES CONCERNING SASANIAN SPOILS OF WAR IN MEDIAEVAL ISLAMIC TREASURIES

By Avinoam Shalem
University of Edinburgh

“We urged (our) horses to Madāʾin,
Its waters like its dry land fruitful.
We cleansed the coffers of this Kisrā,
They fled that day, like he, despairing.”
Abū Bujayd Nāfiʿ b. al-Aswād.1

It is curious that the better known Sasanian objects in mediaeval treasuries are those which were kept in the Christian churches of the Latin West. Apart from many Sasanian textiles, which are scattered in church treasuries throughout Europe, the most celebrated objects are probably the Cup of Khusrav—the so-called “tasse de Salomon” in the Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris (no. 76 in the inventory of 1634)—and, of no less fame, the so-called ‘vase d’Aliénor” in the Louvre (MR 340).2 Both of them were formerly kept in the treasury of St. Denis.3 But unfortunately, it is difficult to unravel their long history before they reached that treasury.

 Tradition tells us that the Cup of Khusrav was among the presents which were given by Hārūn al-Rashd to Charlemagne, and that Charles the Bald presented it later to the treasury. But such accounts were usually invented in order to bestow an aura of importance and mystery upon an object.4 More interesting is the account of Ibn Zafar (1104–70), who described in his Sulṭān al-muḥāfaẓ that in the Byzantine treasury was a drinking crystal bowl decorated with gold, silver and glass (al-zuqāj al-‘uḥḥam) on which the portrait of the Sasanian king Ḥāpiʿr was carved.5 This literary source suggests that the Cup of Khusrav could have reached the treasury of St. Denis via Constantinople; if so, this as most probably after the sack of 1204.6

The story of the “vase d’Aliénor” was lately brilliantly discussed by Beech, who succeeded in ascertaining its “pre-Christian” history.7 Beech has suggested that the name of the anonymous donor Mitadulus, which is inscribed in Latin on the necking of the lower part of the vessel, refers to Māḏ al-Dawla ‘Abd al-Malik b. Ḥūd, the last Muslim king of Saragossa (1110–30).8 However, the question how the vessel reached al-Andalus is still unclear. It is probable that most of the Sasanian objects under discussion, excluding those which directly reached the Byzantine court with Sasanian delegations or in like manner, were initially kept in the treasuries of Muslim rulers. This paper focuses on those Islamic documents which inform us of Sasanian objects in Muslim possession, and is mainly centred on accounts referring to the fall of al-Madāʾin in 637.

Al-Madāʾin, “the Cities”, as the Arabs used to call the two capitals Seleucia and Ctesiphon on both banks of the Tigris, was the winter capital of the Sasanian kings.9 Its capture was not only an important military achievement during the conquest of Iraq, but concomitantly an event which left a great impression on the Arabs, who were confronted with the wealth of a highly artistic culture. Though a large part of precious Sasanian objects was already destroyed by the first century following this event, the legends and the colourful accounts of later Arabic authors probably inspired Muslim artists and their patrons, and both aspired to bestow upon their artefacts an aura of Sasanian workmanship.

Arab writers inform us of various episodes during this capture, all of which illustrate the abundance of Sasanian precious and rare objects in contrast to the ignorance of the Arab soldiers. Al-Dīnawarī (died 895), who relies on Mīḥnāf b. Sulaym, describes how the soldiers were not able to distinguish between silver or golden bowls.10 Al-Ṭabarī (839–923) tells how camphor, which the soldiers mistook for salt, was put in dough for making bread,11 and Ibn al-Ṭiqāqā in his book al-Fakhrī (written in 1302) added that one of the soldiers sold a big jacinth (probably a sapphire) for the modest sum of 1,000 dirhams, because he did not know that there was a number bigger than 1,000.12

Although, according to al-Ṭabarī, the keepers of the Sasanian treasury carried as much as they could of the “most precious and portable commodities”
and departed with the last troops to join Yazdagird III (682–51) in Hulwān, still a large quantity of treasures was left behind. Vessels, precious stones, presents (alāṣf, delicate objects?) of inestimable value were left in the treasure chambers.Obviously big and heavy objects were also left; for example, the plaster statues which decorated the Great Hall of the White Palace remained in their original place, and even later, when Sa’d b. Abi Waqqās, the commander in this battle, decided to use the Great Hall as a prayer hall, the statues were left as they were.

Sealed baskets, which were probably packed in order to be taken by the fleeing troops, were found in two Turkish tents. The baskets were opened, and gold and silver vessels were found within.

A mule, which was lifted out of the water after it fell from a bridge during the flight of the Sasanians over the Nahrawān canal (on the eastern side of the Tigris), carried baggage with the king's finery, including his clothes, gems, swordbelt and coat of mail.

Two other mules were seized, while carrying four baskets in which the clothes and the crown of the king were found. "I began to unload them. On one of the mules there were two baskets containing the crown of the king, which could only be held aloft by two jewel-encrusted props. On the other mule there were (also) two baskets containing the king's garments, in which he used to dress up, brocaded with interwoven gold thread and adorned with gems, as well as other garments made of different fabrics similarly interwoven and adorned." The king's helmet, greaves and armplates, as well as the coats of mail of different kings like Heraclius, the last Lakhmid king, the king of India and the king of Makrān (in southeastern Iran) were found in two leather bags. Eleven swords of different kings were found in two other bundles.

The swords of the Sasanian king and the last Lakhmid king al-Nu’mān, and also the king's finery, his crown and his garments were sent to the caliph 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb "for the Muslims to see and for the nomadic tribesmen to hear about". The spoils were probably sent to be displayed in the Ka'ba and in other important shrines.

This was probably the fate of the king's crown. The crown which was sent by Sa’d from al-Madā’in to the caliph 'Umar in Medina in order to be shown to the Muslims, was, according to Erdmann, the hanging crown of Khusrāw II (591–628). If this crown was presented in public, it was most probably the one which years later was displayed in the Dome of the Rock. The earliest account (which is known to us so far), referring to a Sasanian crown in the Dome of the Rock, appears in the Fāḍā’il al-Bayt al-Mu’addas of al-Wāsiti, which was probably written around 1020. Al-Wāsiti says that ‘During the time of ‘Abd al-Malik, there was a hanging on a chain above the Rock under the dome the Yatīmah pearl, the horns of Abraham's ram, and the crown of Kisra (Khusrāw). When the Banū Ḥāšim (sc. the Abbasids) took over the caliphate, they sent them to the Ka’ba.”

The fate of these objects has been recently discussed by Nasser Rabbat, among them, at least the crown of Khusrāw was still seen in the early eleventh century by the anonymous writer of the Nihāyā. Other sources mention that two large golden ornamental crescents with precious stones, which were part of the spoils of Madā’in, a golden pail and cups studded with precious stones and of great value, which were most probably Sasanian vessels, were sent by ‘Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb to the treasury of the Ka’ba.

