

MISSING LINKS: THE SIGHTS AND SMELLS OF MEDIEVAL LAMPS

Leena Ghannam

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Advised by Professor Christiane Gruber



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## I. Introduction

A series of illuminating moments led me to study the two main objects that this essay will address: an ornate hook and chain set (fig. 1). I want to emphasize the word “ornate” here, particularly because we would not normally expect such utilitarian objects to have been produced with such care. Composed of delicately inlaid silver, epigraphy and interlace decorate the surface of the hook—microcosmic elements of architecture and fauna are structurally integrated. Both objects are part of the Keir Collection of Islamic Art, currently loaned to the Dallas Museum of Art.<sup>1</sup> Although tangential to excavation, paleography, and material analysis,



*Figure 1*

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<sup>1</sup> The Keir, one of the most significant post-war collections of Islamic art, was assembled by Edmund de Unger, a Hungarian property developer. Previously bequeathed to Pergamon Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin in 2008, the Keir has been hosted at the Dallas Museum of Art since 2014. It was contractually loaned for 15-years.

this study of the hook and chain does not aim to be an archaeological one. Instead, I intend to interpret them as art historical objects of both unique significance and shadowed history, forensically interlinked with topics of philosophical, medieval and religious studies.

In a summary of the Keir's metalwork, Almut von Gladiss notes that "the elaborate construction of this [hook] again confirms that even everyday objects challenged the inventive powers of metalworking masters."<sup>2</sup> This descriptive flattery notwithstanding, there has been hardly any formal scholarly research on the hook and chain. They have never been displayed in a gallery. Furthermore, as I will later argue, the use and significance of these objects has been misinterpreted. Often considered to be simply a mechanism for suspending the *real* object of interest (i.e. lamps, incense, or fabrics), medieval hanging equipment is rarely analyzed, let alone preserved or well-documented. This study will focus on these beautiful utilitarian objects with the objective of examining the ways in which they transmit meaning. By transmission, I intend to suggest that the motifs at hand can be understood as a method of unobtrusive and experiential interpretation, which produce multiple sets of meanings rather than singular reference. Such is the role of a utilitarian object: to operate as a framework of symbolic charge.

The purpose of hooks and chains is to create an illusion of suspension; to make an object appear as if it is floating weightlessly. The hook's ornate silver inlay breathes a sense of fragility into its bronze form, reinforcing the appearance of fragility given by the hollow openwork. Yet both objects are quite hefty: the hook stands at 14.4 inches and the chain is 4.4 feet long.<sup>3</sup> Documented examples of decorated medieval Islamic hanging equipment are few and far between, nor is it common to come across a hook bears an artist's signature in hammered silver

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<sup>2</sup> Clause-Peter Haase, ed., *A Collector's Fortune: Islamic Art from the Collection of Edmund de Unger* (Staatliche Museen zu Berlin: Hirmer Verlag München, 2007), 126.

<sup>3</sup> For metric measurements, see fig. 1 description. The chain could have originally been longer because it looks to be broken.



inlay. This in-depth study of the hook and chain, while it does attempt to situate these objects in a geo-temporal milieu, mainly aims to explore the polyvalence of their motifs.

## II. Issues of Dealership

The story of the Keir Collection's hook and chain follows a trajectory similar to many privately-owned objects from the medieval Middle East: from unknown origins, to a Parisian marketplace, to a private collection.<sup>4</sup> Though Edmund de Unger purchased the hook and chain together, there is no way of knowing if they were produced or used together. Attempts to locate the origins of these objects has generated little more than vague assumptions. Géza Fehérvári, a specialist of the metalwork in the Keir Collection, has suggested that both objects were manufactured in Egypt in the thirteenth or fourteenth century, while the Dallas Museum of Art's digital catalogue dates them between the twelfth to fourteenth centuries. Given the dearth of substantive information, the present study will look at the object in relationship to metalworking traditions in order to enumerate, rather than narrow down, the possibilities. In order to allow the hook and chain to guide us to the lives it possibly lived, we may first look towards the body of the hook itself and inquire into its form as both a tool of practice and relic of visual culture.

The thick red and green patina on their surfaces, similarly oxidized on both objects, reinforces the claim that they are of the same age, same material, and same context. In the absence of a formal chemical analysis, scholars have assumed that both objects are bronze, which has left layers of multicolored rust. The hook probably contains a high-tin content (about 20%), hence the dark green, almost jade-like color of its patina.<sup>5</sup> If this analysis is correct, the

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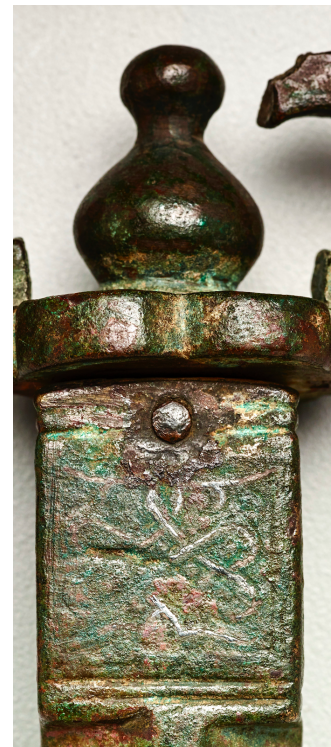
<sup>4</sup> The hook and chain are recorded to have been purchased together in Paris, 1971. See Géza Fehérvári, *Islamic Metalwork of the Eighth to Fifteenth Century in the Keir Collection* (London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1976), 130.

<sup>5</sup> Rutherford J. Gettens, "Tin-Oxide Patina of Ancient High-Tin Bronze," *Bulletin of the Fogg Art Museum* 11, no. 1 (1949): 16.

copper and tin have produced the red and green polychromatic surface of the hook. Similar varieties of oxidation are also present in Persian bronze mirrors, which are polished on one side to produce a shiny surface.<sup>6</sup> Al-Jazari, a twelfth-century Muslim polymath, described this type of copper alloy as white bronze (*isfahdruh*), which contains high amounts of tin, antimony, and lead.<sup>7</sup> It goes without saying that the Keir hook and chain were smoother and more reflective when they were first made.



*Figure 2*



*Figure 3*

We can deduce that multiple techniques were involved in manufacturing these objects. Several parts of the chain's surface have been decorated; there are perforation lines at the center

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<sup>6</sup> P.T. Craddock, "The Copper Alloys of the Medieval Islamic World - Inheritors of the Classical Tradition," *World Archaeology* 11, no. 1 (1979): 68-79.

<sup>7</sup> Eva Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1983), 1.

of each ring and the grooves cross-hatched on the outside of the large terminating ring (fig. 1). These decorations were likely executed with a chisel while the metal was still hot. The chain's links were produced by hammering strips of sheet metal around a circular mold—probably connected after hardening. If this is the case, the hammered rings were left with a gap to allow another ring to link; then two rings would be perpendicularly brazed or soldered together. The hook, on the other hand, was likely cast in closed piece-molds, which suggest that the design was mass-produced to some extent. The architectural openwork in the center of the shaft appears somewhat uneven, although this could be a symptom of oxidation (fig. 2). The openwork was probably shaped in the metal while it was being cast, given the risk of misshaping the hook in punching out large pieces of metal from its body. There are several carved indentations on the surface of the hook, whose grooves appear to have been made with a chisel or graving-tool. On the top panel of the shaft, the head of a nail is visible on either side (fig. 3). The peaked finial, which anchors the rotatable ornamentation to the hook, was likely affixed with this nail—rooting it through the shaft.

Finally, the hook features silver inlay, which Baer describes as “a technique for enriching a metal object by overlaying parts of its surface formed from metal wires or sheets different in composition and color from the ground material of the artefact.”<sup>8</sup> It seems as if the “dovetailing” method was used for the silver inlay. The metalworker would have chiseled an outline on the

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<sup>8</sup> Baer notes that “[a]lthough this craft too is of considerable antiquity, it did not become popular in Islam until the middle of the twelfth century.” Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, 2.

