**Ritual Objects in the Medieval Middle East**

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Organizers: Daniella Talmon-Heller and Jonathan Brack (BGU)

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**Abstracts Booklet**

Panel 1: *Stones as Devotional Objects*

*Kiss the Black Stone but Don't Touch your Penis: Toward a Typology of Ritualized Touch in Islamic Law and Muslim Practice*

**Brannon Wheeler**, United States Naval Academy

Although Muslim jurists detail rules restricting the "touching" of a wide range of objects, there are very few things that Muslims are encouraged or supposed to touch. Among the objects that Muslims are supposed to touch is the Black Stone. The unusual character of this encouraged or enjoined touching, and especially the peculiar sexual connotations associated with it, contrasts sharply with the bulk of Islamic legal restrictions on touching human bodies. Despite recent scholarship studying restricted touching (e.g., impurity), relatively little work has been done analyzing the place of encouraged touching in Islamic law and practice. This paper examines Muslim legal traditions regarding the ritual touching of the Black Stone with the goal of suggesting the outlines of a more generic typology of ritual touch in Islamic law and practice. To trace the main characteristics of this practice, this paper uses ḥadīth collections, legal textbooks and commentaries, and historical texts, as well as ethnographic observations and mythological traditions regarding the origins and symbolic significance of the Kaʿbah. These findings can then be compared with other select examples of encouraged touching practices (e.g., al-ṣakhrah al-mushariffah) among Muslims to arrive at a broader, more generic conception of those centered on the Black Stone.

Panel 1: *Stones as Devotional Objects*

*The Stone of the Unction in Jerusalem: an Image Becomes a Ritual Object*

**Yamit Rachman-Shrire**, The Golda Meir Fellowship Trust

The Stone of the Unction (also known as the Anointing Stone) which is positioned at the entrance to the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, is the object upon which, according to tradition, Christ’s body was laid and anointed after his deposition from the cross and prior to his entombment. While the stone is not mentioned in pilgrims’ accounts prior to the 1330s, a *site* which was associated with the anointing of Christ’s body has been shown in different locations in the church, including within the sepulcher itself, as well as in the choir of the church, half way between the tomb and Golgotha. As pilgrims accounts suggests, it was sometime between 1327 and 1331 that a *stone*, connected with Christ’s unction, has been introduced to the church as a new ritual object.

Why and how did a stone emerged in the church as the object connected with the Unction? Why then? This paper tracks the origins of the Jerusalemite Stone both in Constantinople, where another slab believed to be the stone of the Unction has been shown as early as 1169, and in late medieval Franciscan visual Culture. Via the historicization of the stone I offer reconsidering the paradigm that views Jerusalem as a prototype that was copied and translated into other geographical areas, suggesting a dialogical model for the *in-situ* concretization of this ritual object.

Panel 2: *Scriptures on/as Devotional Objects*

*Encountering Ritual Objects and the Interpretation of the Qurʾan*

**Hannelies Koloska**, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

The importance of Qur’anic verses in the creation, ornamentation, and use of ritual objects in Islamic religious practices like prayer, meditation or magic has been widely acknowledged and studied. Little research, however, has explored thus far the intersection of Qur’anic textual studies and material culture studies. Which explicit or implicit references to ritual objects do we find in the Qur’an itself? What is their role in the text and how do we connect their appearance to existing ritual objects and their use? This paper will outline some methodological considerations for the establishment of a material-based study of the Qur’anic text and will explore references to ritual objects. It will discuss how and to what extent these material references can enhance our understanding of the Qur’anic text and the importance of religious communication through ritual objects and icons in its Late Antique environment.

Panel 2: *Scriptures on/as Devotional Objects*

*Surat al-Ikhlas, al-Fatiha or Ayat al-Kursi - which One Has Precedence on Early Islamic Amulets, Coins, and Tombstones?*

**Stefan Heidemann**, Hamburg University

The use of religious inscriptions on artifacts in the public and domestic sphere is ubiquitous. Its use is to express piety, seek apotropaic protection, or rather serve as a political statement. While it is ubiquitous, the number of verses used is restricted. The survey looks at the its religious use in the different media.

Panel 2: *Scriptures on/as Devotional Objects*

*Real Scrolls, Imagined Scrolls:*  *Sacred Manuscripts and the Veneration of Scribes among Jews under the Ayyubids and Mamluks*

**Dotan Arad**, Bar-Ilan University

While Muslims accused their Jewish neighbors of having a flawed and falsified sacred text (the Torah), the Jews insisted that they have in their possession unblemished ancient and authentic copies of their Sacred Scriptures. In this lecture, I examine testimonies on ancient Torah scrolls held by Jewish Communities in the Eastern Mediterranean. I address the construction of the sanctity of these ancient scrolls, and the legends and myths that were composed to praise them and establish their antiquity and sanctity.