Some precious statues were found packed in baskets: "In one of these [baskets] there was a golden figure of a horse, saddled with a silver saddle; on its crupper and breast girth there were rubies and emeralds encased in silver. Its bridle was likewise embellished. There also was a figure of a horseman made of silver encrusted with gems. The other basket contained a figurine representing a silver she-camel; on it were a saddlecloth and strap of gold. It also had a halter or bridle made of gold, all of this studded with rubies. On the came a man, made of gem-encrusted gold, was seated. The king used to attach these two figures to the props used for holding his crown aloft." The description which is given by al-Ṭabarī is unclear, and thus it is difficult to detect how these statues supported the hanging crown. It is most probable that they were decorative pendants. However, the statue of the horseman was most probably a Chinese one. Al-Mas’ūdī (died 956) describes a similar statue of a horseman, which was sent as a present from the Chinese Emperor to the Sasanian king Khusrāw I (531–79). The statue of the horseman was studded with pearls (fāris mi durr mu'addad), and the eyes of the horse and ride were made of rubies. A similar type of precious statue is mentioned later among the treasures of the Fatimids; al-Qāḍī al-Rashīd (ca. 1050) describes a golden peacock, rooster and gazelle, all studded with pearls, precious stones and rubies (the rubies were inserted instead of eyes). Probably the most impressive booty was the qīt. This was a gigantic carpet measuring sixty by sixty cubits (ca. thirty metres long and broad). The qīt which was also known by its Persian name as the Bahārī Kisārā (“The King's Spring” or “The Spring of Khusrāw”), was a gold-coloured carpet. I decoration consisted of “... pictures of roads an inlays like rivers; among them were pictures houses. The edges looked like cultivated land planted with spring vegetables, made of silk c
stalls of gold. Their blossoms were of gold and silver ... the fruits depicted on it were precious stones, its foliage silk and its waters golden. According to al-Tabarî, the Sasanian kings used to sit on this carpet in winter time, during drinking parties, imagining they were sitting in gardens. Sa‘d, who tried to avoid the barbaric action of dividing the carpets among the soldiers, succeeded in convincing them to send it to the caliph 'Umar in Medina. But disgruntled by the human desire of possessing the material world, 'Umar unfortunately cut the carpet into equal pieces and distributed them among the warriors of this battle.

The memory of the carpet was kept alive for centuries by Arab historians, and it appeared also in poetry as a symbol for the vanishing material world. It is quite probable that about a thousand years later a group of seventeenth and eighteenth-century Persian carpets, the so-called “Garden Carpets”, reflect the memory of the qīf. Their decoration consists of trees with heavy blossoms, flowers, wild animals and water canals, all seen from a bird’s eye view.

Another object which was stripped of its precious stones and distributed by the caliph 'Umar among the Arab warriors, was the famous Sasanian war standard, the so-called “Banner of Kâveh”. This banner, which has been discussed in detail by Christiansen, fell into the hands of the Arabs after the battle of al-Qadîsiyya, probably in 635 (shortly before the fall of al-Madâ’în). It was made of animal skin, studded with precious stones, gold and silver coins. In time of war, it was taken out of the treasury of the Sasanian kings and carried on a wooden rod by the general commander.

A large quantity of gems was looted from the Sassanids and sent to the caliph 'Umar. It is related that 'Umar “burst into tears” when he saw the rubies, chrysalides, peridots (and other) gems. After the battle of Nihâwând in the year 639, the royal Sasanian treasure, containing gems which the king used to divide among his deputies, was also sent to the caliph. Some of these precious stones were probably sent to decorate holy shrines. The 7th-century geographer al-Muqaddasî says that both within the mihrâb [of the Great Mosque in Damascus] and around it are set cut agates and turquoises of the size of the finest stones used in rings. According to Yağût (1179–1229), these precious stones were put there by the Umayyad alîph 'Umar (II) b. 'Abd al-'Azîz.

Arab historians inform us of the unique gems sed by the Sasanian kings. According to al-As‘ûdî, Khusrav I had four signet rings: a carnelian one inscribed with the word “justice”, a turquoise with the word “agriculture”, a carbuncle (mandine?) with the word “patience” and a ruby with the word “faithfulness." The most celebrated Sasanian precious stone was the red ruby called al-jabal “The Mountain”, probably a dome-shaped ruby. This stone was mounted on a ring, which had been passed from one Sasanian king to another. The belief that the king who incised his name on it would be murdered was the reason why it was worn by them without having their names incised on it. Hârûn al-Rashîd, who bought it for 4,000 dinârs, had his first name, Ahmad, inscribed on it. The stone was mentioned for the last time during the reign of al-Muqaddir (908–32), but it is possible that the ring was in the possession of Abu 'l-Futûh Yusuf, a Fatimid ruler of Sicily.

The flight of Yazdagird III from the invading Arab forces ended in Khurâsân, where the king was murdered by a millstone cutter. Some of his treasures probably reached Khurâsân or even his last residence in Marw.

Al-Qâdi al-Rashîd says that the golden palm tree of the Sasanian kings was discovered by the governors of Khurâsân. The tree was decorated with precious stones and was reported as being valued at two million dinârs. Though not necessarily the Sasanian palm tree, a golden palm tree with fruits of different precious stones passed from the Fatimid treasury to the hands of the Nazîr al-Jûyûsh.

A Sasanian brazier (kanân) was sent from Khurâsân to the treasury of the Ka‘ba, but it was destroyed out of fear that it might have “turned” the Ka‘ba into a fire temple.

A little table, probably of Sasanian origin, passed from the treasury of the Umayyads to the Abbasids and later to the Fatimids.

According to Ibn Jubayr, who visited Medina in 1184, two objects, allegedly regarded as Sasanian, were hung above the mihrâb of the Mosque of the Prophet. The first one was a square stone of a bright and shining yellow surface, which measured one square span (shibr fi shibr). This stone was regarded as the mirror of Khusrav. The second item was a little receptacle (huqqâq saqîhir) which was considered to be the drinking-cup (ka‘s) of Khusrav. Since Ibn Jubayr did not describe the objects carefully, it is difficult to know whether these objects were indeed Sasanian. Indeed, Ibn Jubayr himself had some doubts concerning the origin of the objects.

Though mentioned as a jâm min zujâf fir‘awûnî “a drinking vessel (bowl) of Egyptian glass”, this vessel—which was kept in the treasury of Marwân II (744–50)—was most probably Sasanian or at least in Sasanian style. Al-Qâdi al-Rashîd describes it as one finger (isba‘) thick and one-and-a-half spans (shibr) wide. It was engraved in relief with a typical Sasanian hunting scene: a crouching lion was depicted in the centre, and in front of him was a kneeling person who was aiming an arrow at the lion.
CONCLUSION

These literary sources suggest that, during the fall of Ctesiphon in 637 and until the death of Yazdagird III in 651, a large quantity of Sasanian objects fell into the hands of the Arabs. The objects were usually collected by the general commander and sent to the caliph, who was the one to decide what should be done with them. Some of the objects were sent by him to major Islamic shrines, where they were shown in public, while others, mainly those which could have been easily stripped of their precious stones and metals, were destroyed and scattered among the warriors, probably as salary.

This practice was probably carried out in accordance with the concept introduced by the Qur'an in Sūra 8:41 (Sūrat al-Anfīl “The Spoils”). According to this sūra, spoils of war essentially belong to God and His Messenger. They all should be deposited by the soldiers, and the ruler should distribute them. One-fifth of the spoils is to be deposited in public treasuries for public welfare, while four-fifths are to be distributed among the soldiers who took part in the fighting.