Figure 4



SIDE 1, combined metal and inscription drawing



SIDE 1, metal

كالدوله بكلاه اده ظال والخيالك ملوك كلال طاعنه واكارت را دا اي اجبت

SIDE 1, inscription drawing



SIDE 2, metal



SIDE 2, combined metal and inscription drawing

الحزب كلة الود سيدا او اعطار كياره ن؟ دلراك

SIDE 2, inscription drawing

bronze surface, fashioning a groove in which silver wire would be hammered in. Apparently, some sections have proved more durable—or at least have suffered less corrosion—than others. Silver inlay has been applied to create the interlace patterns, the teardrop shapes on tip of the hook, and finally the four inscriptions, all of which are written in Arabic script.

### III. Inscriptions

Two inscriptions can be found along the broad curve of the hook. Fehérvári deciphers the description as follows: “Glory, success and power, unimpaired life, thriving luck, glory, perfection and continuity to the owner.”<sup>9</sup> In order to make sense of these silver inscriptions, I have traced in black and red what remains of them on the hook (fig. 4). Black lines represent the remaining silver pieces, and red lines indicate where it appears the silver has fallen off. Given that silver inlay has fallen off, it is unlikely that Fehérvári’s aforementioned reading is entirely accurate. By the same token, it would be reasonable to assume that these inscriptions consisted of well-wishes. Another inscription can be found on the inner part of the hook, below the shaft. No one has yet deciphered this inscription. Once, again I have traced it for added legibility (fig. 5).

Yet another inscription can be found at the top-most panel of the shaft. Fehérvári’s describes this panel as “the middle unit” and has



سبحر شدا اللال

Figure 5

<sup>9</sup> Fehérvári, *Islamic Metalwork*, 130.

deciphered this unit as, “Made by Yahya” (fig. 6). A correct translation of these inscriptions is vital to understanding the origin of the object, particularly because a name, dialect, or any references could help identify its maker or historical context. I recently showed this epigraphic signature to experts of the Arabic and Syriac languages; little consensus has been reached on the identity of the artist. However, all consultants have agreed that the signature does not read “Made by Yahya.” While the beginning of the inscription does in fact read “amal” (امال) or “made by,” the second part of



*Figure 6*

the first line is not “Yahya” (يحيى). Rather, the name has been deciphered as “Arâtha” or ارآثا, which is a male name of Syriac origin. Other attempts have yielded different options: أراغا (Aragha) or ارآظ (Arath) were most notable.

I am inclined to believe that the inscription reads “Arâtha” for several reasons, one of which is informed by a close examination of the oxidation of the metal. Because of the polychromatic patina, it is easy to mistake a shiny golden area on the surface of the metal as a deliberate diacritical mark once filled in by silver inlay. I invite readers to look for themselves: note that a gold-colored spot appears above first letter and the last. Also note that no paleographers or art historians have suggested that the inscription begins with a ع rather than a ع, despite the gold marking above the ع which could be mistaken as a diacritic. Considering the prevalence of the

green-tinged indentations—some of which still hold silver inlay—we must be cautious not to invent inscription without sufficient evidence. If the artist is indeed a Syriac named “Arâtha,” several conclusions can be made regarding the origin of the hook and chain. As Syriac is the liturgical language of Syrian Orthodox Christianity, it would imply that the artist is a Syriac Christian metalworker from the Jaziran region.

Further inquiries into the artist’s hometown or occupation could be determined by deciphering of the Keir hook’s *nisbah* (نسبة or “place-name”) which is written on the line below the artist’s name (fig. 6). Possible hypotheses include الحائز (*alhayiz*, “the holder”), الحارئ (*alhari*, “the reader”), or الحاري (*alharii*, “the hot”). In these cases, we have deciphered the two last letters as a compounded single letter; for example, combining a ر and ي. *Alharii* or *alharra* (الحاري, “the hot”) makes for a compelling hypothesis because it could be referencing the ancient city in southwest Syria, assumed to have been settled by the Ghassanids (220 - 638 A.D.). If the second line is indeed a transliteration of Al-Haraa (now spelled as الحارّة), it suggests that the objects may have been made there or that the artist could have been an immigrant to another city with metalwork foundries and a Syriac population (i.e. Mosul or Damascus).

The Syriac reading could serve as another example of the multireligious interactions that took place in medieval Jazira (comprising of northwestern Iraq, northeastern Syria and southeastern Turkey). Specifically termed the “Jaziran Synthesis,” Margaret Graves points to the dynamic fusion between Syriac Christianity and Islam in the Jazira region, where craftsmen of different faiths were known to collaboratively design and execute portable metalwork objects.<sup>10</sup> This synthesis of visual culture was especially prevalent in the so-called “Mosul school” of

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<sup>10</sup> Margaret Graves, *Arts of Allusion: Object, Ornament, and Architecture in Medieval Islam* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 83.

metalwork in the Zangid and later Ayyubid dynasties of the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>11</sup> Ecker and Fitzherbert have identified one such object, the Freer Canteen, which they suggest was produced by Muslim metalworker for a Christian patron.<sup>12</sup> In our case, the Keir’s hook could have been made for a Christian monastery or church, a Muslim mosque or madrasa, or any number of other potential sites—wealthy private homes, secular public buildings, or a (inter)religious space.

#### IV. Function

In *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, Eva Baer suggests that it is difficult to determine and classify the precise purposes of many of these utilitarian objects, primarily because an object could have served a number of purposes.<sup>13</sup> This is surely true of the Keir hook and chain, so it is important to examine the possibilities. Consider past assumptions about the function of the Keir objects; the hook is listed as a “Hook from a steelyard” in the Dallas Museum of Art’s online database. To address this claim, one must examine the aesthetics of the archetypal steelyard (a mechanism used

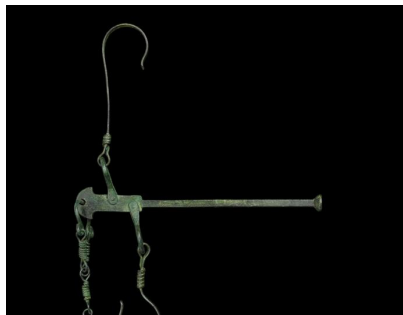


Figure 7



Figure 8



Figure 9

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<sup>11</sup> Heather Ecker and Teresa Fitzherbert “The Freer Canteen, Reconsidered,” *Ars Orientalis* 42, (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2012), 185. Further intrareligious brass artifacts of the Mosul school are thoroughly explored in Eva Baer, *Ayyubid Metalwork with Christian Images* (The Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1989); Raneer A. Katzenstein and Glenn D. Lowry, “Christian Themes in Thirteenth-Century Islamic Metalwork,” *Muqarnas* 1, vol. 53 (1983): 53-68.

<sup>12</sup> See Ruba Kana’an, “Patron and Craftsman of the Freer Mosul Ewer of 1232: A Historical and Legal Interpretation of the Roles of Tilmīdh and Ghulām in Islamic Metalwork,” *Ars Orientalis* 42 (2012): 67–78.

<sup>13</sup> Baer, *Metalwork in Medieval Islamic Art*, 6.



for weighing goods in marketplaces). While steelyards have hooks, they are rarely, if ever, as ornate or large as the Keir's. In fact, they tend to be quite thin and pointy (figs. 7, 8, and 9).

Due to the monumental weight and size of the hook, it is unlikely that it would have come from a



*Figure 10*

steelyard, whose purpose is to weigh. It is equally unlikely that our chain, given its length and weight, would have anything to do with weighing instruments. The linkage style on the Keir chain is also atypical of those on steelyards, which usually have a bent S-shape and tend to hold more weight without breaking (fig. 9).

