About the journal

Hadeeth ad-Dar is a publication of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah. Every year, the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah organises a series of lectures known as the Cultural Season. Hadeeth ad-Dar was created to share these lectures with academic and cultural institutions and Friends of the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah around the world. Cultural Season 18 will get underway in September 2012 and, as with previous years, will present scholars in a wide variety of fields related to arts and culture in the Islamic world.

The Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is a government cultural organisation based on a Kuwaiti private art collection. Since its inception in 1983, DAI has grown from a single focus organisation created to manage the loan of the prestigious al-Sabah Collection of art from the Islamic world to the State of Kuwait to become an internationally recognised cultural organisation.

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Fragment from a garment trimming of silk and metal thread tapestry weave.
Eastern Iranian World
6th - 7th century AH/12th - 13th century CE
Baluch Healing Ritual and Trance Music

Jean During
Presented in English
8 February 2010

The purpose of this lecture is to get you acquainted with the culture of a people, a nation which is among the less known in the region, in spite of its remarkable poetic and musical culture. The main reason for this fact is that Baluch people could not maintain a political stability which would have led to the creation of a Baluch State ideally located both in Pakistan and Iran. Among the factors which prevented the solidification of their political desire for autonomy and unity, we can list the very hard conditions of existence due to a desert climate, the lack of natural resources, and a population scattered on an immense territory - part of which is controlled by local chief of war, and finally tribal structures and ethnic-linguistic diversity.

Baluchistan is the name of a great province in south-east Iran, and also of Pakistan where it covers 40% of the whole country. Its population is estimated at 12 millions, speaking 2 or 3 main variants of a tongue close to Kurdish, with ancient Iranian idioms. Culturally we can distinguish two main areas: the North, which extends beyond the Afghan border, and the South, called Makran. Makran is a more hospitable and quiet place, open to the Oman Sea and therefore, a zone of exchanges and trade which culminates in Karachi.

All my fieldwork in Baluchistan has been done in this area, where the music is quite different and richer than that in the North. I started in Iran (Saravan, Zahedan, Rask, later Chahbahar and Gawader) focusing on healing and Sufi music. Many years later, I rebooted my investigations during several stays in Karachi, the most fascinating place for the study of trance music and rituals. In addition to my musicological and anthropological approach, I considered it my duty to defend the Baluchi culture, and to contribute to the spread of their music through CDs and concerts tours in Europe and USA. I wish I could make a professional film on healing and trance ceremony, but with the degradation of the social and political climate in Pakistan and Iran, it is highly risky. Furthermore, in both Iran and Pakistan, the Baluchis are viewed as marginal and rebellious, and musicians hold a low social status, linked to their ethnic origin.

Actually, Baluchis are a widely open people who absorbed many different ethnic groups living in the same semi-desert space. One of these groups which can be labelled proto-gypsies, is said to come from Western India; they provided the native Baluchis with their skills in carpentry and wood work, jewellery making, instrumental music and vocal arts. While being fully Baluchi, they all belong to a social group called the astli (masters) which is scattered within a few Baluchi tribes like the Zangeshahi, the Dawudi and the Rend.

When you chat with a professional musician, he often says that for seven generations there have been musicians in his family, and he can recite their names. My impression is that seven ascendants is a symbolic reduction, as in fact, there is reason to think that some musicians have 40 or 70 ascendants. I mean that some families could well hold musical competence going back thousands of years, transmitted over dozens of generations. The same could be said about the European gypsies and tziganes.

According to ancient Iranian chronicles dating from the fifth century CE, “To please his people, the Persian King Bahram Cur (d. 438) asked the Indians to send him 12 thousand, musicians men, women and children from the caste of the Luli. The King gave them livestock and grain so that they can practice their art free of charge for the poor” (Mujmal al-Taviirkh cit. Boyce, 1957: 11).

The casts of musicians, coming from India to Pakistan and Iran, finally were absorbed into the Baluchis who, by the 12th century, were pushed East from Centre and North Iran. They were most probably of the same origin as those who reached Europe through two routes: a northern one, crossing Turkey and the Balkans, and a southern one, crossing Egypt (that’s why they are called gypsies) and finally settling in Spain.

In all the countries where they settled, these gypsies adopted the local musical idiom and performed the people’s music with outstanding talent and skill. It seems there is something in their genetic code (they would say in their blood) which, above cultural conditioning, is reflected in their performance style, regardless of which music they play or sing. For the experts, this affinity of style, mood or spirit is obvious even between very distant traditions. For instance Baluchi singing and rhythm has something in common with flamenco, and tzigane violin reflects something of the Baluchi fiddle. In their daily life, tziganes, gypsies and luli from Baluchistan, share other common features upon which I won’t elaborate, as we are here to discover some aspect of their music.

So let’s start with the instruments.

The main instrument of the Baluchis, is the sorud, a bowed fiddle with 4 strings plus 6 to 8 sympathetic strings. It is found in folk music of India and Nepal (sarinda) but in the hands of the Baluchi osti, its shape and sonority rose up to the level of a highly sophisticated professional instrument.
the accuracy of tuning is lower. In general, it is better to use only 2 instruments plus a drum.

I won’t elaborate about the different genres of Baluchi music. It’s enough to say that, like in many cultures there are festivals songs, love songs, and also epic singing/narration which is the most difficult genre. We find some purely instrumental tunes too, some dance tunes, and last but not least, two genres of Sufi songs: the ghazals, which are sung mostly in Persian, and a second repertoire for devotion.

In Arabic music, any tune is based on scale variations or modes, the number of which varies. In Baluchistan, true masters also have a thorough knowledge of modes, except that they call their modes zahirig. With the help of Abdurahman Surizehi, I could list around 25 zahirig on which it is possible to improvise or to compose any melodies. These zahirig sound quite close to Indian raga, but they are purely Baluchi.

The Baluchis use music in most aspects of their lives, including religious practices like exorcisms. For example, a person falls ill and the doctors cannot cure her or him. Then a mullah is consulted and sometimes in a language foreign to the patient and sometimes in a language foreign to the patient (Hindi, Urdu, Arabic). At this stage, the khalife will conclude that the case is not the result a spirit attack.

When the patient does go into a trance, the phase of dance or frenzy may go on for over an hour, until the patient is, as they say, “sated”, “filled” and collapses onto the ground. This process has to be repeated 2 or 3 nights in succession. Generally at the very end, the spirit is interrogated. He speaks through the mouth of the patient in a strange voice and sometimes in a language foreign to the patient (Hindi, Urdu, Arabic). At this stage, the khalife will bargain with him and find an agreement.

“You have had a session, music, blood (a sheep has been sacrificed), what more do you need to leave this sick person in peace and to stop causing him to suffer?”.

Sometimes the spirit will answer by demanding that the patient wear anklets in his honour, a red kerchief or a ring. If the condition is accepted, the spirit will consent to leave the sufferer in peace for a few year after which the sacrifice and the bargain will be renewed.

At this stage of my description, let’s identify more accurately the actors of the ritual. The main one is the shaman, khalife who may be a woman. They are people who have been bothered in their youth by a harmful spirit (sometimes two or three), causing physical or mental damages. As their cases were very serious, they have undergone a long set of sessions over the course of several years, thus gaining a close familiarity with the domain of spirits and trance states. After some training with a shaman, they eventually come through a heavy initiation ceremony (called tobbok), which is performed seven nights in a row.

Some Baluchis seem to have an hereditary aptitude to get into trance, even if there are not much involved in the shamanic or dervish milieu. There is a large family near Karachi, in which 5 or 6 members were potentially khalifes. For them, going into a trance seems very easy and natural.

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When a patient (most often a woman) comes to consult the khalife, the khalife gives him/her a mixture of plants which should be rubbed on the body before sleeping. If after the fourth night there is amelioration, the person has a connection with a spirit and a séance with the appropriate music must be done.

Thus the person will go into trance, and the spirits will stop harming him/her. Music should be played for one or two nights, a few hours each time.

During a trance session, shoes must be removed as the delineated space is considered as sacred as a mosque. Participants are not allowed to smoke for the same reason.

A special stick, known as the sacred pike, is used during the ceremony as the explicit symbol...
of the presence of the protector saint. It is present in all the rites that are developed in Karachi and is presented by the khalife during the session. The participants’ attitude toward this pike is comparable to that of the devout in front of an idol or an icon. Around the pike’s branches, the khalife places a garland of red flowers. Most participants, upon entering in trance, go toward this pike as if to pay homage. During the session, the khalife makes the patient drink hot milk on which he prayed.

When the khalife enters the trance state (it is significant that no one goes in trance before the khalife out of respect), he is no longer himself. He is the “other”; he is possessed by the spirit who is presented by the khalife during the session. The dimension. In this state of consciousness, he/she has surpassed the state of crisis involved by the entry into trance, and is able to communicate with others in an apparent normal manner.

At some point, the khalife is given a bundle of threads which he blesses, and starts making knots on which he blows some air from his mouth. These threads will be saved and used as protection, tied around the wrist or around a musical instrument. People may also consult the khalife about their problems and receive a special band blessed by him.

The goat, sacrificed as part of the trance session, is never dedicated to the spirits, and some says that only the blood spread on the ground will go to them. Unlike Voodoo rituals where the victim energy is seized from the sacrificed animal, in the Baluchi ritual it means simply a pious act in offering a good meal for the community.

The only established fact is that the “Arabian Alexanders” originate from the same prototype, the tetradrachm of Alexander the Great. On these we find, on the obverse, the head of Heracles facing right and wearing the pelt of a lion, and, on the reverse an enthroned Zeus seated left, holding an eagle and a scepter. Alexandrou is inscribed in Greek to his right, and, in the field, different marks and monograms (figure 1). These coins are made of good quality silver and are based on the Attic standard where the tetradrachm weighed a little more than 17 grams.

These coins represent an abundant emission of imitations starting in the 2nd century B.C. and continued to be struck also by the first Seleucid kings of Syria. It is, of course, for this reason that many neighbouring regions of the Seleucid kingdom, such as Arabia, chose to imitate it.