It is worth mentioning that some parts of the looted Sasanian objects were not Sasanian at all. These were either presents sent by different kings to the Sasanian court or spoils of war. The objects were displayed by the Muslims as Sasanian booty, and therefore it is quite probable that in the course of time they were “Sasanised” by the medieval Islamic popular mind.

However, the numerous literary sources referring to the booty of the battle of Ctesiphon suggest that the impression that these precious objects left on the Arabs was strong. Thus some of them, like the crown and the cup of Khusraw, or the Spring Carpet, became legendary precious objects, and therefore were regarded as models of high artistic value for generations to come.


3 The cup of Khusraw reached the Cabinet des Antiques of the Bibliothèque Nationale in 1791. The Vase of Eleanor reached the Louvre in 1793.

4 Unfortunately, the earliest source in which this object was mentioned is the Grandes Chroniques de France of the fourteenth century: “hanap d’or pur et d’emeraudes fines et fins grené (grenais) si merveilleusement ouvri que en tos les royaumes du monde ne fut ainsies ouvri si souliette”. Cited in Le trésor de Saint-Denis, p. 80.


6 According to Villehardouin (no. 1159–1218), who wrote the history of the Fourth Crusade from firsthand knowledge, the booty of Constantinople was equally divided between the French and the Venetians. See his The Conquest of Constantinople, in Joinville and Villehardouin, Chronicles of the Crusades, tr. M. R. B. Shaw (London, 1963), p.94.


8 Ibid., pp. 5–7. The Latin inscription reads: HOC VAS SPONSA. DEDIT. ANOR REGI. LUDOVICO. MITADOL[us]. AVO HIHI REX. S[an][C][is][Q]UE[] SUGER[I]US (as a bride, Eleanor gave this vase to King Louis, Mitadolus to her great father, the King to me, and Suger to the Saints”); the English translation is that of Panofsky, Abbot Suger, p. 79.

9 Al-Masʿudi in his Meadows of Gold describes some precious Sasanian presents which were sent around 590 to the Byzantine court. Among them was a table made of amber with three golden legs in the form of paws of a lion, eagle and goat; see Bis à la Grenzen der Erde, etc. from The Meadows of Gold, tr. and ed. Gernot Ritter (Tübingen and Basel, 1976) p. 137. A “renaissance” in the relationship between the Sasanians and their Byzantine neighbours occurred during the reign of Khusraw II, mainly after he had married his favourite wife Shirin, who was a Christian. The wedding took place in 592 or 593. During the same years, some votive offerings (a plate, cross and vessels, all made of gold) were sent to this emperor, probably to a church in Antioch. See M. Higgins, “Chosroes II’s votive offerings at Sergiopolis,” Byzantinische Zeitschrift XLVIII (1955), pp. 89–102.


14 Ibid., p. 23 (p. 2443).

15 Ibid., p. 24 (p. 2445); see also Ibn al-ATHIR, loc. cit. We must assume that Sasanian luxury vessels of precious metal reached the treasuries of the Umayyads and later passed into the Abbasids. The detailed descriptions by Abū Nuwās of decoration of precious metal vessels which were used by the Abbasids during wine banquets suggest that Sasanian vesse or at least early Islamic ones with typical Sasanian moti
were used in secular contexts. The English translations of some of the songs of Abū Nuwas are given by O. Grabar, "An introduction to the art of Sasanian silver," in Sasanian Silber, exhibition catalogue at the Museum of Art of the University of Michigan (Ann Arbor, 1967), pp. 34-6.

Al-Tabari, vol. XIII, p. 25 (p. 2445); Ibn al-Athir, loc. cit.

Al-Tabari, vol. XIII, p. 26 (p. 2446); Ibn al-Athir, 401-2; A similar account is related by al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd. "Some Muslims seized two loaded mules ... on them there were five baskets (ṣafīū); in two of them was the crown of Khurraw and in the other two the garnets which he used to wear". See G. H. Qaddumi, A Medieval Islamic Book of Gifts and Treasures: Translation, Annotation and Commentary on the Kitāb al-Hādiyya wa-al-Taḥaf (Ph.D. thesis; Harvard University, 1990), 165. It is worth mentioning that two cloaks of Sasanian horsemen were excavated in 1968 at Antinoë. These are kept in the Musée Historique des Tissus in Lyons, Inv.968.111 (34.872) and 968.113 (34.872bis); for illustrations, see Marielle Martininiani-Reber, Soirées sassanides, copies és byzantines Xe-XIe siècles, Lyon, Musée Historique des Tissus (Paris, 1988), cat. 26.


Ibid. According to al-Azraqi (died 834 or 837), the Horns of the Ram were destroyed around 690, namely during the capture of Mecca by 'Abd Allāh b. al-Zubayr, see F. Wüstenfeld, Die Chronik der Stadt Mecca (Leipzig, 1858), vol. I, pp. 155-6; this account might have been invented to explain their disappearance from the treasury of the Ka'ba. Moreover, it might have concealed their probable transfer from the Ka'ba to the Dome of the Rock in 692 by 'Abd al-Malik, who recaptured Mecca at the same year. This speculation has been also suggested by Rabbat, see "The Dome of the Rock Revisited", p. 73. The long history of the pearl, called al-Yatima, is partially revealed by Rabbat, see ibid., pp. 71-2; it seems that there are some contradictory accounts of this unique pearl, which were sometimes mingled with accounts referring to another fantastic pearl, the so-called abūmen ("the Unincriminated"); see also al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, Kitāb al-Hādiyya wa-al-Taḥaf, pp. 180, 348, n. 1. The author intends to discuss these accounts in a separate paper.

Cited by Erdmann, "Entwicklung", 115.


Al-Tabari, vol. XIV, p. 28 (p. 2448); Ibn al-Athir, vol. II, p. 402; al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, p. 168 (the statues were placed near the two pillars[1] supporting the crown).


Ibid., for a German tr. of this part, see Rotter, op. cit., p. 130.

Al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, p. 261. The golden pearl from the treasury of the Fatimids is described again by al-Maqṣūdī (1364-1442), see P. Kahle, "Die Schätze der Fatimiden", ZDMG, N.S. XIV (1915), p. 358.

Al-Tabari, vol. XIII, p. 32 (p. 2452), n. 103.


Al-Tabari, vol. XIII, pp. 32-3 (pp. 2452-53).

Ibid., p. 33 (p. 2453).

Ibid., p. 94 (p. 2454); Ibn al-Athir, vol. II, p. 404.


The better-known among them is in the Islamic Museum in Berlin-Dahlem (L 4169); A similar carpet is in the Arthur M. Sackler Museum, Harvard University (Gift of Joseph V. McMullan, 1957). The earliest example of this group (dated to the seventeenth century) is in the Burrell Collection in Glasgow. For a discussion of this group of carpets, see W. Bode and E. Kühnel, Vorderasiatische Knipselplättchen aus alter Zeit (reprint Munich, 1985), pp. 333-7; Erdmann, "Entwicklung und der Orientteppich" (Berlin and Mainz, 1982), p. 131 (the author stresses the association between the "Garden Carpets" and the qif); G. Curatola, "Gardens and Garden Carpets: an Open Problem", Environmental Design III (1985), pp. 90-7. See also E. Blochet, "Note sur une tapiserrie arabe du VIIIe siècle", JRAS (1929), pp. 613-17.