Instead, the chain is composed of vertical and horizontal interlocking eyes (fig. 10). Chains of this figure-8 shape are generally rare but commonly found on medieval Byzantine Christian polycandela: round, flat hanging metal disks that hold multiple candles or oil lamps (fig. 11, 12). Though not all polycandela feature chains of this structure, many have links that were separately bent, then perpendicularly braised. Polycandela are typically found in churches of the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly in Coptic Egyptian contexts.<sup>14</sup> The Keir chain's aesthetic relation to lighting equipment implies that is functionally related as well. In fact, this hypothesis has already

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<sup>14</sup> Grace M. Crowfoot and D. B. Harden, "Early Byzantine and Later Glass Lamps," *The Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 17, no. 3/4 (1931): 196.

been proposed. Fehérvári was probably right when he suggested that the hook and chain were for suspending a lamp.<sup>15</sup>



*Figure 11*



*Figure 12*

#### **IV. The Lamp Hypothesis**

As previously discussed, the objects are likely composed of white bronze. This highly reflective metal would have been conducive to holding a lamp, which would have lit the hook and chain's surfaces from beneath. Furthermore, the silver interlaces and inscriptions on the hook would have become more visible and dramatic. The capacity of these reflective surfaces to transmit light suggests that they were designed with both a terrestrial and heavenly audience in

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<sup>15</sup> Fehérvári, *Islamic Metalwork*, 130.

mind. It appears likely that Keir objects were used to suspend a lamp. If the lengthy chain reached a low level, the hook's glittering silver inlay would have been visible to an audience on the ground.



*Figure 13*

The hook also has the ability to rotate; note the joint axis visible above the shaft where the palmette design forms a ring around a finial (fig. 13).

This leads us to conclude that the hook was produced to hold a monumental lamp in an airy archway for two reasons. First, its ability to rotate made it flexible (read: more durable) in wind; second, a person could climb a ladder and manually rotate the lamp in order to light candles or oil receptacles along the perimeter.



*Figure 14*

The medieval bell lamps of the Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez, similarly suspended by hooks and chains, allow us to imagine this process (fig. 14).<sup>16</sup> The candles

<sup>16</sup> Abdellatif El-Hajjami and Lhaj Moussa Aouni, *Al-Andalus: The Art of Islamic Spain*, ed. Jerrilyn D. Dodds, 272 – 273 and 278 – 279.

of the Qarawiyyin lamps, now replaced with lightbulbs, could have been lit via two methods. One would be to rotate the lamp to light each candle, and the other is simply to lower the lamp (fig. 15). It also appears that the chain is connected to a revolving contraption. Ironically, it appears that overtime, the friction of the finial broke the palmette ornamentation just above the joint. I've roughly drawn the potential missing piece in red to serve as a blueprint for potential repairs (fig. 16).



The Qarawiyyin Mosque lamps make for an interesting case study of the medieval use of spolia as a motif or allusion. The core of the monumental lamps are repurposed church bells

taken from the Cathedral of Santiago de Compostela in the Iberian Peninsula. The Almoravid, Almohad, and Marinid

*Figure 15*

dynasties, who spoliated the bells as a sign of Muslim victory over the Christians, commissioned metalworkers to add perforated metalwork to the exterior.<sup>17</sup> The altered bell lamps subsequently bore several traces of transferal—from one form, function, and religious tradition to another. Both bells and lamps are objects that generate sensorial, non-material effects. The reconfigured Qarawiyyin lamps, for their



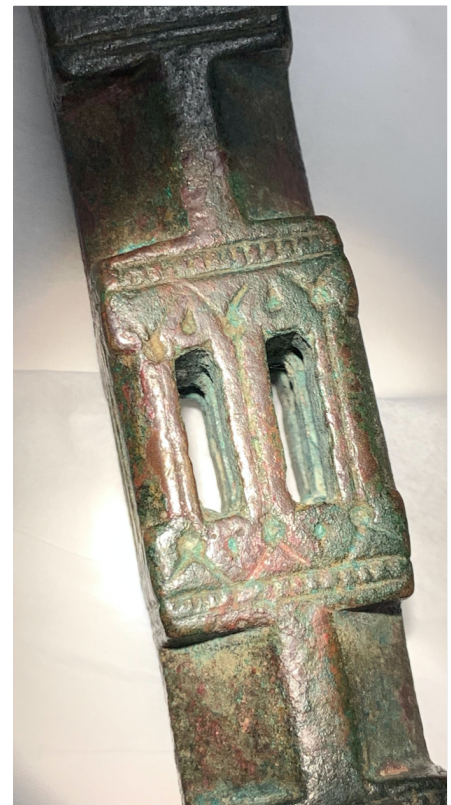
*Figure 16*

<sup>17</sup> El-Hajjami and Aouni, *Al-Andalus*, 272.

part, represent a shift in the senses from sound to light—and perhaps for the faithful, a conversion from one religion to another.

These kinds of analogies are not foreign to the system of references and allusions of medieval Islamic portables. Numerous scholars have explored the notion of a “shared culture of objects” as connected by theological motifs.<sup>18</sup> Like the Qarawiyyin bell lamps, the Keir’s hook is replete with cultural references. Take, for example, the equilateral cuboid openwork along shaft the hook (fig. 17). An elongated miniature building with two windows is located between two other cuboid panels above and below it (fig. 18). These windows open into an interior space allowing light to shine through. This miniature replica of an unknown architectural template acts as a novel shaper of light.

In the interest of setting the stage for the study of miniaturization in Islamic art, I first want to address the theoretical models established in the fields of literature and poetry—beginning with Bachelard’s *Poetics of Space*. “The cleverer I am at miniaturizing the world,” he writes, “the better I possess.” Later, Bachelard writes further, “The minuscule, a narrow gate, opens up an entire world.”<sup>19</sup> This approach to miniaturization was further developed in Susan Stewart’s *On Longing*. She discusses how space and time are intertwined with the miniature, adding that “minute description reduces the object to its signifying properties, and this reduction of physical dimensions results in a



*Figure 17*

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<sup>18</sup> See the work of Margaret Graves, Eva Baer, Rachel Ward, and Oleg Grabar.

<sup>19</sup> Gaston Bachelard, *The Poetics of Space* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1958), 169 and 174.

multiplication of ideological properties.”<sup>20</sup> The process of miniaturization, in other words, creates a macrocosm within a microcosm. As the object becomes a symbol, it is both reduced and expanded upon.<sup>21</sup>

Joan Kee and Emanuele Lugli explicitly apply this scholarship of the miniature to the field of art history. They note that the work of Stewart and other literary critics is limited in the sense that “the discussion is rooted in a distinctly text-based understanding of visual experience, which perhaps does not do enough to flush out the visual specificity of how the souvenir, the doll house or the miniature book shift from ‘the monumental to the miniature.’”<sup>22</sup> Though the question of scale is inherent in any visual medium, the topic has only been recently explored in philosophical terms. Within the larger category of miniatures, that of architecture reads in a specific way—

particularly in the case of openwork, which seeks to mimic a real space. Perhaps the earliest examples of sophisticated architectural

miniaturization can be found in Chinese antiquity: the *mingqi* (spirit articles) and *hunping* (soul jars) of the Han-Dynasty period (25 - 200 A.D.).<sup>23</sup> The intersection of realism with sanctity, explored in ancient China, continued into medieval Islamic art, as Michelle Smith argued in her



Figure 18

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<sup>20</sup> Susan Stewart, *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984), 47 - 48.

<sup>21</sup> For use of terminology regarding visual analysis of miniaturization, specifically macrocosm and microcosm, see John E. Mack *The Art of Small Things* (Cambridge, Harvard University Press, 2007).

<sup>22</sup> Kee and Lugli, “Scale to Size: An Introduction,” in *To Scale* (West Sussex: Wiley Publishing, *Art History* 38, no. 2, 2015), 12.

<sup>23</sup> Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 16-17.

2007 dissertation.<sup>24</sup> The mimetic qualities of miniaturized architectural forms take part in the theologically-informed visual culture of the time. I will henceforth use the somewhat niche term of “microarchitecture” to emphasize the microcosmic, somewhat abstract nature of the hook’s rendition.