The “Arabian Alexanders”, with respect to their typology, style, origin, and, of course, dating, still raise more questions than they provide answers. These coins, whatever their denomination, tetradrachm, drachm or obol, show the main elements of the Alexander prototype: the head of Heracles on the obverse and a seated character on the reverse. The Arab series, however, do not show the Greek bearded Zeus, but, rather, a youthful beardless character, which was identified rightly as the great Arab deity Shams or Shamsh. The head looks much like that of the Seleucid “seated Apollo” issues contemporary with some of the Alexander imitations. The seated deity usually holds an eagle - as in the prototypes - but may also carry a myron (a kind of drinking vase), a small horse or even a long pipe (figure 2). The different inscriptions and monograms in the field may be in Greek, in South Arabian or Aramaic. There are also marks or symbols such as a small palm tree, palm leaves or a tiny bucranium.

Stylistically speaking, the differences are even more numerous. Some series are evident copies but others might seem altogether unrelated to the prototype. One should emphasize that these variations - radical as they may seem - are not due to chronological factors. As we shall see later, differences appeared as early as the very first
coinages. They became more and more numerous throughout the following centuries.

The only evidence in our possession is that provided by archaeology: stratigraphic finds and hoards of coins. Archaeology, however, is not always of great help. Monetary finds undoubtedly provide evidence for the dating of the coins but are of little support when it comes to identifying their issuing authority. However, although the data are not always complete, excavations carried out in the last few years have provided new and valuable evidence.

With only one exception, the geographical and political origins of these coinages are never indicated on the coins themselves. Here again, archaeological findings have provided precious information, though some questions remain unanswered. As already said, circulated in regions often far away from their minting place.

Let us start then with the coinages of North-East Arabia, amongst which we shall first consider the ‘Alexanders’ found in the island of Failaka, ancient Ikaros of the Greeks, in modern day Kuwait. Danish archaeologists working there during the sixties found two small hoards of coins in the Seleucid fortress that, apart from Seleucid issues, each contained a number of imitations of the Alexander type. The first hoard comprised one tetradrachm of Seleucus II in the fashion of Alexander and three tetradrachms of Antiochos III similar to those of the first hoard. With these hoards we must add several isolated coin finds from this site: some tetradrachms, a unique drachm with horizontal shin, and several coins in the name of Abyatha. All this shows that these different types of coins circulated on the island.

Among the coins found at Ikaros/Failaka, the imitations with horizontal shin series are typologically and stylistically very close to the Alexander type and, due to their similar fabric, appear as a very homogeneous production. But we can also observe a certain general clumsiness, possibly due to the inexperience of the craftsmen in charge of engraving the dies, which themselves were probably modelled on an imitation of the original Alexander type. Also, because the Greek name of Alexander is rendered incorrectly, we may assume that the engravers were not familiar with that language. On the other hand, they obviously knew the South Arabian script - both in South Arabian - in addition to the object interpreted as a pipe. These differences aside, the series are typologically and stylistically close to the Alexander prototype, in particular the obverse. Nevertheless, some details on the reverse, such as the footstool on which the feet of the seated figure rest are present on some Seleucid “Alexanders” which are perhaps their prototype.

The area of circulation of Abyatha’s coins was problematic. The main differences with the Alexander type are the inscription and the letter in the left field - both in South Arabian - in addition to the object interpreted as a pipe. These differences aside, the coins are typologically and stylistically close to the Alexander prototype, in particular the obverse. Nevertheless, some details on the reverse, such as the footstool on which the feet of the seated figure rest are present on some Seleucid “Alexanders” which are perhaps their prototype.

The coins in the name of Abyatha are more problematic. The main differences with the Alexander type are the inscription and the letter in the left field - both in South Arabian - in addition to the object interpreted as a pipe. These differences aside, the coins are typologically and stylistically close to the Alexander prototype, in particular the obverse. Nevertheless, some details on the reverse, such as the footstool on which the feet of the seated figure rest are present on some Seleucid “Alexanders” which are perhaps their prototype.

The coins in the name of Abyatha’s coins was apparently much larger than that of the series with horizontal shin. Some specimens were found in Saudi Arabia and even at Mleiha in the Oman peninsula (emirate of Sharjah).

Who was then Abyatha? In an article published in 1974, Christian Robin thought of Abyatha as a ruler from or of Hagar, a kingdom he places in Northern Arabia, possibly situated in the region of Dumat Al-Jandal, on a caravan route that may have linked the Gulf, via Nabhataea, to the Mediterranean.

Let me now turn to another series, mentioned briefly above, bearing the complete name of the god Shams on the reverse in South Arabian and, to the right, Alexander’s name in Greek (figure 4). Of these, only few specimens are known, indicating a limited production. Typologically and stylistically, they faithfully reproduce the Alexander prototype and may even have been direct copies. As we have already seen, they may well have served as a model for the horizontal shin imitations from Ikaros/Failaka and vice versa, in all probability, a little older. In fact, most scholars have placed the beginning of their production at 240-220 BCE.

Before discussing their attribution in more detail, we must consider another, but very similar series. The coins in question have on the reverse the South Arabic letter shin placed vertically in the right position to the left of the seated figure, and the Greek name of Alexander to its right (figure 5). As has been repeatedly suggested, this shin is obviously meant to represent the first letter of the full name Shams.

We know of a considerable quantity of these vertical shin coins, ranging from faithful and good quality imitations, as is the case with the 200 specimens of the Qal’at Bahrain hoard, to very mediocre specimens in bronze with completely abstract images. We may therefore conclude that this type was struck over a long period and circulated within a wide area. While practically all coins of this type come from the area of Thadj in Saudi Arabia, they have also been recorded in Tylos/Bahrain, in the Oman Peninsula, in Ikaros/Failaka and in hoards from away regions such as Susa in Iran. This must surely have been a dominant coinage in the Gulf area, struck by an influential power that controlled a great part of the commercial routes over many centuries. It is obviously the town of Gheria that
we must consider as a prime candidate for having issued this series.

If Gerrha was already an important stopover on the main trade routes linking India and South Arabia with Seleucid Mesopotamia, then certainly the political situation at the end of the third century BC must have further helped its development into a regional power. The Gerrhaeans probably exploited the situation to their advantage by striking their own coins in order to free themselves, if not of the Seleucid yoke, of Seleucid economic control. Moreover, all the Seleucid territories lying between the Gulf and the eastern part of Syria had come under control of the usurper Molon by the beginning of 222 BCE, leading to an interruption of large parts of the traditional routes. The Gerrhaeans may have tried to solve this problem by developing new routes, in particular to the west, towards Nabataea and the Mediterranean Sea. If this was the case, it would favour the localisation of Abyatha’s territory in the region of Dumal al-Jandal, which would thus have served as a stopover on such a route. It would also explain the presence of coins of Abyatha at Thadji/Gerrha and Ikaros/Falakia. This new route, if it ever existed, would have been completely controlled by Arabs, without any influence from the Ptolemies of Egypt.

It is here that we have to come back to Antiochos III one of the major political figure at the end of the third century BCE. As we have already seen, it has become a practically established fact that he undertook a military campaign in Arabia around 205-204 BCE, shortly after the end of his great oriental expedition. According to the historian Polybius, one of the aims of the expedition was to try to solve this problem by developing new routes, in particular to the west, towards Nabataea and the Mediterranean Sea. If this was the case, it would favour the localisation of Abyatha’s territory in the region of Dumal al-Jandal, which would thus have served as a stopover on such a route. It would also explain the presence of coins of Abyatha at Thadji/Gerrha and Ikaros/Falakia. This new route, if it ever existed, would have been completely controlled by Arabs, without any influence from the Ptolemies of Egypt.

The style of these coins, as well as the presence of a South Arabian letter shin, led the authors of this paper to suppose that they may have been issued at Gerrha as a result of Antiochos’ passage through Arabia, and this is admittedly an attractive hypothesis. Until now, we know of only three coins for this coinage which was probably issued in small numbers, as already indicated by the apparently very basic techniques employed in their production. They may have been issued by the newly subjugated Gerrhaeans in an attempt to gain the favours of the king.

Let us now go back to the first series with vertical South Arabic letter shin (figure 7); the Qal’at Bahrain hoard contained an abundant number (more than 200) of the finest specimens. These are faithful imitations of good quality of Alexander prototypes, albeit with some slight aberrations such as the South Arabian letter shin and the awkward spelling of Alexander’s name on the reverse, all exactly as in Ikaros/Falakia. This shows that the engravers, certainly clever, were unfamiliar with the Greek language, and more with South Arabian, which makes the attribution of these coins to Gerrha acceptable.

In an article of 1994, I assume that this coinage with the vertical shin was struck in Tylos/Bahrain but, finally, the attribution of the coins with the name of Shams in full and those with vertical shin to Gerrha instead of Tylos/Bahrain raises a serious problem. However with this new attribution, Tylos/Bahrain lost its coinage. To this, I would suggest two solutions: either Tylos/Bahrain’s own coinage has not been identified yet (which is rather unlikely) or the island was part of the Gerrhaean territory and therefore used the coinage of the latter. In my view, it is the more probable hypothesis.

The vertical shin coins attributed to Thadji/Gerrha were in circulation and no doubt used profusely after the second century BCE. However, a continuous debasement of the metal as well as a stylistic degradation can be noted, probably because the later coins were in fact ‘imitations of imitations’. At the end of this process we find bronze coins with completely abstract designs. These probably mark the end of coin production in this region at a date close to the beginning of the first century CE. But whatever degradation of images we find on these later coins, some of the elements appearing on the original types continue to be present. While the obverse in most cases is blank, the reverse continues to display a vertical South Arabian shin, the seated figure always seems to holds an eagle with often strange shapes, and on the right, some letters or remains recall the name of Alexander in Greek.

To explain the degradation of the coinage of Gerrha, we have to consider the important political change that had taken place in the North of the Gulf during the second half of the second century BCE, when, at around 125 BCE, Hypsaiosines, the Seleucid satrap or governor of the province of the Erythean Sea, proclaimed his independence and founded a new kingdom by the name of Caracene (or Mesene), with Spasinou Charax (the former Antioch of the Erythean Sea) as its capital. Hypsaiosines may have occupied the island to keep an eye on the already declining city of Gerrha and to take control of the chief trade routes.

This kingdom expanded rapidly, including Ikaros/Falakia and Tylos/Bahrain from where an inscription in Hypsaiosines’ name has come down to us in 2002.