A. Christensen, L'Iran sous les Sassanides (Copenhagen, 1936), pp. 496-9.


Cited by Le Strange, Palestine under the Moslems, p. 264.


This information is mainly taken from al-Maṣūdī's Meadows of Gold; for an Eng. tr. of this specific topic, see The Meadows of Gold: The Abbasids, tr. and ed. Paul Lunde and Caroline Stone (London and New York, 1989), p. 295. The stone is also mentioned by al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, pp. 185-6.

Al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, p. 355, n. 3.

Al-Tabari, vol. XV, tr. and annotated by R. Stephen Humphreys (Albany, 1990), pp. 78-90 (pp. 2872-84).

Al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, p. 179.

Ibid., pp. 162-3; see also the account of al-Maqrūzī in Kahle, "Die Schätze der Fatimiden", p. 359.

Al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, p. 189.

Ibid., p. 200.


Ibid.

The term zajjuf for 'awāni should not be necessarily explained as Egyptian glass; al-Ghuzūlī (died 1412) in his chapter on diamonds (aimūs) explained this term as referring to a whitish-yellow transparent glass. See idem, Mattāl al-budā'ī fi manāzīt al-sawr (Cairo, 1882-3), vol. II, p. 151 (cited by Lamm, Gläser und Steinschnitzarbeiten, vol. I, p. 510 (no. 111).

Al-Qaḍī al-Rashīd, p. 46. The same description is repeated by al-Ghuzūlī, op. cit., vol. II, p. 138; Lamm, who cited this account, stressed the Sasanian character of this vessel; see Gläser und Steinschnitzarbeiten, vol. I, p. 498 (no. 94).

The type of *tawthil* which reveals a similarity between an abstract idea and a concrete object is based on a similarity comprehended, or revealed, by the intellect, and resulting from analogies between correlations of the attributes rather than the attributes themselves.

al-Jurtjani, *Asrūr al-Balāgha* (11th century)¹

Two rock-crystal vessels, the first from St. Petersburg (Hermitage Museum, EG 938) and the second from Venice (S. Marco, Tesoro no. 99), are the two remaining medieval Islamic rock crystals which, presumably, were originally used as lamps.² The boat-shaped Fatimid rock crystal from St. Petersburg is 22 cm long and is adorned with delicate carving of vine scrolls and half-palmette leaves (fig. 1). In the fifteenth century it was mounted with gilded silver and enamel, probably in an Italian workshop, in order to serve as a goblet.³ The cylindrical tenth-century Iraqi (?) rock crystal from Venice, which is about 35 cm long (with mounting 49 cm) and 17 cm in diameter, is decorated on its upper part with a carved Kufic inscription invoking good wishes for the owner⁴ and on its lower part with a carved decorative band (fig. 2). A bulge at the bottom of the lamp was recarved in the second half of the thirteenth century and was concealed by a gilded silver filigree mounting, as the lamp was intended to serve as a vase in that church.⁵

The two lamps have a form very different from the common Islamic globular vase-like lamp. This unusual shape can be explained in part by the material from which they were made: the high price of rock crystal and the proficiency required of the carver meant that the manufacture of these precious objects was only patronized by royalty or nobility. Thus these artifacts were probably designed to individual taste, independent of the constraints which normally dictated the form of lamps in other materials. The lamp from St. Petersburg recalls the boat-shaped early Christian metal lamps with the curved handle, the Islamic name of which is *siraj* (سرافج). This kind of lamp might be placed on a ring foot which was usually supported by a stem or a sturdy

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Fig. 1. Lamp, possibly Fatimid Egypt. Carved rock crystal. St. Petersburg, Hermitage, EG 938. (Photo: Courtesy, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg)
disk from below or even hung on chains (fig. 3). The lamp from S. Marco was probably suspended with the help of chains and a metal ring, fixed around the upper rim of the cylindrical body (fig. 4). This kind of lamp seldom appears in medieval Islamic manuscript illustrations.

The aim of this paper is to investigate the meanings attached to rock-crystal lamps in the medieval Islamic world. The shortage of medieval Islamic rock-crystal lamps which survive to our own day governs the direction this research takes, mainly to medieval documents and to the plentiful surviving glass lamps, which to some extent make good this deficiency. From them it is possible to fill the vacuum with a hypothetical sketch of what they looked like and to get an idea of what the medieval Islamic attitude towards these precious objects was.

The earliest rock crystal lamp to be mentioned is probably the famous Qulaila which used to hang in the mihrab of the Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus. Al-Ghuzuli (d. 1412), who drew from earlier authors in his composition, al-Mu'adhdhin fi manazil al-surur, informs us that “in the mihrab of the Companions of the Prophet was a stone of crystal — and there are those who say that it was a precious stone or pearl (safir, durra, meaning big precious stone) — and its name was Qulaila (قليلة), and when the lamps [of the mosque] were extinguished this lamp was brightening for you with its own light.”10

According to him the lamp was brought by stealth to Baghdad during the reign of al-Amin (809–13), the son of Harun al-Rashid, who was a rock-crystal collector, and a glass lamp was sent to Damascus as a replacement.12 Al-‘Umari (d. 1348) provides us with quite similar information on Qulaila.13 He adds, quoting Bedouins who prayed in this mosque, that the Qulaila was sent back to Damascus by al-Ma'mun. At some later stage it was broken and replaced by a glass lamp, and as the latter suffered the same fate no further efforts were made to find a substitute.

Ibn Juhayr, who traveled to the east between the years 1183 and 1185, gives us the following detailed account of Islamic holy places and their interior decoration. In the south aisle, in front of the right-hand corner of the masjid of the Great Mosque of Damascus was to be found the head of Yahya ibn Za'qariya (John the Baptist). Above it, he goes on, “is a wooden chest that stands out from the column, and on which is a lamp that seemed to be of hol-

Fig. 2. Lamp, Iraq? 10th century. Carved rock crystal. Venice, San Marco. (Photo: Der Schatz von San Marco in Venedig)

Fig. 3. The lamp from St. Petersburg. A suggested reconstruction of its original state.
Ibn al-Najjar in his history of Medina (completed in 1197) tells us about the variety of lamps in the Prophet’s tomb. He enumerates more than forty silver lamps, two of crystal and one of gold. Another crystal lamp in a silver box is listed in the inventory of the Ka‘ba treasury which was ordered by Sultan Qaṣr Bay in 1476. These documents indicate that rock-crystal lamps were used in the major Islamic shrines. It is no wonder that rock crystal was used in connection with light, notably as lamps. The natural merit of rock crystal, namely its pellucidity, was considered by medieval Islamic physicists, such as Ibn al-Haytham (b. 965) to have reached the third degree of translucence below the most transparent substance, the celestial body, the first and the second degrees being attributed to air and water respectively. This enables it to absorb light without damaging the rays. Furthermore its ability to reflect light magnificently made it preferable to other materials. The description of the Qu‘aila’s own brilliance in the obscurity of the mihrab and al-Tifashi’s narrative about work in the rock-crystal mines near Kashghar which was made impossible in daytime by the reflection of the sun rays provide further confirmation of its renowned luminosity.