## V. Microarchitecture

Achim Timmerman further elaborates by saying that microarchitecture “could aestheticize certain religious discourses, providing theatrical frameworks for programs of images or dramatize the performance of liturgical rituals or para-liturgical devotions.”<sup>25</sup> Scholars of medieval art often have analyzed examples of microarchitecture that reference recognizable architectural spaces as a vehicle for adjacent, particularly religious rhetoric.<sup>26</sup> As cultures

develop their characteristic forms of architecture, microarchitecture serves as a short-hand for the meanings generated by the buildings themselves.

Margaret Graves refers to the miniature as an “intensified essence.”

“The primary function [of miniatures],” Graves writes “is



*Figure 19*

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<sup>24</sup> Michelle Smith, *Early Islamic Metalwork in Jordan*, (Department of History in Art, University of Victoria, 2007), 102.

<sup>25</sup> Achim Timmerman, “Microarchitecture in the Medieval West, 800-1550,” in *The Cambridge History of Religious Architecture of the World*, ed. Richard Etlin, (New York and Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, forthcoming).

<sup>26</sup> See the analysis of medieval and gothic Christian microarchitecture in *Mikroarchitektur Im Mittelalter: Ein Gattungsübergreifendes Phänomen Zwischen Realität Und Imagination*, ed. Christine Kratzke and Uwe Albrecht. Leipzig: Kratzke Verlag für Kunst-und Kulturgeschichte, 2008).

representational and their role is to depict.”<sup>27</sup> The question then becomes: does Keir hook depict a *specific* architectural monument, and could this lead us to answers regarding its provenance?

To address these questions, I will turn to Graves’s analysis of the Gälve incense burner, in which she runs into familiar problems with attribution (fig. 19). From the outset, she warns against presupposing “a direct referential relationship between object and building.”<sup>28</sup> Having rehearsed debates over whether the burner was made in Iran or the eastern Mediterranean, Graves makes a case for comparative object analysis, arguing that it best to compare “metalwork with metalwork, whenever possible.”<sup>29</sup>

Although the Keir hook may not be a direct based on a particular architectural monument, the tower can be interpreted as an allusion to an archetype of religious towers. Though there is grooved ornamentation on the microarchitecture, the decoration is generic enough to act as a reference to any number of religious towers. The central microarchitecture is situated between thin rectangular edges of metal (fig. 18). It is difficult to parse out in photographs, but these thin strips are actually the corners of the cuboid shaft turned at a 45-degree angle, perhaps as a framing or elongating device. It could also be the case that this angled edge is an abstract allusion to the visual experience of a viewer circumambulating a real tower.

There are two possible types of towers—a minaret or a steeple—that the microarchitecture could be imitating. Both of these religious monuments are typically tall and slender, therefore making itself easily seen by the surrounding city—more beautifully advertising itself to potential converts. For Muslims, minarets better facilitate the muezzin’s call to prayer five times a day.<sup>30</sup> For Christians, church bells signal the canonical hours, mainly Matins, Lauds

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<sup>27</sup> Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 17.

<sup>28</sup> Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 165.

<sup>29</sup> Graves, *Arts of Allusion*, 164.

<sup>30</sup> Jonathan Bloom, *The Minaret* (Edinburgh University Press, 2013), 64.



and Vespers, which intend to summon believers to pray as well as to ward off demons.<sup>31</sup> Both of these structures, in other words, serve as architectural purveyors of salvation to the masses.<sup>32</sup>

This speaks to the common association between towers, heaven, and salvation from on high. This sacral claim also applies to the Islamic tradition and can be etymologically. In *The Minaret* Jonathan Bloom traces the word's origins: "minaret" comes from the Arabic words *manār* and *manāra* which mean either "place of fire" or "place of light."<sup>33</sup> Bloom also notes that Al-Asma'i, a ninth-century Arabic philologist, defined *manār* as "a sign or mark, set up to show the way" or a "thing that is put as a boundary between two lands, made of mud or clay or earth."<sup>34</sup> In fact, the word *manārat* is also the Arabic word for "lighthouses."

Apparently, the word was later extended in the Umayyad period to refer to the minarets above mosques. Minarets initially functioned trail markers, leading *hadj* pilgrimages from Iraq to Mecca across the Hijaz.<sup>35</sup> Thus, the minaret is understood, both culturally and linguistically, as the symbol of salvation for weary travelers. It seems likely then that Keir hook's towered microarchitecture, which in effect emits light, not only alludes Arabic conception of the minaret, but its symbolic function. Microarchitecture here serves as an aniconic image of God and enlightenment.

Before examining the theological underpinnings of this claim, it is important to acknowledge the three other possible examples of microarchitecture on the hook: two are architectural finials and the other is a mihrab. The first finial, previously mentioned as the axis upon which the upper palmette ornamentation can rotate, is affixed to the top of the tower (fig.

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<sup>31</sup> Bernard Cohen, *Benjamin Franklin's Science*, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1990), 119. Of towers in the Christian tradition, the Bible reads. "The name of the Lord is a strong tower; the righteous man runs into it and is safe." Proverbs 18:10.

<sup>32</sup> Though the tradition of canonical hours stems from Jewish tradition, synagogues rarely have towers.

<sup>33</sup> Bloom, *The Minaret*, 46.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Bloom, *The Minaret*, 47.

1). This could be read not only as a functional element, but as an *alem*; an architectural decoration that typically caps the top of minarets. Though an *alem* usually supports a metal crescent, it is possible that this finial is a miniaturized rendition of the archetype.

The second architectural finial can be found at the tip of the widely curved hook (figs. 19, 20), where two platforms appear to support dome-like forms. The knotted interlace pattern and the teardrop shapes, though not as explicitly microarchitectural as the *alem* shape, serve to mimic an emission of light or hollowness of a building. Furthermore, these elements are only inlaid with silver on the outer side of the hook. Perhaps the audience on the ground would have only seen this outer portion of the inlay, hence its limited application. On the other hand, if the hook was too high up, they nonetheless function within a sacred decorative program.



*Figure 19*



*Figure 20*



Figure 21



Figure 22

Yet another example of microarchitecture on the hook is formed by the palmettes above the shaft, which potentially outlines a mihrab motif (fig. 21). Marking the death of the prophet Muhammad in its niched void, the mihrab is a typical feature of mosques that signal prayer orientation towards Mecca.<sup>36</sup> In this reading, the three-pronged schema (partially drawn in red) is an abstracted mihrab, which stems up to form a symmetrically curvilinear shape: a lamp. A larger archway, formed by the backs of two birds, encloses the abstracted lamp and mihrab in the palmettes. Thus, the palmettes appear to be schematically rendering a domed religious building.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>36</sup> Nuha Khoury, "The Mihrab: From Text to Form," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 30, no. 1 (1998): 13.

<sup>37</sup> See Grave's discussion on "Mobile Monuments" in *Arts of Allusion*, 157-175. 91

Stephannie Mulder’s work on medieval ‘Alid shrines in Syria is helpful here. She describes the popularity of this composite microarchitectural motif of the mosque lamp hanging in an Islamic prayer niche. She writes that the mihrab as decorative images “first appear around the end of the eleventh century, and can be found as late as the early sixteenth century, but they seem to become particularly prominent in the late Ayyubid and Mamluk eras, in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, in Syria and Egypt.”<sup>38</sup> One of her examples of a Syrian mihrab motif, a fourteenth-century Egyptian stele, bears a striking resemblance to the form of the Keir hook’s palmette, right down to the flared shape of the rope (fig. 22). The similarity between the two solidify the hypothesis that the Keir hook and chain were produced in proximity to Bilad al-Sham. Both objects also serve as an example of the mystic and cultural significance of light in the Sufi and Syriac traditions.