We now have to pass on to another region, the Oman Peninsula (today part of the United Arab Emirates), in order to look at a last important group of “Arabian Alexanders” which I tried to make more familiar in a book in 2004. The excavations undertaken in this region, notably at Mleiha (Sharjah) and ad-Our (Umm al-Qaiwain), have produced a large number of Alexander-type imitations. Based on the archaeological data, I have suggested a division of the coins into three main groups, an “early”, a “middle”, and a “recent” group.

The “early” series comprises three main denominations: the tetradrachm, drachm and obol. They are all reasonably faithful copies of the Alexandrian prototype. The unbearded and youthful seated figure on the reverse in all probability represents Shams. The legs of this figure are usually represented uncrossed, as is the case in some early coins of Alexander, but this last detail is also present in some issues under Seleucus I. The first or the second, which are more likely to have served as a model for these coins. Although they...
The most likely answer is, because Mleiha was an important stopover on the Arabian caravan roads. Coined money, particular in the form of coins of Alexander, was certainly well-known, and we have to assume that local issues such as those from Gerrha must have made their way to this region. Moreover, the fact that practically all known coins of this type come from Mleiha, lends further support to their attribution to this site.

The oldest archeological strata in Mleiha, according to the excavators, date back to the middle of the third and the beginning of the second centuries BCE. Two obols with identical dies were found separately in one of these strata. Furthermore, the fact that practically all known coins of this type come from Mleiha, lends further support to their attribution to this site.

Why did Abiel, a local dynast, strike coins in a region so far away from the other regional centres? The most likely answer is, because Mleiha was an important stopover on the Arabian caravan roads. Coined money, particular in the form of coins of Alexander, was certainly well-known, and we have to assume that local issues such as those from Gerrha must have made their way to this region. Moreover, the fact that practically all known coins of this type come from Mleiha, lends further support to their attribution to this site.

The “middle” series also bear the name of Abi’el. The Ga’al Bahrain hoard contained more than 75 specimens. Many scholars, including myself, to believe that they were from the Gerrha region and dated back to the second half of the third century BCE. But there are only a few specimens found in the area of Gerrha and more than 50 such coins came from Mleiha.

When looking at the tetradrachms, the drachms and the obols of this group, one immediately recognizes a number of typological and stylistic particularities which show that these are no longer copied directly from original “Alexanders” but rather imitations of imitations. On the obverse, the head of Heracles is still of good quality, although the lion’s mouth is gradually taking the shape of a curved horn. Also the obverse seems the same as other coins of the area such as those from Gerrha. This confirms my view that the latter must have served as models for the former.

On the reverse, the differences are even more significant: the seated figure no longer holds an eagle as on the Alexander prototype but a drinking vase called rhyton ormate with a horse. In the left field, we find either a small palm tree or a palm leaf, details which are present in all subsequent series of the Oman Peninsula. Finally, behind the seated figure, there is an Aramaic inscription giving the name of Abi’el with also an incomprehensible name for his father, however different of the previous. So these coins are from a second ruler of this name, struck about the middle of the second century in a style which, although still reminiscent of the Alexander prototype, represents a new class of imitations.

The last imitations of Alexander type in the Oman peninsula are the “recent” series. These were struck in great numbers at Mleiha, but also at ed-Dour which at that time was part of the same territorial and political entity as Mleiha. The various imitations are too numerous to be described here in detail. But it has to be underlined that these coins, though of increasingly crude fabric and abstract style, nevertheless preserved several characteristic elements that show that they were part of an organized monetary system lasting well into the first or second century CE. The obverse shows yet again the customary head of Heracles, albeit in extremely various fashions. But it is the reverse that is of much more interest, with Shams holding not only a sceptre, but also a small horse which as of now replaces the rhyton of the “middle” series. In the left field, we still find a small palm tree or a palm leaf, while behind the seated figure, there are some more or less deformed Aramaic letters meant to represent the name of Abi’el, which became now eponymous. Finally, a mark resembling a trident is present on absolutely all coins of this series, irrespective of the degree to which the images have been deformed. The presence of this ‘trident’ symbol characterises the coinage of the Oman Peninsula until the end. However, with very few exceptions, the coinage belonging to the ‘recent’ series appears to have circulated exclusively within its own territory, and therefore to never have been used in the overland trade. It was obviously destined as a base metal coinage for essentially fiduciary purposes, and limited to the territory of Mleiha.

The altogether stable quality and abundance of this coinage show that Mleiha was flourishing during the last century BCE and the first century CE. Furthermore, ed-Dour seems to have played the role of a second capital. This situation doubtlessly stood in some relation with the foundation and development of the kingdom of Characene and the establishment of new caravan roads to the detriment of Gerrha which, though it still existed, must have lost its leading role to Mleiha.

It is at the end of the first or the beginning of the second century CE that the coin production of Mleiha and the other trade centres seems to disappear definitively. Also in the north of the Gulf, the kingdom of Characene, which made the link between Arabia and Palmyra in Syria and, far away, with the Roman Empire, is annexed by the Parthian kingdom. This result from the increasing development of the sea routes through the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean to South Arabia and India leading a general abandonment of the overland caravan routes and consequently, the definitive end of the local coinage.
Breaking the Wall of Silence and the Resistance of Marginalisation: Women’s Presence in Cyberspace

The decision to address this subject stems from the interest we perceived from a large number of Western scholars in the exceptional phenomenon of Arab women’s presence in cyberspace in contrast with the lack of interest by Arab scholars on the subject. It is no longer possible to negate analysing the parts that are played by a group of Arab women in cyberspace; particularly because their presence has become clearly visible. This encourages scholars of different disciplines such as media studies, sociology, women’s studies, cultural studies and others to research and investigate the phenomena in order to outline a set of inferences which may change the typical and inherent portrayals that are normally associated with women. In addition, it would bring to attention the social and cultural transformations and the intellectual movement which contemporary Arabian societies are experiencing.

In the beginning women were in a state of presence/absence in the works of writers, historians, travellers and others. They were present in the sense they were the topic of discussion and absent on the level of having the right to represent themselves. As for today, we witness the emergence of a class of contemporary women who expressed a wish to break the history of suppression, marginalisation and the employment of women as companions attending to the whims of men, with roles limited to providing pleasure and companionship/sociability.

With the advent of the information technology revolution which provided contemporary mediums of communication, a number of women’s voices surfaced - writing on the internet. These women produced creative narratives in a variety of areas such as poetry, novels and stories. Their writings were also notable in regards to their ability to engage in online discussions of public affairs, including political, economical and religious events amongst others. This goes to show that the new media has granted the chance for many kinds of women to express themselves; the opportunity is the same regardless of their intellectual and social standing and their cultural background. Where does this manifest itself?

The identities of the women setting sail on the internet can only be learned by viewing the personal pages of individuals or groups on Facebook, or on blogs or websites, dialogue platforms or other pages. These pages contain information explaining the intended purpose behind the creation of the blog or website. “Hoce Tunis” (Women of Tunisia) is an exceptional women’s website which deals in particular with the affairs of Muslim women and family and children matters in general; the website also has a number of sections.”

Egyptian Rabab Kasaab is an agricultural engineer and a writer who began blogging in 2007. She justifies her reasons behind her blog by saying: “The initial purpose was to publish my short stories far away from the controls of literature forums whose only concerns were to defend the trinity of taboos, “religion, sex and politics”. And because I don’t like shackles and I like to be the one calling my own shots I created my blog to be my own voice and I wrote in it my short stories, my thoughts and a series of articles written in colloquial which I named “Yawniyat Madeenati” (My City’s Diaries). I used to talk about anything that crossed my mind or grabbed my attention at work, in the market or on the street. My eyes were fixated on Egypt through the city of Tanta where I live because it is a miniature model of the situation in the entire Republic. I spoke about the queues for rice and its renowned subsequent crisis; I talked about the secondary school examinations and about the rising prices. These are situations I witnessed and had heard about from my colleagues at work, and what we simply have to face on a daily basis. The blog acted as a breathing space for me, which made it at one point in time my lung allowing me to breathe properly. When Facebook appeared, it was an even bigger lung, having a broader breathing space and was also far more widespread. This is when my blogging activities had died out.”

While some of the women had chosen to divulge their real names (Hanouf, Tallal Al-Malouhi, Ezzah Jabr), a larger group of them chose to hide behind a pen name: “Mamlakat Al-Sam” (Kingdom of Silence), “Ma’a Allah” (With God), “Irribakat Imra’a Hurra” (Perplexities of a Free Woman), “Bustan Afkar” (Garden of My Thoughts) and others chose a specific name for their website or blog. This is more the case in societies that segregate men and women, creating two distinctly different worlds and showing them in an opposing form: The men’s world versus the women’s.

It is possible to classify women present in the internet domain into two categories. The first being women who express what lines up in their hearts in a simultaneous fashion— recording their thoughts, giving their impressions or reactions to events. The second category is women’s rights activists, politicians or women active in civil society (feminists) who have taken cyberspace as a way to defend some core issues headed by the women’s rights issue. This category of women was unified when it came to having faith in the importance of participating in the digital revolution and communication technology. However, they had conflicting viewpoints in identifying the facets of their presence and the intended goal behind utilising the new media. This disagreement, in reality, creates a series of questions: What is the relationship of Arab women with the technologies of this new media? What is the nature of the role that women take on in cyberspace? What is the nature of the content which women produce in order to achieve interaction with others? What is the degree of female interaction in cyberspace and what is the relation between it and their effectiveness in the real world?

Looking back at a few samples from these blogs, websites and dialogue platforms, we observe that that some of the articles can be characterised as superficial and disgracefully short-changed, whereas other writings are marked by their impressive and self-exaltation facets. This group possessed the right of expressing itself, but it did not deviate from the commandments regarding women that were preordained by their forbears. They are void of thought and empty minded except when it comes to cosmetics and housekeeping affairs. As for their experiences in life, they do not have knowledge which exceeds the principles of cooking and beauty amongst other concerns; their ultimate ambitions are to entice these experiences with other women. “Aatayeb” (Delicacies) is a website which brings together a group of female bloggers who specialise in writing blog posts about cooking; bloggers such as “Futoon” (Arabic woman’s name which means ‘something beautiful’), “Aatayeb” and “Miss Cupcake” (direct transliteration). There are blogs that specialise in fashion, such as “U-turn
Fashion” (direct transliteration), blogs for mothers where they share their experiences with child rearing and blogs covering subjects relating to handicraft and other mediums from the different forms of the Islamic practise) and zawaj al messyaf (tourist’s marriage: name used as criticism of practise), as well as women empowerment, the wearing of hijab and/or niqab, and the relationship of religion with women’s issues and discusses the ones which had previously been ignored.