It is quite possible that the earliest recorded rock-crystal lamps were pre-Islamic products. The delicate carving of the Sasanian cameo of the Cup of Khusrar, datable to the sixth century A.D. (Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Monnaies, Médailles et Antiques), hints at the probable existence of a rock-crystal carving center in Mesopotamia before the rise of Islam. A manufacture of rock-crystal lamps probably existed in the Byzantine Empire. Some late-antique rock-crystal lamps which are excellently preserved are probably products of fifth-century Byzantine workshops. Most of these lamps are shaped in the form of sea creatures or decorated with marine scenes.

This “aquatic” iconography of pre-Islamic rock-crystal lamps might well be explained by the widespread Western conception that rock crystal was congealed water “petrified” in the course of a long and continuous natural process. This belief was adopted by Muslims in medieval times as well. For instance, al-Biruni explained the word crystal (maḥā or miḥā) as akin to water (al-mā), since both are pure and clear. As for its origin, he accepted the idea of congealed water. He added that the existence of leaves or ears of grain in rock-crystal bowls like the one he had was a proof of the earlier fluid state of the stone.

The dominant impression conveyed by the stone is one of water; thus in medieval Islamic poetry rock crystal

Fig. 4. The lamp from San Marco. A suggested reconstruction of its original state.
is compared more than once to water, raindrops, and the waves of the sea. One of Ibn al-Mu'tazz's poems, cited by al-Biruni in connection with rock crystal in Kitab al-jamahir fi ma'rifat al-jawahir, clearly illustrates this point:

أما رأيت حجاب الماء حين بدأ
كأنه تهبل البلور إذا انطلبا

Do you not see the waves of flowing water
As if they are a rock-crystal bowl [turned] upside down?

This poem of Ibn al-Mu'tazz could fit as a perfect poetical description of some late-antique rock-crystal bowls which served as lamps, especially of the bowl with the fish, shells, crabs and Medusa (?) in the treasury of S. Marco.

Though we do not possess any information on the shape of rock-crystal lamps in mosques, it is quite probable that they had the concave form of a bowl, a cup, a vase, or some other kind of container able to hold an inflammable liquid or to protect the light of a candle in it. The glass finds from Samarra, studied by Lamm, encourage this speculation. Fragments of suspended glass lamps which were hung with chains to a ceiling, either by glass ring handles attached to their bodies or, presumably, by a metal ring fixed to the rim of the glass, frequently have in common the form of a container.

Amongst these finds from Samarra two cup-formed glass lamps explain the system of lighting. The hollowed cylindrical glass tube affixed to their inner base served as a holder for a candle placed within. The high outer walls of the cup might have served as protection against the wind, and the relatively high tube within made it possible to fill the cup with water up to the very top of the tube; in this way the candle was extinguished as soon as it reached the water, thus avoiding any danger of fire (fig. 5). Water was frequently used in Byzantium and in the Islamic regions of the Near East for fire-proofing, especially for suspended lamps where the danger of fire is more acute. This system was not restricted to hanging lamps containing candles but is found in floating wick glass lamps as well. The latter were lit by means of oil floating on water and by various techniques of suspending a cotton wick in the oil. One well-known method was that of the wick holder, a metal S-shaped hook fixed to the cup's rim, but it is probable that the common system, still in use in the Middle East, of cotton wicks floating on oil with the help of cork and tin holders, was also used. In this floating-wick system the oil was continuously absorbed upward by the wick, the top of which was lit. As soon as the oil was completely finished, water extinguished the remaining flame (fig. 6).

The hanging rock-crystal vessel in a mosque, made out of a substance clearly linked to water and probably made safe by water, might have achieved an effect of supra-water, sparkling when the floating wick was lit.

The supreme clarity of the "rocky" limpid water, i.e., of rock crystal, was the reason behind medieval spiritual interpretations which tend to associate the mineral with paradise, the source of life and celestial scenes. In Genesis it is mentioned in connection with one of the four streams of Eden: "A river flowed from Eden to water the
garden, and from there it divided to make four streams. The first is named the Fishon, and this encircles the whole land of Havilah where there is gold. The gold of this land is pure; bdellium (crystal, رَجْذَب) and onyx stone are found there."36 In the Book of Revelation crystal is used to describe the river of life: "Then the angel showed me the river of life, rising from the throne of God and the Lamb and flowing crystal-clear."37 In one of the poems of the fourth-century poet Lactantius the Fountain of Life in the "far-off land" is described as follows: "... there is a fountain in the midst, the fountain of life they call it, crystal clear, gently flowing, rich in its sweet waters."38 Similar views were expressed in medieval Islam. The Arabic name of the stone (maha) which encompasses the words al-ma (water) and al-hawa (air) hints at the two elements of life embodied in that stone.39

Two verses of sura 37 which describe the destiny of the believers in paradise were cited by al-Biruni in connection with rock crystal. "They shall be served with a goblet filled at a gushing fountain, white, and delicious to those who drink it. It will neither dull their senses nor befuddle them."40 In one of the versions of the Persian passion plays (taziya) performed during the "Ashura" festivities al-Husayn will be welcomed in paradise by his father Ali who will offer him a crystal cup full of cool water from one of the rivers of paradise, the river Kauthar.41 Not only paradisiac water is offered in a crystal cup; Ja'far al-Sadiq (699–765) recommends enshrining the dry-powder elixir (al-iksir), the secret life-giving mixture, in a crystal or a gold capsule.42

These associations of rock crystal with the sources of life and the rivers of paradise might explain the presence of the "hollow crystal" lamp seen by Ibn Jubayr in the Damascus sanctuary of John the Baptist, the man so closely associated with the idea of baptism in water as an act of purification and as a spiritual rebirth. Furthermore, the reference of Ibn Jubayr to the presence of rock-crystal lamps in the Zamzam Dome emphasizes the link between rock crystal and holy water. To this day Zamzam water is drunk by pilgrims for its health-giving power. According to Muslim tradition the well is said to be the very one which was miraculously unveiled in the desert by the angel Gabriel in order to save the life of Hagar and her son Isma'il after they were evicted by Abraham. The Zamzam well is the "Wells of Life" which saved Hagar and Isma'il, the primordial mother and the son in Arab genealogy.43

Since we are concerned with rock-crystal lamps, this "suspended well" should be reexamined in connection with light, and the overlapping areas between the iconography of light and water should be investigated as well.

Sura 24:35 is the most cited verse of the Qur'an regarding light. It reads: "God is the light of the heavens and the earth. His light may be compared to a niche that enshrines a lamp, the lamp within a crystal of star-like brilliance. It is lit from a blessed olive tree neither eastern nor western. Its very oil would almost shine forth, though no fire touched it. Light upon light; God guides to his light whom He will."44 The idea of light as a life-giving source, i.e., a symbol of God, is widespread, and fire cults were and still are celebrated all over the world.45 In the Muslim world the divine light was condensed into the form of a transparent suspended mihrab lamp.