## VI. Light

Oleg Grabar once wrote of the “low symbolic charge” that visual motifs undergo when their initial contexts change.<sup>39</sup> In the case of the Keir hook, the microarchitecture is emblematic of this effect. By exploring the hooks contemporaneous philosophy, one can better understand the theological underpinnings of light and its motifs. The Quran’s Verse of Light (*surat al-nūr*)—which Graves referred to as the most authoritative, yet inherently limited, explanation of the hanging lamp motif—remains crucial to our understanding of the functions of light and lighting equipment<sup>40</sup>:

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<sup>38</sup> Stephannie Mulder, “Seeing the Light: Enacting the Divine at Three Medieval Syrian Shrines.” *Envisioning Islamic Art and Architecture: Festschrift for Renata Holod*, ed. David Roxburgh, Leiden: Brill, 2014): 91.

<sup>39</sup> Oleg Grabar, “Symbols and Signs in Islamic Architecture,” in *Architecture as Symbol and Self-Identity*, ed. Jonathan G. Katz, Philadelphia: Aga Khan Award for Architecture, 1980), 4.

<sup>40</sup> Graves, “The lamp of paradox,” *Word & Image* 34, no. 3, (2018): 238.

God is the light [*nūr*] of the heavens and the earth; the likeness of His light is as a niche [*mishkāṭ*] wherein is a lamp [*mishkāḥṭ*]—the lamp in a glass [*zujāja*], the glass as it were a glittering star [*kawkabun durrīyun*]—kindled from a blessed tree [*shajaratīn mubārakatin*], an olive [*zaytūn*] that is neither of the East nor of the West whose oil well-nigh would shine, even if no fire touched it; light upon light. God guides to His light whom he wills. And God strikes similes for men, and God has knowledge of everything.<sup>41</sup>

The tradition of Islamic mysticism is built upon this materially specific self-portrait of the prophet Muhammad.

Consider, for example, *The Niche of Lights*; a twelfth-century treatise of the Persian Sufi philosopher al-Ghazali. Al-Ghazali was immensely respected and widely read in the medieval period as both a theologian (*mutakallim*) and a leading jurist (*faqīh*).<sup>42</sup> In *The Niche of Lights*, which takes its title from the light verse, al-Ghazali examines cosmological metaphysics and optics with the understanding that God is one, God is the “real light” and “everything else is sheer metaphor, without reality.”<sup>43</sup> Al-Ghazali’s mysticism, therefore, can be understood as a literalist reading of the light verse. “When the sun sets,” he wrote, “when the lamps are put away, and when shadows fall, the deniers perceive a self-evident distinction between the locus of the shadow and the place of brightness.”<sup>44</sup> Later in the text, he states that “by ‘guidance’ is meant

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<sup>41</sup> Qur’an 24:35; trans. Gerhard Böwering.

<sup>42</sup> David Buchman, “Translators Introduction,” in *The Niche of Lights* by Al-Ghazali, trans. Buchman. (Provo, Utah: Brigham Young University Press, 1982), xix.

<sup>43</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, 22.

light”<sup>45</sup> This kind of rhetoric reappears in Neoplatonic discussions of ontology of enlightenment in relationship to optics.<sup>46</sup> Spiritual salvation is not conceived of as metaphor, but as the exception to metaphor. The material world is merely a motif of God himself; humans are able to approach God through light.

Al-Ghazali was chiefly concerned with the paradox of describing what “lies beyond the limits of language,” and he insisted that there cannot be an equivalence between an image and an experience.<sup>47</sup> As opposed to the ekphrastic iconography often present in European art, Islamic mystic philosophy aesthetically operates as a system of cultural associations, which manifest as allusion or motif.<sup>48</sup> Aniconism in Islamic art functions similarly, wherein imagery (particularly figural) is perceived to be a crass or insulting attempt at copying something sacred.<sup>49</sup>

The aniconic paradigm is further illustrated in the work of Suhrawardi, another twelfth-century Persian Sufi philosopher. Surely inspired by Al-Ghazali’s *The Niche of Lights*, Suhrawardi developed a novel alternative to the Aristotelian theory of predicative knowledge.<sup>50</sup> He argues instead for a unified theory of “knowledge by presence”—a relational system between subject and object that has been termed “illuminationist relation” (*al-idāfa al-ishrāqiyya*).<sup>51</sup> This theory can us understand how the Keir hook might have been seen in its original context: as an apotropaic object with the ability to better facilitate a viewer’s interaction with God through the intercession of light.

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<sup>45</sup> Al-Ghazali, *The Niche of Lights*, 41.

<sup>46</sup> See Marsilio Ficino, *Platonic Theology*, published in Italy, 1469-1474.

<sup>47</sup> Al-Ghazālī, *Ih yā ‘ulūm al-dīn*, vol. 4. (Cairo: ‘Isa al-Babī al-Halabī, 1347/1928–29), 20.

<sup>48</sup> Graves, “The lamp of paradox,” 240.

<sup>49</sup> Christiane Gruber, “Idols and Figural Images in Islam: A Brief Dive into a Perennial Debate” in *The Image Debate: Figural Representation in Islam and Across the World*, ed. Christiane Gruber (London: Gingko, 2019), 9.

<sup>50</sup> Nicolai Sinai, “Al-Suhrawardī’s Philosophy of Illumination and Al-Ghazālī,” *Archiv Für Geschichte Der Philosophie* 98 (2016): 272–301.

<sup>51</sup> Hossein Ziai, Introduction to *The Book of Radiance* by Sohravardi, trans. Hossein Ziai (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1998), xix.

The ontology of light, wisdom, and salvation becomes even more apparent in the corpus of writing by medieval Syriac theologians. The thirteenth-century Syriac Christian maphrian Gregory Abū l-Faraj Barhebraeus was likely inspired by Islamic theology.<sup>52</sup> In two of his treatises—the *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary* and the *Book of the Pupils of the Eye*—Barhebraeus demonstrates his Neoplatonic affiliations though by providing sources of Aristotelian logic for a medieval Syriac audience.<sup>53</sup> Given the titles of these treatises, it is clear that Barhebraeus employed terminology often associated with optics and lighting equipment. For example, the title *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary* not only references a large, branched, menorah-like candle, but also the theological importance of light and enlightenment. Bearing in mind the etymological history of the word minaret, it is interesting to learn “that the [root] word *manāra* was [also] borrowed from a word meaning “candlestick” (a cognate of the Hebrew word menorah) in Aramaic.”<sup>54</sup> It is not surprising then that an Andalusian candlestick holder would bear similar microarchitectural and bird motifs to the Keir hook, both of which were used as lighting equipment (fig. 23).<sup>55</sup>



Figure 23

<sup>52</sup> Takahashi, “Reception of Islamic Theology among Syriac Christians in the Thirteenth Century: The Use of Fakhr Al-Dīn Al-Rāzī in Barhebraeus’ *Candelabrum of the Sanctuary*,” *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World* 2, 1–2 (2014): 172.

<sup>53</sup> Herman F. Janssens, “Bar Hebraeus’ *Book of the Pupils of the Eye*,” *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 47, no. 1 (1930): 31.

<sup>54</sup> Bloom, *The Minaret*, 7.

<sup>55</sup> Two others have been found in Madinat Ilbira in Granada, Spain; Manuel Gómez-Moreno, *Ars hispaniae Ars hispaniae : historia universal del arte hispánico. Vol. 3, El arte árabe español hasta los almohades, arte mozárabe*,

This web of associations is indeed connected to Barhebraeus' reflections on wisdom and enlightenment, in which he emphasizes optics as an intercessory medium:

Because, although the holy teachers brought forth their proper teachings against the multitude of false opinions that sprang up in the world, the children of our age, dim-witted and enfeebled, are incapable of comprehending the amplitude of (the teachings) and of measuring the immeasurability of their extension—and for this reason, the field of wisdom has lain fallow, the love for it has grown cold, *its fire has been extinguished and its light has darkened*—I have judged it necessary to collect together the necessary questions in an encompassing work, and to treat in a philosophical way and to discuss the doctrines pertaining to both theology and the natural sciences.<sup>56</sup>

Barhebraeus' refers, in this case, to absence of (en)light(enment) in contemporaneous medieval scholarship. Light is a stand-in for God, truth, and a believer's knowledge of both. The greater our exposure to the vocabulary of medieval theologians, the less metaphorical the word "enlightenment" appears.