This group of women appear to be devoted to making use of their abilities and to employ cyberspace for the benefit of humanitarian issues. Communication technology had contributed to broadening the field of vision in regards to recent events and life. This desire to break away from suppression may find backing in two components: The first being the system of human rights and a premium education on a culture based on them, which enables the individual to challenge and persevere. As for the second, it lies in the efforts of female scholars who specialise in the history of women in order to uncover the niqab (metaphor: women’s face veil/cover) from the symbols of the women’s resistance. Also, they hope to transform the internet and other outlets from tools used by individuals to act on their own whims and drown in apathy to a method for communication that serves humanity. From here, the substance of interactive action becomes important to the proponents of that movement; it branches to different divisions: social, political and a religious. While we are aware that there are interests from women of relation to economics and science, it does not form a large enough base for consideration. Domestic violence, sexual education, equality between the two sexes, al Khefadh (female circumcision), honour killings and sexual harassment are some of the most important issues to women active in cyberspace. We mention, as examples, blogs like “Afkar Muba’thara” (Scattered Thoughts) and Saudi Arabian blog “Hadeel”.

The emergence of new voices such as the divorcée, the widowed and the abused cannot be neglected as a phenomenon of the new media. A good example is a new blog called “Ana Ayza Algawaz” (I Want to Get Married) by Egyptian Ghada Abdulai. In it, she discusses the subject of marriage and how society viewed spinsterhood and how the lady viewed herself and others. In the same context, Mahasin Saber—an Egyptian divorcée who had suffered greatly in the Egyptian courts of law in order to get her divorce—had created a blog named “Ana Ayza Atalla” (I Want to Get a Divorce).

In addition to utilising the new media to expose the patriarchal system which practise prejudice against women, another group entered the political arena to criticise, denounce and expose the methods of repression being used. They also hoped to name and shame those guilty of inhumane actions. Many groups were created for the purpose of mobilising popular disagreement and to instigate actions for the sake of defending human rights, especially those of women. We refer to Tunisian bloggers, Leena Bin Mahni, owner of the blog “Bnayah Tunisiya” (Tunisian Girl), Fatmah Al Rayahi, owner of the blog “Fatmah Arabica” and Hanaa’ Al Tarabulsi, and Egyptians Asma’ Mahfooth and Nawarah Najm and plenty of other ladies.

Women’s contributions in 2011 appear to be effective in creating political uproar through social media networks like Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, via email, instant short messaging and chat rooms. Cyberspace became a platform for making the dreams of change and revolution a reality, encouraging the eventual ‘toppling of the regime’.

If we were to hold the view that the vast array of social media tools had attracted young women bloggers, Facebook and users of other forms of social media, we can surmise that writing on internet websites attracted political and human rights activists; those women who had taken it upon themselves to spread awareness, criticise repressive regimes and make demands for rights such women’s suffrage rights, expression, political activism and the formulation of civil societies, unions and other organisations. Websites such as “Al Heware Al Mutamadin” (Civil Discourse) “Markaz Musawat Al Mar’a” (Centre For Women Equality), “Shaal Al Sharg Al Ahwaz” (The Transparent of The Middle East) and “Al Awan” (The Times) acted as domains which enabled writers to express their points of view towards life’s different issues and women’s issues in a particular sense.

When we familiarise ourselves with a number of articles, we notice that cases of domestic violence, sexual harassment, honour killings, discrimination against women in laws and work places, marriage of minors, zawaj al mesyar (voyager’s marriage: Islamic practise) and zawaj al messaf (tourist’s marriage: name used as criticism of practise), as well as women empowerment, the wearing of hijab and/or niqab, and the relationship of religion with women had the highest rate of coverage by women. These types of writings are regarded as a glimpse of light. These articles addressed women’s issues as a part of the whole picture of societal issues and not as a separate matter. The writing style of these women had been characterised as courageous in broaching issues and profound in analysis.

That the interaction and participation enabled young Arab women to come out from the conditions of concealment and marginalisation to those of exposure and accomplishment is unquestionable. There were even some who were in policy making positions who became more noticeable and recognised. It might be safe to say that amongst the young ladies some achieved a form of star status, and in turn, received invitations to attend international conferences. In addition, traditional media outlets flocked to conduct interviews to get their opinions on the role of women in changing societies and their contributions to the success of their revolutions.

Also, many of these blogs were gateways to achieving fame. “Ana Ayza Algawaz” operated by Egyptian lady Ghada Abdulai was a great success and was made into a book that grossed high sales numbers. Later, it was made into a television show.
which competed with all the other shows during the month of Ramadan in 2010.

Some media websites provided excellent opportunities for Arab women to tell their stories, helping the women recruit the masses to support their efforts in order to abolish all kinds of discrimination and violence against women. These sites make it easier for women to reach a broad and diverse audience for a lesser cost than using the traditional media. This type of women empowerment in all disciplines is considered beneficial.

As for the influence of women activists on the internet on society, it was evident in the organisation of campaigns and protests. In this light, it is adequate enough to point to the blogging alliance, “Kuluna Laila” (We Are All Laila), which defends women in discrimination cases and lets their voices be heard by an audience and the appropriate officials. The activists were able to spread their positions, gaining favour with other new pro-women advocates.

Bahraini blogger “Layal”, owner of “En Kunt Tha Ra’?” (a phrase from an Arabic poem which translates ‘If you were of a belief/opinion…’). The line continues: “…be of strong will, the corruption of belief is to hesitate” followed in the path of “Kuluna Laila”. She had achieved noticeable presence amidst Arabic blogs during her first six months on the internet. “Layal” led one of the famous Arabic blog initiatives during the Israeli war on Lebanon in 2006, promoting a day in which Arabic blogs would publish a unified letter of protest written in many different languages to have an effect on visitors.

The organisation of these campaigns reflects a sense of awareness that the interaction process in cyberspace moved from the stage of individual protest to that of collective resistance. The latter stage aims to repel humanitarian and civil rights infringements and works toward changing mindsets. The faith that a number of women had that their voices are being heard encouraged them to organise protest campaigns and form women pressure groups within the official and legislative establishments as well as inside the political movements. This was done to ensure that these bodies pass laws which secure the rights of women and enables them to take their active roles in society.

This goes to show the capacity of users of social media to influence and change the playing field and direct public opinion. If we were to look at the outcomes in regards to the integration of women in social media, it would come across us how capable these Arab women are in utilising it to their benefit. This can be seen in relationship to political performance and increased participation in elections. In Jordan, for example, women candidates made good use of mobile phones during election campaigns where they had sent thousands of short messages to citizens. Writing on websites gave women the ability to protest, debate and confront their opponents. The opponents responded in kind, with critical articles written by both men and women. However, this did not stop the interaction with the various players in power. The result was a dialogue unique in most countries of the region.

That lively presence of these activists had implications which affected their lives, forcing many of them to pay a price. The methods used to subjugate these writers were plenty— blocking websites and blogs, Arresting and criminally prosecuting them were some of the tactics employed. Furthermore, the propagation of the term, “fatat al internet” (girl from the internet), which in itself had negative connotations, perpetuated the idea that girls who spend time on the internet promoting their issues are merely using it as a front for their true intentions: to correspond with men, who they were attempting to deceive and entrap them. From this perspective, a presence in cyberspace becomes negative and undesirable. Female users risk are susceptible to conservative moral rulings and their activities may be judged “haram” (forbidden) in a religious context.

No matter how intense the opposition of the patriarchal society becomes against these women, it does match what the women who write on religious affairs encounter. The women who challenge and criticise the schizophrenic and hypocritical nature of religious discourse and the intransigence of a number of men and their hatred for women receive the most vitriolic responses.

Blogger Khoudi Saleh Al-Fahad says: “I don’t know the reasons behind the disproportionate discharge of these accusations against women in my country; those women whose primary concern is the dissemination of enlightened thinking and the rights of women in Islam. Every time I allow comments to be published on my blog, I receive a barrage of accusations, insults, curses and shouting that I am not a Muslim and that I do not belong to the religion or the nation and that I am battling honour and spreading vices because quite simply I write about my refusal of the wolf and sheep convention and for my belief that women are individual entities, separate from men. I declare here in all sincerity that I will not stop ‘the stolen rights campaign’ or stop fighting for all of its articles. I will not stop writing on every subject involving women. We as women of this nation will stand beside every wronged woman with every ounce of strength and resolution and through all channels in which we can assist her”.

It becomes clear that these reactions did not deter women from using the new media tools. From this point, it is safe to say that communication technology has given women opportunities for knowledge procurement, character building and confidence reinforcement; especially in regards to feelings of emancipation. They also benefit the chance to rid themselves of the guardianship imposed upon women in a number of societies where patriarchal wisdom, personified particularly in the official religious establishment, reigned supreme. The new media writing is a step towards liberation from the aforementioned guardianship and suppression. In that sense, it is a means to achieving self realization.

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The edification and rising awareness of women allowed them to gain more freedom and move towards a state of self determination. It is the direction that Arab societies are heading, in spite of the number of obstacles and noticeable inconsistencies between the different societies in the Arab world. Today there is a group of women trying to pave their own path and promote their cause known. This determination to establish their presence and be a part of the decision making is highlighting the gains women attained as a result of their education.

The exceptional presence of women in the new media offsets the opinions which say that women do not produce but consume. They proved that they have the ambition to be effective in the cyber world and are working to correct the ideas adopted by traditional media outlets. This means doing away with stereotyping and mechanisms of marginalisation. It is no secret that traditional media rarely present women as decision makers or politic participants. On the contrary, traditional media reinforces, in many instances, society’s prevailing beliefs and ideas regarding women.