The iconography of the mihrab lamp is too vast to be discussed here; the meanings applied to this symbol varied over the course of the Middle Ages.46 Of no less importance is the role of water in the Qur'an; an abundance of water as well as light is a proof of God's existence. This idea appears frequently in the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms: "You strode across the sea, you marched across the ocean, but your steps could not be seen."47 Or: "Greater than the voice of ocean, transcending the waves of the sea, Yahweh reigns transcendent in the heights."48 It is expressed even more forcefully in Habakkuk: "For the country shall be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh as the waters swell the sea."49 In the Qur'an, rain, rivers, and ocean are all subject to God's will.50 Even more important is the emphasis on water as the source of life of any living creature and as the reviving fluid of Nature: "Are the disbelievers unaware that the heavens and the earth were but one solid mass which We tore asunder, and that We made every living thing of water? Will they not have faith?"51 "It was He who created man from water... and sent down pure water from the sky, so that We may give life to a dead land..."52 We may conclude that in the Qur'an, both water and light are regarded as the basic elements of life and reveal God's omnipotence in bestowing life.53

The visual effect achieved when these rock-crystal lamps were lit was probably impressive. Light was seen through water, whether the water which protects against fire or the "congealed water" of rock crystal. This effect of light seen through water captivated the medieval Muslim mind, resulting in fanciful and complicated medieval fairy-tale architecture in which the natural antagonism between the two was ostensibly annulled; these miraculous edifices belong to the realm of mechanical devices and are probably variations on the legendary
glass palaces of Solomon and Khusrau. Fortunately, the same idea of lighted water was visually expressed on the bottoms of Persian and Mamluk metal vessels used as water containers. Though the rock-crystal lamps belong to the *ars sacra* of the mosque and the metal vessels to the secular and mercantile level of Mamluk society, one can still study the meaning of the former through the latter. In the course of migrating into a secular context a religious symbol has somehow to be altered in its visual representation, usually by losing its non-figurative character and becoming simpler and easier to understand. The effect of light through water which characterizes rock-crystal mosque lamps is represented on the metal vessels through the motif of sun and fish. By studying this motif at its popular level we might be able to decipher the higher and sometimes even spiritual ideas behind combining light and water. The representation of sea creatures encircling solar symbols has been studied mainly by Richard Ettinghausen, D. S. Rice, and Eva Baer. All three point to the possibility that this motif is connected to the source of life or to paradise; Ettinghausen would like to see in it a variation on the "solar symbol" as a source of life. Rice, who deals with two vessels of the same kind, reads the outer verses, hinting at al-Husayn's being received with paradisiac water from his father's hand, and understands the entire decoration as a Shi'ite manifestation of eternal water. Baer suggests that folk tales popular among the Muslim bourgeoisie are visually reflected on these vessels and understands the motif as meaning a blessing for a good life. Her final piece of evidence, taken from Nizami's *Iskandar Nama*, in which water from the source of life in the land of darkness is made drinkable with the help of the sun rays, hints at the popular associations of sun and water with the source of life.

It is likely that the light seen through the water-like rock-crystal lamp was understood in medieval times as an allegory for the sparkling water in the legendary source of life. In the lighted rock-crystal lamp it was impossible to differentiate between light and water: water looked like waving rays of light, and rays of light looked like streams of water. The rock-crystal lamp probably corresponds to Nizami's poetical description of the Fountain of Life:

That fountain appeared like silver.
Like a silver stream which strains from the middle of the rock [the mountain-mine].
Not a fountain, which is far from this speech;
But if, verily, it were, it was a fountain of light [not of water].

This dualism between water and light led to confusion whereby, on the one hand, God who is actually light is compared in the Qur'an to a source of water, from which the unbelievers are unable to drink ("The idols to which the pagans pray give them no answer. They are like a man who stretches out his hands to the water and bids it rise to his mouth; it cannot reach it. Vain the prayers of the unbelievers") and, on the other hand, more than once, a transparent drinking vessel is compared to a lamp or to a source of light. Thus the drinker seems to drink light. Daqiqi, a tenth-century poet from Tus, expressed a similar thought:

Water and ice in crystal bowl combine:
Behold these three, which like a bright lamp shine.
Two deliquescent, one hard-frozen see,
Yet all alike of hue and bright of blee.

Asadi Tusi, another tenth-century poet from Tus, said:
"Then they retired to a garden for pleasure and feasting, . . . Goblets like moons in the hands of drinkers were sprinkling the jewels of the Pleiades." Three other poems of different lyricists are quoted by al-Biruni in his treatise on rock crystal. The first one is by Abu'l-Fadl al-Kaskari:

إِذْ أَرَادُوا حَجَرَةً تَجَلَّىَ فِي نَارٍ وَطَارَةً
فَكَرَوْا بِهَا وَتَكَرَّرُوا

The wine on top of hand is like a lamp,
overflowing with rays and flames and radiance.
The beholder considers it, because of its unity with its beaker, that it is there [exists] without any vessel.

The second one is by Ibn al-Mufazzaz:

فَمَرَّتْ الصّمَوْلْ فِي يَدَّ مَرْضِيَّةَ يَدْبِرُهَا
مِنْ شَرَابٍ كَانَتْ كَلَّامِصًا

A chilled [wine] [shines] like rays of sun in a beaker, like a mirror.

The confusion between a transparent drinking vessel and a transparent lamp might have its roots in the development of the suspended lamp. The first hanging lamps were shaped like a drinking vessel. These early sus-
pended lamps, which were usually lit at sunset (sometimes even by Jews\(^{22}\)), fulfilled a further purpose during the daytime, when the lamp was extinguished. In one of the documents relating to the caliphate of 'Abd al-Malik we are told that the oily liquid of the lamps in the Dome of the Rock, whether tamarisk, myrobalan, or jasmine oil, had such a pleasing smell that the pilgrims perfumed themselves with it.\(^{23}\) Despite this evidence of the dual function of the early drinking-vessel lamp, the fact that the transparent, single-hanging Islamic lamp retained throughout the centuries the form of a drinking vessel — the most frequent one is the jug lamp (\textit{qandil} or \textit{misbāḥ})\(^{24}\) which looks like a suspended water jug with its useless flat and stable base — hints at the possibility that this ambiguous shape evoked two ideas at the same time; it was both a source of light and a source of water.