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(Madrid: Editorial Plus-Ultra, 1951); Juan Zozoya, "Aeraria de Transición: Objetos Con Base de Cobre de Los Siglos VII Al IX En Al-Andalus," *Arqueología Medieval* 11, 2011: 11–24.

<sup>56</sup> Ján Bakos, *Le Candélabre des sanctuaires de Grégoire Aboulfaradj dit Barhebraeus* (Paris: Firmin-Didot, 1930–1933), 21, 24f., 26f.. My italics.



A hierarchy (*takhyil*) in the Keir hook is evoked through the progression of forms. We can manually segment this progression into three parts: the curved hook at the bottom, the microarchitectural shaft, and the palmettes at the top (fig. 24). The hook's hierarchy further suggests the artist's familiarity with Sufi metaphysics. Suhrawardi is one such proponent of this hierarchical cosmic logic. Consider *The Book of Radiance*, in which he describes the "realm of intellect" as the celestial sphere that operates in harmony with the material world, but remains wholly independent of it.<sup>57</sup> For Suhrawardi, it is a blessing that the celestial sphere moves around the Earth, because "were celestial bodies stationary, then parts of the Earth on which rays of the stars shine continuously would be destroyed, while the rest would remain deprived of light."<sup>58</sup> This is likely an explanation as to why the faithful are enlightened over time, otherwise "destroyed" by overexposure to God's light.



*Figure 24*

Suhrawardi goes on to define three "Realms of existence." The first, assumed to be highest, is the "Realm of Intellect" also defined as the "Great Heaven." This sphere holds "noncorporeal essences free from matter" that are controlled by "Light and the Glory of God." The second is known as the "Lesser Heaven" —the "Realm of Soul which comprises essences

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<sup>57</sup> Suhrawardi, *The Book of Radiance*, 50.

<sup>58</sup> Suhrawardi, *The Book of Radiance*, 66

free from matter but take matter upon themselves.” The third is called the “Realm of Matter” or the “Realm of Earthly Dominion” and is assumed to be Earth.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps it is not by chance that we can visually identify three realms of the Keir hook. The widely curved hook at the bottom can be interpreted as “Realm of Earthly Dominion,” whose assumed well-wishes to the owner would subversively suggest that the patron’s wealth is limited to this material sphere. The microarchitectural shaft of the hook can be understood as the “Realm of Soul,” in which the tower is a material feature that contains an immaterial essence of light and enlightenment. This entire shaft could, in fact, represent a religious building that serves as a transitory space from earth to heaven, with floor tiling at the bottom panel, ceiling decoration at the top. The “Realm of Intellect” could be represented by the upper palmette ornamentation, which abstractly swirls to form a peaked archway, leading presumably to the “Great Heaven.” The palmettes pivot over the rest of the hook, with the tower’s *alem* acting as its axis, which points towards the rotating celestial sphere. Moving from the bottom of the hook upwards, the dense metal appears to dissipate, as if to become more immaterial as it enters the realm of God. The miniaturized tower on the hook thus embodies multiple modes of transmission: of sound, of light, of enlightenment.

By comparing the Keir hook with hanging lamp motifs elsewhere, we can imagine how the hook would have been perceived *in situ*. In Islam, one of the cornerstones of the synecdotal lamp-archway motif can be found on the famed frontispiece of a Quran found in Sana’a, though thought to have been made in Damascus (fig. 25).<sup>60</sup> This two-dimensional rendering of a hypostyle mosque resembles the abstracted image in the palmette of the hook (fig. 26).

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<sup>59</sup> Suhrawardi, *The Book of Radiance*, 67-68.

<sup>60</sup> Tim Mackintosh-Smith, “The Secret Gardens of Sana’a,” *Aramco World* 57 1 (2006): 36.



Figure 25



Figure 26

The fragment is thought to have been made in Damascus because it is said to resemble the architecture plan of the city's Umayyad Mosque (also known as the Great Mosque of Damascus).<sup>61</sup> The Umayyad Mosque's hypostyle plan set a standard for subsequent mosque architecture in Syria and beyond. The Umayyad Mosque also features three minarets, the earliest and tallest of which, the Minaret of the Bride (*Madhanat al-Arus*), resembles the microarchitecture of the hook, with two windows on each side (fig. 27). The miniature tower could serve as a direct reference to the Minaret of the Bride, which might very well suggest a Bilad al-Sham attribution.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>61</sup> Richard Ettingshausen et al. *Islamic Art and Architecture 650-1250* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1974), 24.

<sup>62</sup> It should not be disregarded, however, that the tower microarchitecture also looks similar to that of the Koutoubia Mosque in Marrakesh and the Giralda Tower in Seville, perhaps placing it in an Andalusian context.

The Umayyad Mosque in Damascus is also notable for its monumental chandeliers, which hang from the rafters (fig. 28). There are examples of these monumental lamps in religious contexts all over the world. Their longstanding aesthetic significance is hinted at in a nineteenth-century painting, titled *At the Mosque Door* by Osman Hamdi Bey gives us an idea of the longstanding aesthetic significance of the hanging lamp.<sup>63</sup> The painting represents a typical Turkish lamp suspended from a chain in the doorway of a mosque (fig. 29). This lamp was likely lit through its pictured levy system, which could lower the lamp. Hamdi Bey’s painting illustrates the prominence lamps in the quotidian life of Muslim villagers and the continued aesthetic significance of light and lighting equipment in an Islamic context.<sup>64</sup>



*Figure 27*



*Figure 28*

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<sup>63</sup> Other examples include the aforementioned Qarawiyyin Mosque in Fez, the Great Mosque of Kairouan in Tunisia, the Al-Azhar Mosque in Cairo. The Mosque of Muhammad Ali in Cairo, while not hypostyle, has massive lighting equipment in the interior, further demonstrating the aesthetic significance of light as a feature of Islamic architecture.

<sup>64</sup> These arguments are attributed to Graves, “The lamp of paradox” and Mulder, “Seeing the Light.”

The taboo of idol worship in the Quran has produced widespread interreligious aniconism in the Islamic world. Thus, representations of God are not directly symbolic, but rather mimic sensorial experiences of divinity. The ontology of light as a more tolerable image of the ineffable has been studied by Islamic theologians and art historians alike. Christiane Gruber argues that there are two alternative forms through which the image of the prophet Muhammad is evoked in the Persian painting tradition: light and inscription. The depiction of divine radiance in Islam is often referred to as *nūr Muhammad* or “the light of Muhammad,” which seeks, Gruber argues, “to transcend the restrictions of mimetic description in order to herald the Prophet as a cosmic entity freed from temporal boundaries and corporeal limitations.”<sup>65</sup>



*Figure 29*

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<sup>65</sup> Gruber, “Between Logos (*Kalima*) and Light (*Nur*)” 230.



*Figure 30*



*Figure 31*



*Figure 32*



*Figure 33*



*Figure 34*



*Figure 35*

## **VII. Perfumed Oils**

Gruber also discusses another “non-corporeal attribute” of the prophet, one that is often liturgically invoked: aroma. The Keir hook and chain can be compared a corpus of six ewers, which suggests that these objects may have been used as olfactory equipment in addition to lighting equipment. These ewers feature two similarly significant elements to the hook: microarchitecture and zoomorphic imagery (figs. 30-35). Each of the ewers is about 20 cm tall (give or take 5.5 cm), with a slightly flared mouth, flared base, and slenderly tapered necks, which have decorative rings around their narrow locus. Also, all ewers have a large S-shaped handle, each of which feature cuboid microarchitecture (similar to the hook) as well as a soldered

figurine, typically of a horse or lion.<sup>66</sup>

The addorsed birds on the Keir hook serve as this mimetic zoomorphic motif. An unexpected comparison can be made with these objects and the Keir chain; note the cross-hatched rings on both the necks of the ewers and the terminating link of the chain (figs. 31, 36). Given that



*Figure 36*

none of the ewers are inlaid, it follows that were likely made earlier than the hook—varying in date from the seventh to eleventh century. The striking similarities between the hook and these ewers, however, leads us to conclude that they were a part of the same artistic milieu.