Traditional media contributed to influencing the type of involvement allowed to women in politics, limiting their effectiveness. In contrast, women activists on the internet worked to change social image of women in Arab societies, proving that women are capable in speaking on politics, economics, society, religion, creativity and are able to analyse current events in society. They sought to highlight the role of women in the cultural domain. This means they are no longer undermined by being merely the subject of those who had previously spoken on their behalf. Women are overcoming the obstacles of restriction. As such, writing on electronic sites was a form of emancipation from authority and the dominance of some powers on the intellectual domain.

Women’s use of the new media confirms the importance of this technology. It helps diminish the gap between women and men and contributes to further cultural and Gnostic openness within an expansive framework of science and technological aptitude. All this comes to play with the goal of building a balanced society where equal opportunities are granted to women and men.
Reflections on the State of Islam Today

Dr. Fahmi Jada'an
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No one can escape the impact that accompanies the pressures of asking a question dealing with Islam and its culture. When it comes to this sensitive matter, most people venture on one of two very different paths: “fear for Islam” or “fear of Islam”.

Are we truly witnessing Islam retreating to the edges of its borders? Are we spectators watching the global occurrence of the crumbling, weakening and deteriorating of its elements? Or, on the contrary, are we witnessing the “return of Islam”? Is this religion recuperating and waking from its long slumber? Does that symbolise a genuine replacement for the belief that tolerance, secularism and democracy have ultimately failed? In all cases, signs of “anxiety” and “appréhension” are accumulating for all in the future to come.

Against this apprehension and for the last four decades in particular, Western civilisation’s spheres have been governed by an awareness that portrays reality as follows: Western Modernity has succeeded in overcoming its domestic enemies (theocracy, fascism, Nazism and communism), but it faces tosay a new enemy which is no less dangerous - Islam! This danger stems from three different sources: immigration, terrorism and finally, active cultural and “civilizational” hostility.

Let us look into the image of Islam in its own home ground, meaning the realms, or the Arabian and other territories which are Islamic, or those territories in which Islam is the religion of the majority. Religion in such places is the regulatory body that oversees the affairs and day to day lives of its people.

However, it seems necessary that before we begin this review, we should take into consideration that the characteristics of a contemporary “City of Islam” are not those of Islam’s previous cities. In the past, the Islamic City was pure or relatively pure in respect to adherence of Islamic creed. The Islamic City today, with its diverse lands and peoples belongs to the age of modernity whether it chooses to accept it or not; whereas, the older Islamic nation belongs to the age which has been tagged as the pre-modern era.

On the surface, the Islamic world today functions as part of a centralised methodological course. This means that our perception of reality is based on the principle of favouring the absent over the attester. In turn, this brings us to the condition in which we do not seek out the principles of thought, vision, work and delivery from within our current and direct reality, but rather from within our historical trials and “Salafi” fundamental practices. Additional contributions are taken from religious literature and Islamic jurisprudence and in particular what we learned from the first generation of Muslims. We understand our present time along with its predicaments, issues and rulings through the trials and tribulations of the past. But it is necessary to be aware ourselves that this methodology does not preside over all the people of Islam. The jurisprudential, reformative and enlightening manifestations in the Arab and Islamic rationale gave birth to new trends, conceptions and methodologies in the modern Islamic world that tied the religious scripture closer to reality.

An acute problem is then revealed, one that causes severe disturbances and serious breaches in the practice of the faith. This is the epistemological problem, an issue with many aspects, four of which stand out:

First: Doctrinal belief oriented with some practical properties. This is a view of the present era of Islam stemming from the first or early Islamic era. And I have in mind the divisional and doctrinal contradictions. It is no secret that early Islam – since the passing of the Prophet PBUH – faced huge challenges and grand trials that hit both the Companions themselves and the following generations of Muslims. Consequently, a conflict arose due to the issue of the Caliphate or Imamate, and as a result a transition was made from the order of “Prophethood and Caliphatr” to what had been labelled in some circles as “Malicious Monarchism”;

in other words, the rule of might and tyranny which has dominated the political Islamic experience.

There are hardly any people who do not know that, concerning the issue of Imamah, the phenomena of difference and division were not reserved exclusively for those who went by religious scripture and those who went by freewill. Rather it extended to many issues and more than 70 divisions, leaving historians to ponder a Hadith attributed to the Prophet foretelling the matter. In the end, most of these divisions faded away leaving a few groups to continue in the historic struggle, with disagreements, bitter quarrels and contestations. We as a people are left with these groups— to exist with us and to engage us in their discourse. These conflicts are fed by and rooted in the temptations of ignorance and the forces of “Islamophobia.”

This aspect makes an exciting image of Islam, giving it a haughty persona.

Second: This aspect personifies the interpretation of the religious texts in a literal and superficial sense. Of course, this reading is not innovative or a reinvention, as every Classical Islamic studies scholar is knowledgeable of the extensive explorations that have been conducted in the realms of provisions, comparative research and interpretations. The beginnings of personal effort and scholarly works have been characterised by the constant switching between Revealed Text and personal opinion, leading to confrontations and contestations or to the complementarity of Text and Reason.

However, the regression of Islamic rationalism and the triumph of the Literalists, with the addition of the Ash’arites amongst their ranks and the resignation of the philosophical intellect, as well as the exclusion of any of its doctrinal devotees, combined to the reinforcement of superficial and literal scripture reading. Any reading involving the examination of the Text in terms of its historical implications or human experiences had been shunned, as has been any moulding or interpretations offered to suit the needs of modern times, governed by rationality.

It is also certain that the greatest share of interest in this subject is based on the infinite reliance on Hadith, a source that fits easily with some doctrines; more restrictive in others. In spite of the spread of superficial reading of religious texts, the results of interpretation and reading religious texts from a Qur’anic outlook had also made its way into the realms of local and global Islamic wisdom. This contribution began with the intent of portraying an attractive image of the religion in the age of universal culture and pragmatic utilitarian globalisation. At the same time, there has been a tendency in the realms of the “free” globalised world, of taking the meanings of some religious texts and highlighting them to launch harsh criticisms at the religion of Islam and its sanctities— just as what happened with the “Refuznik” women’s issue.

Third: This is the alarming ascension of a revisionist and emotional discourse that portrays Islam in two lights. The first being mythical; the second oppressive, destructive and one that turns a blind eye to the Qur’anic content concerning “desire”, but clings to a loud and clear fear mongering text. This rhetoric has been shown on satellite television channels and in episodes of religious teaching, as well as in many religious lessons and sermons conducted in mosques. What’s more, it is also included in a countless number of missionary books, leaflets, religious brochures, compact discs and internet websites. With this rhetoric, the scientific, rational, merciful and optimistic image of Islam dissipates, and a different image of Islam rises: one that is absent of joy and pleasure.

This discourse promotes a religion which is magical, exclusionary, darkly paranoid, rife with despair and hopelessness. In it, the series of positive
emotional feelings that the Prophet of Islam embodied are thrown out. The distorted Islam of this rhetoric has moved away from "God the Most Gracious, Most Merciful", the lines we use every time we utter a holy verse, and is replaced with a sea of mythology. It is dominated to a large degree through tyrannical means and championed by those whose ideas and policies were not merely a "local" problem; in fact, it's rooted in the Islamic religious references. They uphold radical and narrow-minded beliefs, creating a perplexing shadow over the religious text. Within the situation that this problem creates, there are three important points: social intercourse, women's conditions and international relations.

The secondary predicament associated with the epistemological problem is the political dilemma, and it is the most controversial and tense in contemporary Islam. This, of course, is nothing new, the religious and political domains in Islam were always in continuous states of overlapping, revision, interweaving, or in a state of identification or juxtaposition and confrontation. In political Islamic jurisprudence, it was one of the duties of the Imam or Caliph to preserve religion.

This in turn turned the relationship between religion and the "Omnipotent Sultan (ruler)" in the persona of the Caliph into a tightly bonded and substantial relationship. In this relationship, there is no divergence between what is political and what is religious. If seeking an accurate explanation, it is that the Caliphate truly was a "monarchical" state, but it was "monarchical" in the sense that it justifies its actions and legitimises its mortal 'Sultanate' authority with explanations stemming from religion. This is how things were during the Omayyad, Abbasid and Ottoman caliphs; and today, this is what the dominant movement in political Islamic thinking is scheming to revive.

But, Kemalist secularism in Turkey was able to largely sever this long tradition. In 1922, this form of secularism proceeded with the separation of the Caliphate and the Sultanate, and in 1924, with the complete abolishment of the Caliphate. Under the influence of the spread of liberal philosophy and "freethinking" local political movements, a new understanding of the concealment of state and religion grew stronger. This became known as "the secularism of separation". Some of its proponents assert that the historical Caliphate system was not an Islamic system, and that the Prophet himself never meant "monarchism" (Mulk), but religious and moral guidance. This view witnessed a new development in the current Turkish experience in what some literature calls Islamic secularism.

However, in Egypt, the traditional view remains active, as supported by Mohammed Rasheed Redha, and more extensively later Hassan Al Banna and the Islamic Brotherhood. At this stage, the final objectives were illuminated with its main goal and its rooted desire to enforce Islamic law on all individual, social, legislative and political scales.

Before the spread of Western culture and the colonization of the East and the Arab and Islamic world, the ideas of the Indian thinker Abul Ala Al-Mawdoodi were presented in the book, "Divine Governance", which resonated in the Islamic world. To Sayed Qutub and others it was of the utmost significance, defining what the model Islamic nation should look like. It was a desired antithesis to what was tagged by the West as the "Jahili society". Standing contrary to the materialistic Western civilization, it rejected the hegemony of the global model.

The events that took place in the mid-20th century and the political failures and shortcomings of the "Nationalist regimes" helped spawn the fundamentalist approach in regards to religious ideologies. This in turn produced a series of radical movements that directed their ruthless discourse at the individual, society and state in the realm of the Arab world. These movements were able to radicalise political and functional mechanisms with separatists, causing violent actions on local and global levels.