A colorless glass lamp from Iran, datable to between the eighth and the tenth century (Copenhagen, David Collection, 14/1964) seems to illustrate this assumption (fig. 7). The fluid-like decorative glass loops which are attached to the lamp’s body give the impression of dripping water flowing out of a vessel.\(^{25}\) Moreover, the Syrian enamel beakers manufactured in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries which simultaneously served as drinking vessels or lamps\(^{26}\) — some of them decorated with fish, like the thirteenth-century enamel beaker from Damascus or Aleppo (Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf,

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Fig. 7. Lamp, Iran? 10th century. Yellowish glass. Copenhagen, David Collection, 14/1964. (Photo: Courtesy David Collection, Copenhagen)

Fig. 8. Beaker. Probably Syria, 13th-14th century. Enamel glass. Düsseldorf, Kunstmuseum im Ehrenhof, Heinrich Glass Museum, P1939-17. (Photo: Walter Klein; Courtesy Kunstmuseum, Düsseldorf)
It is not surprising to discover that the two remaining Islamic rock-crystal lamps also share the form of a drinking vessel. The form of the boat-shaped lamp from St. Petersburg probably derives from the shape of primitive Mesopotamian lamps which were actually cut-open conch shells. Some of these primitive lamps were unearthed in Ur and are datable to the fourth millennium B.C. (they are now in the British Museum). The inner whorls of the conch shell which were cut away recall the boat shape of the St. Petersburg lamp, and the natural orifice was replaced by a carved tube. Conch shells were frequently used as drinking vessels as well as lamps. Thus the shift of function from a lamp to a drinking vessel in the sixteenth century is understandable. A cone-shaped vessel with a lower bulge, similar to the crystal lamp from the S. Marco treasury, is to be found in one of the painted twelfth-century panels of the Cappella Palatina ceiling in Palermo. A frontal sitting figure raises both arms, holding one vessel in each hand. Although the shape of the vessels corresponds to that of a lamp, the vessels are undoubtedly drinking vessels.

All these facts suggest that the rock-crystal lamp was conceived by the pious Muslim not only as the sacred crystal or glass lamp of sura 24 but also as a drinking vessel, made of paradisiac water, full of luminous water like the clear, pure and sacred water of Eden. Ibn Juhayr was correct when he described the lamp in the sanctuary of John the Baptist as "[seeming] to be of hollow crystal, and like a large drinking vessel."}

**NOTES**

nisches Museum, Cologne (Milan, 1984), pp. 272–81 (cat. no. 36). A pegged beaker of carved rock crystal in the Kestner Museum in Hanover was considered to be a Fatimid lamp (I would like to express my thanks to Dr. Helga Hübschmen-Mlynek from the Kestner Museum who sent me a photograph of, and literature related to, this vessel); see R. Schmidt, “Die Hedwigsgläser und die verwandten mittelalterlichen Glas- und Kristallnachbauten,” Jahrbuch des schlesischen Museums für Kunstgewerbe und Altertumskunde, 6 (1912), p. 76, fig. 27, and Lamm, Mittelalterliche Gläser, pl. 61, no. 16. The piece was formerly a part of the treasury of the Luneburg church where it served as a relic container. Its form recalls, as far as I am able to judge from the photograph, a typical Islamic candlestick with a bell-formed base and a short neck.


5. For the illustration of the recurved beaker, see Erdmann, “Opere islamiche,” pl. XXIV/a.


7. Lamm translates durr as “perl” and points out that al-Ghuzuli uses the word durr to describe any big precious stone. See Lamm, Mittelalterliche Gläser, pl. 1:3.

8. Al-i-Han b. al-Mahdi, Kitab al-Ghuzuli, Matbii' al-hadath fi manazil al-umur, vol. 2 (Cairo, 1882–83), p. 284. Lamm translates the name Qahla in this passage as “the little vase” (ibid.). This name, though written with qaf and not with kaf, might be derived from the saying that the lamp was shining in the maharab every night (khalaj). A small rock-cystal vase, the upper projecting rims of which might hint at its use as a lamp, is in the S. Marco treasury; see Il Teatro, cat. no. 84.


11. Ibid., al-Qadi al-Rashid (1052–71) informs us of the unfortunate end of this stone — al-Mahdi gave it to his slave girl Hana who cut it into two dice for backgammon. See G. H. Quadami, “A Medieval Islamic Book of Gifts and Treasures: Translation, Annotation and Commentary on the Kitab al-Hidaya wa al-Tubah,” Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1990, p. 189, para. 218. This marvelous story of a light-giving precious stone might derive from the Alexander legend in which Alexander, on his way back from the Land of Darkness, found a luminous stone in the belly of a fish. The stone shines on its own; therefore Alexander made a lamp out of it which he used at night. See J. Kuska, Das Steinbuch der Astrolabisten (Heidelberg, 1912), p. 8.


13. Ibid., p. 96.


15. The Arabic medieval term biyqandah is mentioned in the Geniza letters; see S. D. Goitein, A Mediterranean Society, vol. 4 (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, 1983), p. 133. For an illustration of an Islamic polychrome candlestick, see Richard Ettinghausen, “Sacred and Islamic Metalwork in Baltimore,” Apollo 84 (1966): 466, fig. 6. The term zajj, which appears in the cases of the Zamzam Dome and Qasr Sa'id, and the term hllit, in the case of the sanctuary of John the Baptist, were both translated by Broadhurst as “crystal.” For the Arabic text, see Abu'l-Hasan Muhammad ibn Jhubayr, Rihla (Leiden, 1907), pp. 101, 329, 273.


17. Ibid.


22. A fish-shaped rock-cystal lamp, datable to the fifth century A.D., is in the treasury of S. Marco (no. 343): Il Teatro, pl. 61, cat. no. 77, for a color plate, see Der Schatz von San Marco, p. 94, with bibliography. A shell-shaped rock-cystal lamp was found in 1344 in the grave of Empress Maria (the a. d. 497); see G. B. de Rossi, “Disegni d'alchimie vasi del mondo mistichie sepolto con Maria moglie dell'Imperatore,” Bollettino d’Archaeologia Cristiana 1 (1863): 33. Rock-cystal lamps decorated with animal creatures are to be found in the treasury of S. Marco (no. 50); see Der Schatz von San Marco, pp. 90–93 (with bibliography), and in New York (Metropolitan Museum of Art, bequest of Mrs. William H. Moore, 1955, 53.135.7.); see Age of Spiritu aliti, exhibition catalogue, Metropolitan Museum of Art, ed. Kurt Weitzmann (New York, 1979), cat. no. 186.


25. Ibid., p. 335.

26. Ibid., p. 341–42.

27. Ibid., p. 355–56.

28. The poem was translated by Kahle into German: “Sichst du nicht die Wellen des Wassers, wenn sie erscheinen, als ob sie eine Bergkristallschale wären, wenn sie umgedreht ist?” ibid., p. 355.

29. See above n. 22.


32. Lamm, Samara, nos. 148.1, N. 547; 197.1, N. 552.

33. Ibid., p. 35.


35. Al-Samhudi vividly describes an incident in the mosque of Medina, which goes back to the time of the Prophet. Two persons, Tamim al-Dari and his servant Abu'l-Barrad, brought from Syria lamps, oil, and chains. On Thursday night the lamps were hung in the mosque of Medina, and water, oil, and wicks were put in them by Abu'l-Barrad. On Friday, when the Prophet entered the mosque, he was so astonished by the bril-
liance of the lamps that he addressed to Tamim and said: "You have illuminated Islam, as Allah enlightened your path" (this incident was quoted by M. Clermont-Ganneau, "La Lampe et l’Olivier dans le Coran," in Revue d’Histoire des Religions 81 (1920): 259; on the floating-wick lighting system, see F. W. Robbins, The Story of the Lamp (and the Candle) (London, New York, Toronto, 1939), pp. 75–79; for a color illustration of a tenth-century Byzantine floating-wick lamp, see Ernst Kitzinger, Early Medieval Art (London, 1983), pl. 9.