There are likely dozens of these objects scattered in museums all over the world, three of which can be found in the Keir Collection. Some differences between them include the number of windows in the microarchitecture as well as various types of animals or other abstracted figurines. Many sources indicate that the epicenter of their use was in a Coptic Egyptian context, potentially making them objects of Christian visual culture.<sup>67</sup> However, several ewers of this variety have also been excavated in Cordoba, at the opposite end of North Africa.<sup>68</sup> This S-shaped feature is said to be a specifically Andalusian element.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>66</sup> Lions are said to be symbols of Al-Andalus, as can be seen with the modern Emblem of Andalusia.

<sup>67</sup> The British Museum ewer (fig. 33) is said to have been “obtained from a Coptic Monastery in Egypt.” See Rachel Ward, *Islamic Metalwork*, (London: Thames & Hudson, 1993), 64.

<sup>68</sup> Gómez-Moreno, *Ars hispaniae Ars hispaniae*; Zozoya, “Aeraria de Transición.”

<sup>69</sup> Zozoya, “Aeraria de Transición,” 21-22.



Rachel Ward used these types of ewers as an instance of the difficulties of attributing singular provenance, noting that they “have been scattered across the Mediterranean... similar examples have been found in Sicily, Lebanon, Mallorca and Spain.”<sup>70</sup> It is unknown whether there was one center of mass production, leading to exports across the Mediterranean, or if the style was somehow standardized and reproduced in all of these locales.

Investigations into the function of the ewers have been inconclusive. It may be productive to examine their lids. Two of the them share an interesting similarity: they are perforated (figs. 29-30).<sup>71</sup> These ewers likely held a perfumed lighting oil, as the lid would have allowed the oil’s aroma to waft up and delight an audience. The exotic shape of the handle may have allowed for easier grip and angle while pouring into an oil lamp. The openwork, not unlike the Keir hook’s, suggests that they were used to facilitate light and smell. Because these objects appear to come from the same locale, the motifs they bear are attached to similar theological practices.

Byzantine textual sources and artifacts (i.e. censers and thuribles) speak to the spread of religious aromatic practices across the Levant and beyond.<sup>72</sup> The twelfth-century *typikon* of Istanbul’s Pantokrator Monastery, for example, established the incense practice there for centuries to come: it calls for a half-liter of incense oil to be provided for the monastery each week.<sup>73</sup> Since incense practices were well-established in the Eastern Christian tradition, Syriacs were one of the first religious communities in the Middle East to devotionally use incense.<sup>74</sup> The

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<sup>70</sup> Ward, *Islamic Metalwork*, 64.

<sup>71</sup> Perhaps the fact that this defeats the purpose of a lid is the reason that so many were discarded, as it would have made pouring burdensome.

<sup>72</sup> Susan Ashbrook Harvey, Beatrice Caseau, and Bissera Pentcheva have also explored the medieval culture of incense.

<sup>73</sup> Tera Lee Hedrick and Nina Ergin, “A Shared Culture of Heavenly Fragrance: A Comparison of Late Byzantine and Ottoman Incense Burners and Censing Practices in Religious Contexts,” *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 69 (2015): 331.

<sup>74</sup> The Syriac use of incense began in the seventh and eighth centuries; Nina Ergin, “The Fragrance of the Divine: Ottoman Incense Burners and Their Context.” *Art Bulletin* 96, no. 1 (2014): 72.

liturgical use of incense was eventually adopted in Islam. Mary F. Thurlkill eloquently describes the interreligious connotations of incense:

Evolving within [Mediterranean and Middle Eastern] cultures, early Christians and Muslims assimilated these sensory cues [of sweet smells] within their own cultic practices while also adapting them to their unique theological and hagiographical purpose. Early Christians most readily associated odors of sanctity with the body's radical transformation; Muslims identified sublime smells with consummate purity and union with the Divine.<sup>75</sup>

As such, the Quran and hadiths described the prophet Muhammad as one who would densely perfume himself, so much so that his beard would shine with his favorite scent of musk.<sup>76</sup> Often referred to as the *Sunnah* ("habitual practice") of applying fragrance, the hadiths encourage an aromatic cleansing of the mosque space, and further suggest that believers clean and perfume themselves in preparation for prayer.<sup>77</sup> The Prophet has gone as far as to say that believers who have recently eaten garlic or onion are forbidden to enter the mosque.<sup>78</sup>

This use of fragrance as a sacred practice is present in the literary, theological, and visual traditions of the medieval Bilad al-Sham. Perfumed lighting oils—perhaps orange, olive, or herbal—would have fragrantly burned in a lamp for a dually visual and olfactory sensory experience. These ewers help us understand the functions of the Keir hook and chain: the designs of both suggest that they facilitated the emission of light and sweet-smelling aromas. As if to vividly mimic the swirling shapes of fragrant smoke, the rotating palmette ornamentation on the

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<sup>75</sup> Mary F. Thurlkill, "Odors of Sanctity: Distinctions of the Holy in Early Christianity and Islam," *Comparative Islamic Studies* 3, no. 2 (June 2007): 136

<sup>76</sup> Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj al-Qushayri, *Sahih Muslim, Being Traditions of the Sayings of the Prophet Muhammad as Narrated by His Companions and Compiled under the Title al-Jami' us-Sahih*, trans. Abdul Hamid Siddiqi, 4 vols. (Lahore: Muhammad Ashraf, 1971–75), bk. 30, no. 5759; see also no. 5760 and no. 5758.

<sup>77</sup> Ergin, "The Fragrance of the Divine," 89.

<sup>78</sup> Ergin, "The Fragrance of the Divine," 73.

hook fluidly forms scrolls of bronze, leading upwards and eventually morphing into pillar-like birds.

## VIII. Birds

In art across the medieval Islamic world, the bird motif is widespread—particularly on incense burners. From the Seljuks to the Almohads, one can find scores of miniature bronze and brass bird-shaped burners (fig. 37).<sup>79</sup> All are perforated to allow the smoke to emanate from their corpus. In an attempt to interpret the two addorsed birds on the Keir hook, we must first examine the theological underpinnings of the motif.

Suhrawardi, the aforementioned Persian Sufi mystic, wrote a series of treatises on different visionary phenomena. His *Treatise on Birds* is an allegory in which Suhrawardi himself has become trapped in a cage with a flock of birds. Suhrawardi becomes ashamed of how accustomed he has gotten to the cage, and thereafter plots an escape with his feathered comrades. After successfully escaping and flying away, the flock comes upon luscious gardens tucked away in the mountains. Suhrawardi describes the bewitching sound, smell, and landscape of paradise: “The songs of the birds were the like of which we had never heard, and there were aromas and scents that had never reached our



Figure 37

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<sup>79</sup> Consistencies in incense burner type were first noted by Ernst Kühnel and later explored by Eva Baer, James Allan, Assadullah Souren Melikian-Chirvani, and Mehmet Aga-Oglu.

nostrils.”<sup>80</sup> This description of paradise reveals the experiential modes of evoking holiness, further unveiling the motivations behind the use of incense, light, and birds in theological capacities. The pleasant sensorial environment induced by smell is directly linked with paradise because birds, through flight, approach the celestial realm.