All this was then paired with the religion of Islam itself, citing the positions of the most prominent Imams and Jurists, and in particular, Ibn Taimiyah, to give Islam an authentic political character. By combining this view with some selected actions and operations deemed "violent" in the Arab sphere; a new image of Islam was brought to light. This image reinforced the media policies of some of the global and regional powers that portrayed it as a radical "political project". The goals of these leaders were to repress freedoms, invade the west and destroy its civilisations. In this case, political Islam hijacked the facade of Islam, which in turn meant that any reference to the religion of Islam meant an affiliation to this model of the religion.

The third dilemma bred from the epistemological and political problems is the socio-political problem. In part, it creates a perplexing shadow over the present image of Islam and its current condition. Within the situation that this problem creates, there are three important points: social intercourse, women's conditions and international relations.

Here, like in all other similar affairs, it is our responsibility to call attention to a key issue particularly linked to our present time. When looking at the majority of the issues and predicaments that contemporary Islam experiences, it becomes clear that it suffers from a defect in vision and judgment. It is dominated to a large degree through tyrannical means and championed by those whose ideas and movements justify their existence and actions through Islamic religious references.

In actuality, these groups represent a minority in the overall scale of Islamic powers and movements. They uphold radical and narrow-minded beliefs and convictions and in no way represent a majority. They have been able to impose themselves and reign supreme for many different reasons: the active involvement for the cause and effectiveness in promotion, the production of material, and local and global operational capabilities. All this in addition to the presence of a strong Islamic base and a prominent fixation of faith. Perhaps this is the most dangerous symptom currently engulfing Islam, making it a prisoner of this disparity: the effective and vigorous activities of the minority and the alarming utilisation of it abroad belittles the silent majority made up of those who do not care or those who have been left without any means to resist.

In this context, "social intercourse" in the Islamic domain — and I further specify the Arab world — displays an uneven form of "social hierarchy". It is certain that this communicative value has other determinants; specifically, economical and political factors that function within religious rationalizations, or religious-political justifications which play a critical role in this problem. The fact of the matter is that the function or religious-political movements' wellness has spurred new levels of conflict, collision, and separation in present societies. It has escalated even further, to the point where those who disagree in belief, scholarly endeavours or even in opinion were cast as enemies of religion. They had to be isolated, opposed, loathed and even combated.

Religion has been blatantly fused with faith, so infringements and conflicts became more widespread, making the danger that threatens security, prosperity and national unity greater. Today, it is no secret that this problem has growing implications, as it reaches those not of the Muslim faith. In some countries of the Arab world with Christian populations, a series of discriminatory issues had come about (apostasy, accusations of blasphemy, civil rights, building of churches, infringements on religious sanctities, retention of apostates, immigration, and calls for foreign intervention).

This aspect of the problem is not at all innocent — its components are overlapping and intertwining. It is not merely a "local" problem; in fact, it's rooted in foreign-political intrusions — sometimes hidden, other times public. If these religious-political movements played any role in aggravating and escalating the problem, then it is certain that someone is using that role to misrepresent the image of Islam. Purposeful criminal operations have been conducted with the purpose of ruining the system of social hierarchy.
and destabilising society and governments. At the same time, the religious-political movements strengthen the negative image of Islam all over the world, painting the religion as “intolerant”, thus instigating hatred and animosity.

A central issue linked to the socio-political problem is the women’s issue: a matter that has often cast a lingering shadow on Islam’s global image. I do not think that I am reducing the problem to a pasteurised reduction if I said: If we were to ask the “average person” in the West and in many other regions to tell us what he knows of the Islamic world, he would answer: The oppression of women and violence or terrorism.

It is no surprise that legal rulings pertaining to women in Islam from the renaissance era to this day caused quarrels and queries in Islamic regions. They are also a constant subject of review, discussion, observation and critique in non-Islamic domains. It is also no secret that the Islamic rulings on women, which I consider to be the compilation of jurisprudential rulings, have been stripped by religious scholars of any relationship with the religious texts and early historical trials. These jurisprudential rulings contribute a series of perceptions, circumstances and rulings covering superficial grounds, lack contemporary humanistic moral values: equality, justice, freedom and human dignity.

However, it is certain that patriarchal culture and traditions, along with the male dominated spectrum of textual interpretation in regards to women, has played a critical role in determining, regulating and directing rulings pertaining to women. Limiting interpretation to male readers and speakers, the negligence of the historical, social and economical contexts of the texts, as well as the misinformed mishmash of cultural inheritance and interpretation of the text are all key factors to such practices.

Tradition has preserved very little in terms of female testimonial objections against the ruthlessness of men and oppression of women. History bears witness that the Prophet himself practised a righteous life. He had displayed noble “feminist” tendencies as Fatima Al-Mernissi has revealed. However, the inherited authority of the patriarchal movement and the power it possessed demonstrated its strength through the case made by some religious narratives to eliminate the equal and just state of affairs and replace them with the principles of gender distinction and hierarchy.

Prominent Salafi thinkers like Mohammed Rasheed Redha took notice of the change in the perception of women immediately. Redha observed that one of the virtues of the European modern age lies in the fact that it alerted us to the chain of values and ideals which it believes are prevalent in the religious Islamic texts. Modernity cast our awareness towards it, and so it became of greater worth to us. We even attribute to ourselves the initiative for implementing it first.

The truth is that the revival of these values is specifically credited to a group of Muslim thinkers, women who travelled to the West and emulated its sciences, culture and ideals. They were able to—from a Qur’anic perspective—recognize that the Qur’an is clear in its establishment of “ontological equality” between the two genders. Therefore, it is important to “re-read” the “disturbing” religious texts and to interpret them to support a new image of the Muslim woman and of Islam in the present time and in the future.

The aforementioned women were able to work towards their goal in a manner that lies in contrast with, “The Refuznik Women”, the assemblage of women who gained their prominence in realms of globalization for unduly criticizing Islam and its prophet. They claimed that Islam in its essence and spirit oppresses women.

I have resolved this matter in my latest book (Khanji-as-Sirb) (Outside the Herd) 2d ed. 2012). I can go so far as saying that on the surface, interpretive reading of the texts pertaining to women suggests the pre-eminence of hierarchical customs and the lack of equality between man and woman. However, when a different approach is taken while conducting the reading, one realises that the text actually dispels the notions that Islam oppresses women and strips them of their human dignity. This is exactly what The Interpretive Feminists” has done. Ameenah Wadood, Asma Barlas, Rifat Hassan, Fatima Al-Mernissi and others were able to draw from the Qur’anic perspective of “ontological equality” a series of values and rulings which establish the feminist case for the principles of equality, justice, freedom and human dignity.

The Shahnama and the Persian ‘Arts of the Book’

Charles Melville
Presented in English
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From the earliest surviving examples of illustrated copies of the Shahnama, dating from around 1300, up till the latest, from the mid-19th century in Iran and northern India (e.g. Kashmir), Firdausi’s celebrated poem has been the most commonly and continuously illustrated work of Persian literature. The reasons for this lie beyond the intrinsic merits of the text and the popular appeal of its stories, which certainly lend themselves to illustration at the narrative level of battles and combat between armies and champions, fights with dragons, demons and other monsters, and rather more rare romantic and courtly interludes. The enduring appeal of the Shahnama can be found also in the perception of the poem as Iran’s ‘national epic’ and its distillation of Persian culture, political ethics and national ‘identity’.

Thus, as history, it tells the story of the Persian Empire from the early origins of human society to the collapse of the Sassanian dynasty and the Muslim conquests in the time of caliphs ‘Uthman and ‘Uthman. Much of this history is taken up with the interaction of Iran and the nomads of Inner Asia, identified as the ‘Turks’ or ‘Turanians’ in the Shahnama, and later with the Byzantines and the Arab lands of the Byzantine Empire — mainly in the Levant, but also echoing earlier connections with the Yemen. In other words, on the political level it addresses Iran’s place in the world vis-a-vis its neighbours, and provides a living memorial of Iran’s pre-Islamic imperial glory.

Culturally speaking, Firdausi’s poem promotes the values of adab, of courtly politeness, respect for authority and religion, knowledge (dânineh) and learning, and faithfulness (wafiat) in one’s dealings. In terms of political ethics, the Shahnama focuses on the qualities needed for kingship, which, apart from the God-given grace or charisma (farr) and royal descent of pure Iranian lineage, requires above all the qualities of wisdom (kherad) and justice (‘adl), both of which involve suppressing greed, hastiness and rash decisions, and consulting with the wise, be they scholars or priests. The Shahnama is also celebrated for its use of the Persian language and for playing a major role in the emergence of New Persian as a literary language — although the use of Arabic words, including some key terms (as already noted), is more widespread than is generally mentioned. It can also hardly be irrelevant that the poet was writing almost 400 years after the coming of Islam: whatever his personal religious persuasion — which remains ambiguous — it is likely that the values of his contemporary society also permeated his work, whether consciously or not, so that his poetry and his ethics sit perfectly comfortably with Muslim belief.

In its own time, the full significance of Firdausi’s work was nevertheless unappreciated. We can identify the evaluation of the text both as a symbol of “Iranianness”, and as a preferred subject for the renaissance of Persian culture.
Following the Mongol conquests and fall of the Abbasid caliphate in 1258, Iran’s new rulers first became at least partly acclimatized to Persian culture, and ultimately also converted to Islam. The earliest surviving manuscripts of the *Shahnama* date from 1217 and 1276; the last coincides with the construction of the Il-Khanid palaces at Takht-e Sulaiman with their superb glazed tiles bearing quotations from the poem. These texts and another recently discovered from around the same time are not illustrated – but this situation suddenly changes, apparently coinciding with the conversion of Ghazan Khan to Islam (in 1294), so that by the mid-Safavid period, the text has hardly faltered, and hundreds of copies have been identified. From this time, the popularity of the text has gone on to develop by the Persian artists over a long period.

If one looks at representative and outstanding examples of these illustrated manuscripts, he can see some of the subjects most frequently chosen and popular with the artists and their patrons. Among these were the murder of Iran (165 examples found so recorded by the *Shahnama Project*); the death of Suhrab (over 240) and of Siyavush (over 400 for his fire ordeal and later murder, combined); the transfer of power from Dara (Darius III) to Iskandar (132); and Rustam’s archetypal confrontation with the White Div, by far the most popular of all (274). Other popular scenes are Buzhan’s rescue from the pit (189) and the death of Isfandiyar (227). The comparison of the treatment of these subjects allows us to appreciate the changing style and iconography developed by the Persian artists over a long period.