36. Genesis 2: 10–12; The word melam qu was understood as pearl in the Hebrew translation of the Stone Book of Aristotle; see Raskin, Steinbuch des Aristoteles, pp. 62–65. Rabbinical commentators identify the river Phison in Eden with the Nile, thus the land of Havilah would be Egypt; see Goitene, Mediterraen Society, 4: 200, n. 357; St. Jerome identifies the river Phison as the Ganges; F. A. Wright, Selected Letters of St. Jerome (London-New York, 1933), p. 460.


40. Ibid., p. 329; sura 37: 46–47.

41. D. S. Rice, "Two Unusual Mamluk Metal Works," Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 20 (1957): 493. The Shi‘ite association of rock crystal with paradise could hint at the meaning which might have been attached to royal Fatimid rock-crystal tableware; many pieces of which are in Christian-church treasures.

42. J. Raskin, Arabische Alchemisten II: Ḥ alf fur al-Sūdār, des sechste Inam (Heidelberg, 1924), p. 118.


44. Though the term zaqāja (زاقة) is translated by Palmer as glass, I chose Dawood’s translation: N. J. Dawood, The Koran (Hammondsworth Penguin Classics, 1990). For a discussion of this verse and especially on the polychromed term misbaha (مسبحة, niche) which could be translated as metal carapace (metal shell) and thereby might suggest a suspended lamp, see Clermont-Ganneau, La Lampe, pp. 217–22.


49. Ibid., 93: 4.


52. Ibid., 21: 31.

53. Ibid., 25: 54.

54. Ibid., 25: 48–49.

55. The idea of life-giving water can be found in many Christian theological commentaries; see mainly Underwood, "Fountain of Life," pp. 43–138.

56. Among these spectacular inventions is a fountain of light which was in the eleventh-century house of the Cordovan Samuel ibn-Naghibh. From the fountain’s head, water fell in the form of a dome upon an alabaster floor; lights were set in that "dome" and on its top was a wax light. On this fountain and the glass, water, and light pavilion of Yahya ibn Isma’îl al-Ma’rîm from Toledo (1043–75), see F. P. Bargueñu, "The Alhambra Palace of the Eleventh Century," Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes 19 (1956): 210–12, n. 60.

57. For Surat the reflection of the sun in a pool of water was an allegory for being (the phenomenal world) reflected in nothing; see E. G. Browne, A Literary History of Persia (London, 1902), p. 139.


62. Ibid., p. 27.

63. Abü Muhammad Ibars Ibn Yusuf Nizâm al-Dîn, Sîhâb al-Nasr, e born or Book of Alexander the Great, trans. and annotated H. Wilberforce Clarke (London, 1881), canto 69, 21, 22, p. 80; in the term "Fountain of Light" appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in Qumran and are dated to the first century A.D. In Hadîqat (الحديقة), 3: 18–19, the fountain of life became a fountain of light: "And a fountain of light was an eternal source of life, all the wicked will be burned in the sparks of its splendour" (هدايق الوردة ل-information, ...). See D. Flussers, Jewish Sources in Early Christianity (Tel Aviv, 1971), p. 102 (in Hebrew). The connection between light and the fountain of life is attested in Psalms 36: 9: "Yes, with you is the fountain of life, by your light we see the light." Even the modern glass-cystal lamps, many of which adorn old and modern mosques, keep this tradition of the "fountain of light." The drop-like and sharply cut glass-cystal pieces of which the entire lamp is made recall an elaborate water fountain with its glittering droplets.

64. Qur’an 13: 14.


67. All were translated by Kahle, Bergkristall, pp. 326–27.


69. "Es lief in ihnen [den Bechern] ein gelber karchitischer [Wein aus Karch], so leuchtend als ob er in seinem Becher brennte..." ibid., p. 327.
70. “Ein gekühlt[er] [Wein] [leuchttend] gleich Sonnenstrahlen in einem Becher, wie eine Luftspiegelung...” ibid., p. 327.


73. Ibid., p. 147; perfume-burning lamps were used by Christians as well. See J. Wilkinson, Jerusalem Pilgrims before the Crusades (Jerusalem, 1977), p. 83; G. Soulier, Les influences orientales dans la peinture toscane (Paris, 1924), p. 60, n. 2.

74. The term qandil is more general and refers to any single suspended lamp. Misbah is the specific name for a globular-shaped suspended lamp. For this definition and for the development of the jug lamp, see D. S. Rice, “Studies in Islamic Metal Work V,” Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies 17 (1955): 206–31.

75. A colorless glass mosque lamp with thread designs on its handles (similar to the one from Copenhagen) was exhibited in the Islamic Art Gallery of the King Faisal Center for Research and Islamic Studies in Riyadh; see The Unity of Islamic Art, exhibition catalogue (Westerham, 1985), cat. no. 139. Another one is in Jerusalem in the L. A. Mayer Memorial Institute for Islamic Art, G83, and a simpler one in the Düsseldorf Kunstmuseum, the Hentrich Glass Collection, P. 1973-91. For illustrations and related literature on this kind of mosque lamp, see Axel von Saldern, Kunstvermacht Düsseldorf, Glassammlung Hentrich, Antike und Islam (Düsseldorf, 1974), p. 213, cat. no. 324.

76. Lamm, Mittelalterliche Gläser, vol. 2, pls. 127 (7), 128 (1-3), 138 (1, 7), 141 (3-5), 163 (4, 5), 164 (1, 2, 6), 166 (7, 8), 167 (4), and a glass lamp decorated with fish, pl. 115 (13). For a discussion of this group of enamel vessels, see W. B. Honey, “A Syrian Glass Goblet,” Burlington Magazine 50 (1927): 289-94.

77. A similar standing lamp in the shape of a ewer is in the art gallery of the University of Notre Dame; see Islam and the Medieval West, exhibition at the University Art Gallery of New York State (New York, 1975), cat. no. 26. On such ewer lamps, see J. W. Allan, Metalwork of the Islamic World: The Avon Collection (London, 1986), p. 126, cat. no. 32; G. Fehérvári, Islamic Metalwork of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Kir Collection (London, 1976), cat. no. 54 (both of them point to additional comparative material); and A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, “Les Bronzes du Khorassan 3,” Studia Iranica 4 (1975): 198–201, figs. 9–11. I would like to express my thanks to Mrs. Ulrike al-Khamis who drew my attention to the Geniza letters where a description of a lamp vase, owned by Yemenite Jews, can be found: “The Jews of San'a, Yemen, had a lamp consisting of an upper smaller container for oil and a wider, hollow, and open base. When not used as a lamp, the vessel was turned upside down and served as a vase for flowers,” see Goitein, Mediterranean Society 4: 150.


79. For a drawing of this panel, see F. Gabrielli and U. Scerrato, Gli arabi in Italia (Milan, 1979), p. 290. For an illustration, see U. Monneret de Villard, Le pittura musulmana al soffito della Cappella Palatina in Palermo (Rome, 1950), fig. 199.