*Figure 38*

The twelfth century also saw the popularity of the Sufi poet Farid ud-Din Attar of Nishapur, whose name means “perfume” or “essential oil” in Farsi. In *The Conference of the Birds*, Attar’s most famous poetic fable, birds gather together to decide who shall be granted sovereignty over the kingdom.<sup>81</sup> The title comes from the Qur’an where it is said that David and Solomon are taught to speak language of the birds (*manṭiq al-ṭayr*).<sup>82</sup> The allegory features various anthropomorphic birds, which include a partridge, nightingale, and peacock. In relating these texts to the Keir hook and chain, it is essential to address the potential species of bird the palmette decoration depicts (fig. 38). Although there are plenty of birds in Islamic Art, I would argue that the depicted birds are peacocks, primarily because the crests above their heads and the shape of their beaks.

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<sup>80</sup> Suhrawardi, *The Mystical and Visionary Treatises of Shihabuddin Yahya Suhrawardi*, trans. W.M. Thackston, Jr. (London: The Octagon Press, 1982), 22-24.

<sup>81</sup> Farid ud-Din Attar. *The Conference of the Birds: A Sufi Fable*, trans. C. S. Nott (Berkeley: Shambala Publications, 1971), 11-12.

<sup>82</sup> Qur’an, 27:16.

Due to their exotic rarity, peacocks and peacock feathers gained cultic and imperial associations for the Ancient Greeks and Romans. These associations carried into Byzantine visual culture, especially apparent on mosaics and tombs.<sup>83</sup> Christian legends held that the flesh of the peacocks was incorruptible and carved on tombs to symbolize immortality.<sup>84</sup> Peacocks are also frequent symbols in Middle-Eastern Christianity of biblical phenomena; the spots on each peacock feather are a symbol of all-seeing eyes. These have been understood as angels, an omnipotent Christian God or, by some accounts, the church itself.<sup>85</sup>

A tradition of the peacock motif can also be traced to pre-Islamic and Islamic visual culture.<sup>86</sup> Scholars have noted the similarity of the Christian and Muslim understanding of peacocks.<sup>87</sup> In the Islamic tradition, peacocks are associated with the expulsion of Adam and Eve: the peacock swallows Satan (the snake), but accidentally carries the snake into the Garden of Eden by doing so.<sup>88</sup> Thus, the peacock serves as an Islamic allusion to paradise, corruption, and/or eventual redemption.<sup>89</sup> In Attar's *The Conference of the Birds*, the peacock represents a materialistic person seeking to reform. The peacock says, "I am always hoping that some benevolent guide will lead me out of this dark abode and take me to the everlasting mansions."<sup>90</sup> Here, the peacock seeks beauty in the afterlife, asking for enlightenment in order to transcend the "dark abode."

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<sup>83</sup> Nile Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers: Sacred Objects as Cultural Exchange between Christianity and Islam," *Al-Masāq* 18, no. 1 (2006): 33-34.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Kereese Harris, "From the Divine to the Diabolical: The Peacock in Medieval and Renaissance Art," Master of Art dissertation, Arizona State University, 2016, 41.

<sup>86</sup> Harris, "From the Divine to the Diabolical," 14.

<sup>87</sup> Rachel Milstein, Karen Ruhrdanz, and Barbara Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets: Illustrated Manuscripts of Qisas al-Anbya* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1999), 56.

<sup>88</sup> Green, "Ostrich Eggs and Peacock Feathers," 56.

<sup>89</sup> Milstein, Ruhrdanz, and Schmitz, *Stories of the Prophets*, 108-109.

<sup>90</sup> Attar, *The Conference of the Birds*, 17-18.

There are also instances in the medieval Islamic world in which the peacock has been a secular image for courtly culture. For example, a peacock motif is woven into the coronation mantle of Roger II of Sicily. Likely made by Arab craftsmen, this twelfth-century robe served as a sartorial symbol of sovereignty over the multi-religious Norman-Arab-Byzantine culture of North Africa.<sup>91</sup> The peacocks association with ineffable paradise and wealth further signifies this imperial significance. Since the peacock is earth-bound, it appears that its significance dually concerns heaven and earth (paradise and wealth, respectively). Thus, the material culture of incense appears to be closely tied with that of the bird motif; both smoke and wings appear to weightlessly float above and beyond architectural boundaries.

## **XI. Conclusion**

In contrast to the ethos of encyclopedic museums, which are based on the geographical origins of objects as given indices, Eva Hoffman explains the tendency of Islamic and Christian medieval objects—particularly from North Africa, Egypt, Sicily, and Spain—to resist prescriptive categorizations. “Instead of attributing works to singular sites of production,” Hoffman writes, “we might ask why so many of these objects from Mediterranean centers dating from the tenth to twelfth centuries appear indistinguishable from one another and why it is possible to attribute the same works to any number of sites?”<sup>92</sup> In other words, why are we so desperate to trace a single origin? As visual languages evolve across time and space, the historian of Islamic artifacts must question the boundaries that the field has constructed in order to acknowledge that evolution.

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<sup>91</sup> Clare Vernon, “Dressing for Succession in Norman Italy: The Mantle of King Roger II,” *Al-Masāq* 31, no. 1 (2019): 96-97.

<sup>92</sup> Eva Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability: Islamic and Christian Interchange from the Tenth to the Twelfth Century.” *Art History* 24, no. 1 (2001): 21.

There is little question that the Keir objects date from the twelfth to thirteenth centuries. What's less clear is their possible dynastic affiliations within that timeframe—the Zangid, Ayyubid, or Artuqid dynasties are all contenders.<sup>93</sup> While the hook and chain's foundry could have been in Mosul, there are far more Arab centers of metalwork than the category "Mosul school" would suggest.<sup>94</sup> It is more likely that the Keir objects were made elsewhere, perhaps in Damascus which began to practice silver inlay in the 1250s.<sup>95</sup> Other possible cities include Jerusalem, Antioch, Aleppo, and Mardin, all of which had a considerable Syriac Christian subculture. However, as Hoffman notes, this era of artistic production during which religious cohabitation was a standard feature of the urbanized environment. Medieval art objects themselves defy modern notions of binaristic religious space: one such example is the shrine of the Prophet Jonah in Mosul, a pilgrimage site shared by Muslims, Jews, and Christians.<sup>96</sup> As we have seen, the Keir hook's visual program could have come from a number of locales, which speaks to the way that motifs and visual philosophies are mirrored across the cultures and religions of the Mediterranean, North Africa, and Middle East.

Although the above comparison between the hook and chain and the six ewers hint at an Al-Andalus attribution, we must still account for the appearance of the Syriac name "Arâtha" on the hook. The multifaceted conclusions of these analyses serve to enhance the significance of these quotidian objects. It is not in spite of, but rather *because* of the stylistic and iconographic interchange between these objects that the medieval Islamic "decorative arts" have such

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<sup>93</sup> Though the Artuqids were known for their use of bronze, it was mostly for the production of coins. Examples of more decorative portable metalworks from the Artuqid dynasty have yet to be explored in depth.

<sup>94</sup> Julian Raby argues this—that the "Mosul school" designation is limited; Julian Raby, "The Principle of Parsimony and the Problem of the 'Mosul School of Metalwork,'" in *Metalwork and Material Culture in the Islamic World: Art, Craft and Text*, ed. Venetia Porter and Mariam Rosser-Owen, (London: I.B. Tauris, 2012), 57.

<sup>95</sup> Raby, "The Principle of Parsimony and the Problem of the 'Mosul School of Metalwork,'" 37.

<sup>96</sup> Wirtschafter, Jacob and Gilgamesh Nabeel, "In Mosul, Archaeologists Want to Excavate before Jonah's Mosque is Rebuilt," *The Christian Century* (2017): 15-16.

historical importance. The symbolic density of these objects allowed us to explore their contemporaneous theological and visual program as it pertains to language, microarchitecture, zoomorphic imagery, and the experiences of light and smell. In the end, these visual paradigms become just as portable as the objects themselves.



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