The succession of manuscripts of the highest quality, produced at the royal ateliers (*ketâbkhâna*), starts with the Great Mongol or ‘Demon’ *Shahnama* (c. 1335), in which there is a strong emphasis on the cycle of Alexander or Iskandar (at least in the paintings that have survived the brutal dismemberment of the manuscript). Thus, echoing the point made earlier about the Mongols’ exposure to the culture of their subjects, we find a truly imperial depiction of the ruler as an aloof being, seemingly detached from the events around him, whereas later depictions of the prince enthroned tend to see him engaging at some levels with the courtiers clustering around the throne. In the Great Mongol *Shahnama* there is also some focus on the story of Iraq and his murder, which as mentioned, became one of the most frequently-depicted scenes: explaining, as it does, the initiation of the vendetta between the Iranians and the Turanians, the resolution of which dominates the whole first ‘legendary’ portion of the poem. The story of Iraq also provides an early paradigm of the martyred innocent, which is reinforced in the later story of Siyavush and chimes so sympathetically with Iranian Shi’i religious sentiment. In terms of artistic expression, the ‘Demon’ *Shahnama* is a one-off, few later copies coming close to matching its emotional power.

A group of three almost exactly contemporary copies, made for the three grandsons of Timur, between c. 1425 and 1440, are also remarkable for their inventiveness and the high quality of their execution – as much for the illuminations as the pictures themselves. Ibrahim-Sultan’s copy was first, made in Shiraz, pioneering powerful, minimalist compositions that reduced the scenes to their essentials. In contrast, the copies made for his brothers Baysonghor (1430) and Muhammad Juki (1440) in Herat contain a high degree of abstraction, in that the emphasis seems to be as much on the surface brilliance of the execution as on the narrative moment.

This tendency to technical perfection reached its peak in the work done for the Shah Tahmasp (‘Houghton’) *Shahnama*, probably started for Shah Isma’l I (d. 1524) but completed for Tahmasp by c. 1540 and employing the most celebrated artists of the Timurid court in Herat. This magnificent, heavily illustrated copy, has made most subsequent efforts seem rather second-rate, although some important manuscripts were copied at royal command for the short-reigned Shah Isma’l II (1576-77) and later Shah ‘Abbas (d. 1629). An interesting group of manuscripts was illustrated in the 1640s, and artists of the renown of Mu’in Musavvir produced several copies in the following decades; the influence of western painting and the adoption of mannerist poses, pale pastel hues and a sense of perspective all show the Iranian artists’ continuing adaptability and inventiveness to endow well-worn subjects with a new liveliness.

So much for the *Shahnama* itself – clearly it is a work of enormous significance in Iranian culture. We can observe various measures of the impact of the work on later generations. First, the literary impact; second, the visual influence of *Shahnama* illustrations on other works; and third, what might be called the reciprocal impact of the iconography of scenes in other literary works being re-imported back into *Shahnama* illustrations. We are especially concerned here with the last two points, as they relate to the arts of the book, but in reality all three elements are to some degree inter-related.

From the literary perspective, later poets attempted to fill out some of the stories from the so-called ‘Sistan’ cycles of narratives of the house of Rustam that were left incomplete or ignored altogether by Firdausi. The most significant of these were Asad Tusi’s *Garshaspanma*; the Bâzunama, which followed the fortunes of Suhrab’s son, who narrowly avoided being killed by Rustam as his father had been, thanks to the timely intervention of his mother (figure 1); and the *Bahmannama*,
These works too were illustrated and could be referred to Firdausi’s poem in their retelling. Later epic poets such as Nizami of Ganja (d. 1209), Amir Khusrau Dihlavi (c. 1302) and Jami (d. 1494) also refer to Firdausi’s poem in their retelling.

The visual impact of Shahnama iconography can also be seen in the religious epic by Ibn Husam (Qisas al-anbiya’). The Shahnama itself, thus almost indistinguishable from Shahnama paintings in the absence of the text.

Rather different is the appearance of characters from the Shahnama appearing in prose works such as Books of Marvels (‘Ajā’ib al-makhluqāt), with illustrations that are directly influenced by Shahnama iconography, such as Bizhan being rescued from the pit by Rustam (in connection with the pit of Akvan Div), or the fire ordeal of Siyavush (in connection with an entry on ‘fire’), or, on more, stories concerning Iskandar. Stories of the Prophets (Qisas al-anbiya’), recounting the career of Joseph (Yusuf) frequently contain pictures of him being drawn out of the well where he had been thrown by his jealous brothers, in images again reminiscent of the Shahnama.

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ARTISTIC CURRENTS ALONG THE GULF IN ANCIENT TIMES

Trudy S. Kawami
Presented in English
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Our view of the art of ancient cultures has often centred on the so-called empires, Assyria for instance, which we see as centres from which artistic impulses emanated outward. But excavations and research along the southern shores of the Gulf present a different model from that of artistic centre and periphery. The Gulf, known to ancient Mesopotamians as The Lower Sea, and its peoples have long been a conduit for both precious commodities and ideas that travelled between West and South Asia. The resulting cosmopolitan culture was not concentrated in one large capital which dominated the area, but rather was spread out along the hospitable western shore of the Lower Sea. Its centres were numerous, well-watered islands like Failaka, Tarut and Bahrain, as well as inland settlements that served the coastal trade. Because it connected disparate ethnic, artistic and cultural spheres, the Gulf has a special place in the history of ancient art in the Near East, a facilitator of artistic and intellectual interaction.

As early as 4,000 BCE, traders from Mesopotamia were bringing the well-made and beautifully painted Ubaid pottery to the shores of the Gulf. It was probably the contents of these pots, not the ceramics themselves that were the focus of this exchange but alas the contents have long since vanished. By the 3rd millennium BCE the rich copper deposits of Oman (Sumerian Magan, Akkadian Makkan) supplied the craftsmen of metal-poor Mesopotamia with copper and bronze. The site of Tell Abraq, near Sharjah, provides glimpse of the culture that grew up with this long-distance trade. The resulting cosmopolitan culture reminded us that each region along the coast has its own identity. The tombs on Bahrain held from one to only a few individuals each in contrast to the huge communal burials of Tell Abraq. Clearly the two regions had very different concepts of family and burial. There were also probably other differences in social customs and speech that are lost to us at our distance in time.

Tarut Island, north of Bahrain, was a major source of Omani copper. This was probably the source of the wealth that in the late 3rd millennium BCE supported the construction of Tell Abraq’s major structure, a mud-brick tower 40 m in diameter with stone facing. Tell Abraq was also a major transhipment point for luxury goods in this period. Its well-to-do inhabitants were buried in huge communal tombs with gold ornaments, ivory combs (figure 1) from Central Asia, etched carnelian beads from the Indus Valley (Akkadian Meluhha) and decorative soft stone containers with Iranian and Mesopotamian parallels.

In return Mesopotamian styles in temple building came into the Gulf. The Barbar temple complex in Bahrain, ancient Dilmun, had a square stone terrace with an encircling oval wall, a distinctive arrangement known from Mesopotamian temples like that at Khafaje in the Diyala region of modern Iraq. A foreign merchant would have felt at home worshipping here. But the Barbar temple was clearly dedicated to a local god, possible Enzak, and a number of features like the double well-like altars and peculiar circular stones on the terrace and the deep pool with descending stairs in the outer enclosure are distinctively local. Even the copper finds from the temple’s ruins, an elegant bull’s head and a standing male figure, demonstrate local characteristics while pointing to Mesopotamian connections.

The large cemeteries of the third millennium remind us that each region along the coast has its own identity. The tombs on Bahrain held from one to only a few individuals each in contrast to the huge communal burials of Tell Abraq. Clearly the two regions had very different concepts of family and burial. There were also probably other differences in social customs and speech that are lost to us at our distance in time.

Tarut Island, north of Bahrain, was a major source of Omani stone boxes with richly patterned sides and curious imagery that were exported as far north as Syria where they were excavated five thousand years later in the ruins of palaces and temples. Utilizing stone from the Arabian Peninsula and possibly from south-eastern Iran, Tarut produced vessels in the so-called ‘Intercultural Style’ featuring motifs like palm trees, twining snakes and exuberant instruments. These vessels were highly prized in antiquity and have been found in elite tombs and temples throughout western Asia. An imposing meter-high stone figure of a nude worshipping man (figure 2) repeats a Mesopotamian image, but in local stone and on a very large scale. Its size and accomplished execution suggest a local sculptural production that has yet to be uncovered.

It is probably in this period, near the end of the third millennium BCE, that the island of Failaka was settled. Locus F6 on the south-western shore yielded evidence for a large stone-based structure presumed to be a temple, a large house with adjacent storage buildings and a variety of seals, some cylinder seals imported from Mesopotamia. The presence of these seals which include a locally produced version of the Mesopotamian cylinder seal suggests active commercial contact between these two spheres. The soft stone (chlorite) fragments confirm connections with Tarut where such vessels were made, and the cuneiform inscription carved on one vessel attests to a literate society. This fragment (figure 3) is doubly precious as the inscription gives us the name of a major deity, Enzak, perhaps the one worshipped in the temple. These rare remains, seen in the context of the entire western coast, show a culture on Failaka with literate cosmopolitan traders willing to adopt and adapt new styles and materials, but nonetheless retaining their own identity and belief systems.

Even small Kharg Island off the Iranian coast was part of the artistic waves that circulated in this period. A small stone Sumerian sculpture almost identical to the excavated sculptures from the Diyala in Mesopotamia is reported from there.

Besides Omani copper, what other goods from the Gulf itself? Mother-of-pearl slabs and shells for inlay like those found in the Royal Tombs of Ur were a major aspect of the Gulf trade to judge from the numerous Mesopotamian finds from the Royal Tombs at Ur to the Palace at Ebla in Syria. Two shellfish, Fasciolaria trapezium and especially Lambis truncate sebae, were the sources of this material which may be identified with the Akkadian word ajartu. In modern times these two species are found in the Gulf of Oman, the Indian Ocean side, but it is certainly possible that they flourished farther to the north, past the Straits of Hormuz. The export with the highest value, however, was not Mother-of-pearl but the rare, hard-to-curve black diorite shipped to Mesopotamia from the Arabian Peninsula. Paramount Mesopotamian rulers like Sargon of Akkad and Gudea of Lagash bragged in their inscriptions that their statues carved of this exotic “esu-stone of Makkan” which would last forever. The decorated carnelian beads from the Indus Valley, worn by, and buried with, the ruling elite in Mesopotamian cities like Ur and Mari moved through the Gulf. The brilliant blue lapis lazuli from Afghanistan followed the same route as did ivory and decorated items from as far north as Central Asia.

Dr Trudy S. Kawami is the director of research at the Arthur M. Sackler Foundation in New York. She has four publications in production, including Zebu Cattle in the Apadana Reliefs at Persepolis. “O Sábuhr kē cząr az yazdān dāšt: Essays in Memory of A. Shapur Shahbazi for Iran University Press and Parsa-Pasargadae Research and “The Image of the Coiled Feline in the Iron Age Steppes, ,” which will be part of the BAR International series.
The use of the cuneiform writing system and cylinder seals to validate agreements spread from Mesopotamia to the Gulf, further facilitating international trade and communication. By the end of the third millennium BCE, almost every artistic style and luxury material known in Western and South Asia was moving along the Gulf.

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The archaeological levels of the first millennium BCE are near the surface, hence vulnerable to the deep digging of modern machinery as well as general development. Nonetheless, we have sufficient written references as well as “dirt archaeology” to see the cultural currents swirling during this period. We know that the Babylonians liked Failaka. According to an Aramaic inscription from Tell Khazneh on Failaka Nebuchadnezzar II (605 – 562 BCE) had a temple and palace there. Nabonidus, the last ruler of the Neo-Babylonian period (556 - 539 BCE), installed a governor at Dilmun (Bahrain). Knowing the long history of the Gulf, it is no surprise that these mighty rulers wanted to keep tabs on activity and commerce there, and perhaps enjoy the climate in the appropriate season.

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They built two temples, now called Temple A and Temple B. Temple A was in the Greek style called in antiq, that is the side walls were brought forward to the edge of the front steps and two simple columns with Ionic capitals punctuated the small porch. Ornamental stone akroteria marked the edges of the roof in true Greek fashion. But this was not a completely Greek structure. If one looks closely at the column bases, one can see that they are not Ionic at all, for Ionic bases are simple ribbed disks. The Failaka bases are close cousins to column bases from Persepolis, the Achaemenid capital.

Reused from an Achaemenid building on Failaka, these columns bases nicely parallel the more humble finds of the residential area around the temples. Here Greek and non-Greek lived side by side, the native with the new-comer in typical Gulf manner. In the economic sphere, however, the Greeks made a lasting contribution with the classical style of their money. Their distinctive silver coinage featuring the profile of Alexander on one side became the favoured medium of international exchange and inspired local Gulf rulers to issue copies of these valued coins. Greek coinage set a standard of purity and excellence that was followed and imitated for centuries.

By the first century of the Common Era (CE) the fame of the Gulf region reached all the way to East Asia. In 97 CE Gan Ying, a general from the illustrious Ban family (who may have been Central Asian originally) was sent by the Emperor An to document the routes by which trade could move between China and Rome. Gan Ying’s account, “Chronicl of the Western Regions” in the Hou Hanshu (History of the Later Han, compiled in the 5th century), reads:

“Leaving Susa and travelling south you cross a river, then going southwest you reach the kingdom of Ka-ra after ca. 400 km.” (Ka-ra was Charsax Spanisou, a nominally Greek trading depot near Basra at the head of the Gulf that was actually controlled by Nabatean Arabs) “This is the extreme western frontier of Parthia. Leaving there and heading south, you embark on the Great Sea (our “Lower Sea”) and then reach Da Qin (Roman territory).”

This is the first mention of Rome in Chinese historical literature. The image of the early explorer standing at the head of the Gulf and looking to the west is a fitting coda to the richly varied currents that had already flowed through this vital waterway for over three thousand years.

Special thanks to Dr Kawarini for providing the images for this article.
It is interesting to observe the degree to which the study of the transfer of artefacts between the Islamic Near East and Europe has evolved away from early art-historical modes of enquiry. It has become increasingly attuned to the need to take account not only of political and economic factors but also of ideological issues. It has begun to address what may be couched in contemporary terms as hybridity and transformations of meaning and identity.

Of the Middle Eastern artefacts now in Western Europe, many arrived during the Medieval period, as is demonstrated by the rock crystals, ivory, glass, textiles and metalwork in many church treasuries and aristocratic collections, and although some were pillaged, others were gifts and others were traded. The Geniza documents, which record, amongst other things, the activities of Jewish merchants in Fatimid Egypt, give evidence of healthy trans-Mediterranean trade connections as far back as the eleventh century, indeed, noted Arabid S. D. Goltein named the collection of volumes of his major publication on the documents “A Mediterranean Society”.

Given such information, it is hardly surprising that the old emphasis on empires, which even when used as seemingly neutral taxonomic tools still carried the implication that they were the major actors in the generation and transfer of artefacts, has gradually receded. The role of Byzantium, for example, had traditionally dominated the landscape of Eastern Mediterranean scholarship, and more recently it has still been viewed as a bridge between East and West, especially in the transmission of ornament or technique (with reference, for example, to the use of pseudo-Kufic inscriptions, or to the origins of enamelling on glass in the western world).

But such generalised appeal to the mediation of Byzantium merely prolongs the traditional scheme. It is problematic not merely because the evidence for it may be inconclusive, but because it shore up a too schematic set of temporal and geographical demarcations and transitions. We need to heed the complexities of trading patterns and look at the Mediterranean less in terms of large-scale power blocs and more in terms of a patchwork of cultural centres participating in a set of loosely structured transactions. Rather than just to plot patterns of acquisition, it might be more profitable and more interesting to trace the responses to the different categories of artefacts as they variously maintain their original function, inspire emulation, are transformed, or are represented in other media. Such retentions or adaptations point to conceptual flexibility, reflecting varied modalities of reception.

During the medieval period, we find objects being placed in new environments and put to radically new uses. The information on what was traded is scanty, so that the mechanics of acquisition are unclear and in some cases were probably haphazard, particularly when account is taken of booty and looted objects. But however obtained, with several pieces 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, crucially 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. So this paper will attempt to characterise aspects of the flow of material culture across the Mediterranean during the Middle Ages from this wider perspective, using a small number of representative case studies.

A hitherto neglected but representative example is the “Reliquary of the Nails of Saint Clare”. This is a wonderful rock crystal vessel (figure 1), mounted on a copper gilt high stem that contains the relic which gives it its name. It was first mentioned in Emma Zocca’s catalogue of Assisi’s antiquities in 1936, and subsequently by Kurt Erdmann in 1940 in an entry in which he assigns the crystal to Fatimid Egypt and indeed considers it as one of the highest quality. During the 1990’s I discussed this piece with the late Ralph Pinder-Wilson who encouraged me to try and study the piece. 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”.

The relic is, then, Christian; the reliquary belongs to a convent and the mount is an example of western European goldsmithry, 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, ones that combine embellishment, functional displacement, and effacement of any consciousness of origin. Just as renaissance painters happily allow the lute, the shawm and the long trumpets to be played by Christian angels, 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 looks by being made into composites, and decisively detached from their original function. You have a wonderful example here in the collection of the Dar al-Atwar al-Islamiyyah, (figure 2) a beautiful rock crystal flask with an Arabic inscription carved in relief around the body which says “Baraka li-sahibihi”. But it has been mounted in Europe with a silver gilt lid with a putto on top and a foot with inscriptions that relate the object to Spanish aristocratic families: it had been probably used as a reliquary. Going back to the reliquary of St Clare, the flask containing the nails has been set upside down, and typologically belongs to a group of heart-shaped flasks, including...
The crystal itself is unfortunately chipped at the top and 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, 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. The carving is sharp and used in masterly fashion for the curved floral decoration that allows us to relate this piece to Fatimid Egypt, for it consists of the typically Fatimid multi-petaled palmette that is found not only on other rock crystals but also on other media.

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, and this diversity not only permits a sophisticated decoration but also allows the light to play with the crystal in different ways, making it vibrant.

The metal chalice that supports the reliquary was added in Italy, perhaps in the thirteenth or fourteenth century. Given the good fit one may think that it was created especially for this reliquary, although it could have been readapated from another object. The type recurs 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 indeed up to the nineteenth century.

For the Assisi flask the more radical transformation was undoubtedly that of function and associated meaning: what is now a sacred object was previously a rock crystal of Egyptian manufacture of the second half of the tenth century that probably served as a perfume holder or a cosmetic receptacle, as the Geniza documents testify. What allows the transfer from a culture to another is thus the aesthetic, the fashioning of a valuable raw material into a precious, delicately carved artefact that, having served 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.

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. These rock crystal and other objects were not placed directly in Church contexts on arrival from the Middle East: 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 transferred them 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, and it was there that they acquired their mounts.

There are also exceptional objects acquired at an early stage that were arguably subjected to processes of transformation driven by consciously ideological motives. One such object is the Andalusian marble capital (figure 3), set on the roof of Pisa cathedral. The capital, raised aloft on a short column, was situated at the end of the gabled roof of the northern transept, possibly supporting, as its modern replacement does, a Pisan cross. Given that the capital seems to have been placed there early on, during the first or second phase of the construction of the cathedral, 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, the fact that it was surmounted by a cross could be understood as a symbol of Muslim defeat.

The capital has an Arabic inscription that says “‘amal fatu al-naqqash ‘abdih [‘abdih]” (the work of Fatu the sculptor, his servant). It is carved with acanthus leaves at three levels, with the inscription on the central upper band of one side and belongs to a well-known group of the second half of the tenth century, from Madinat al-Zahra.

A splendid example is the one in your collection here (figure 4), the Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah, where a longer inscription is found around the top, bearing the name of al-Hakam II, Mustansir bi-llah, who reigned between 961 and 976, and of the same sculptor, Fatu. The capital may, then, have formed part of the architecture of the now ruined complex of Madinat al-Zahra. 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.

In any event, a century or so later it 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 of 1114.

So, presumably once one of a group on 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.

However, there is also an aesthetic element here. 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.