Eastern Jews identified historical figures such as the famous biblical scribe Ezra as the scribes of these ancient scrolls. I further discuss therefore the figure of Ezra in Jewish consciousness and the sites that were dedicated to his cult. Travelogues and Genizah documents, mainly from the Mamluk period, are employed to address these topics.

Panel 2: *Scriptures on/as Devotional Objects*

*The Production of Material Copies of The Word of God: Jewish and Muslim Perceptions and Prescriptions*

**Daniella Talmon-Heller**, Ben-Gurion University of the Nege

According to *Midrash Devarim Rabba* 9:9 (tentatively dated to the ninth century) Moses copied the Torah he had received on Mt. Sinai onto thirteen scrolls. Before his death, he gave a copy to each tribe and deposited the thirteenth scroll by the Ark of the Covenant. Maimonides (1138-1204) mentions this tradition at the very beginning of his *Code of Law*, which includes a detailed specification of the necessary conditions for the production of a proper copy of those scrolls, one that may be used for liturgical reading in the synagogue. He refers to the materials; the intention and routine of the scribe; the dimensions of letters, lines, columns, margins and empty spaces, and to the different forms of paragraphs of poetry and prose.

The authoritative *textus receptus* of the Qurʾan is known to have been prepared at the command of the third Caliph ʿUthman b. ʿAffan, around 650 CE. Most early Muslim authorities agree that ʿUthman prepared between four and nine copies, kept one in Medina, and dispatched the rest to the Muslim garrison towns (*al-amsar*), to serve as master copies of the sacred text. Some Muslims were ambivalent towards the very idea of a written (rather than memorized, recited and transmitted orally) Qurʾan, yet soon enough the transcription of the Qurʾan came to be regarded a praiseworthy devotional practice, governed by a religious etiquette. While Jewish authorities insisted on the exact replication of the alleged ancient master copy of the Torah scroll not only in content but also in form, copyists of the Qurʾan did not feel obliged to duplicate the appearance of the ʿUthmani master copy. Hence, Qurʾani codices and the materials and scripts used for their production underwent great changes throughout the centuries.

In my talk, I will explore the Jewish and Muslim understandings of the transcription of Sacred Scriptures, and the ways by which its execution was ritualized in both traditions. I will tie my analysis of similarities and dissimilarities to the employment of the material Torah and Qurʾan in the formal liturgy and in informal rituals.

Panel 3: *Blessed Garbs*

*The Garment of the Shaykh: Embedment and Transference of Baraka*

*in the World of Syrian Sufi Saints*

**Daphna Ephrat,** The Open University of Israel

From around the 12th century, new and more institutional practices gradually emerged that gave more concrete and tangible force to the Sufi master's authority and the submission to him and his spiritual genealogy. Most common in the early phase of the crystallization of the spiritual paths were the Sufi rituals of the taking of the oath of fidelity (ʿ*ahd*) and the investiture with the cloak of initiation (*khirqa*) that would later be replicated and become the primary symbol of the binding relationship with a Sufi master and his blessing.

Building on insights of new research on the performative character of charisma and its embedment and transference in material objects, my paper will explore the significations and symbolic uses of garments and other implements and items of clothing in the world of the early generations of Sufi saints in the Syrian milieu of the 12th and 13th centuries. The investigation seeks to demonstrate how a wide range of garments was displayed as embodiments of the shaykhs' charisma, and how the praxis of bestowing their blessing through clothing that had its origins in small circles of Sufi masters and their disciples became commonplace. This phenomenon was nowhere revealed more clearly than in the division of pieces of the *khirqa* or other items of clothing among a large crowd of participants in the collective *dhikr* rituals.

The significance of garments as physical effects will be discussed in the light of extracts from hagiographical narratives preserved in vitae and bio-hagiographical literature. These include narratives of masters transferring to their close disciples the *baraka* embedded in their cloaks to protect them in times of troubles and bestowing their blessing through their rosaries and prayer rugs that would remain with their disciples after their death, as well as accounts of fellow believers seeking to touch the cloths in which the shaykhs died and flocking to their *sajjada*s to obtain some of their *baraka* and be healed or protected from attacks by enemies, such as Crusaders and Mongols. Relating to concrete situations, these and similar accounts reveal the effect of the garment of the locally revered shaykh as a material form of belief, central to the manifestation of his spiritual power, the construction and diffusion of his charismatic authority, and for making him present in his absence.

Panel 3: *Blessed Garbs*

*Binding threads and expanding threads: The Interlaced Serpents on the Lining of the so-called Mantle of Roger II (528/1133–4)*

**Sara Kuehn**, Institut d’ethnologie méditerranéenne, européenne et comparative (IDEMEC)-CNRS / Zentrum für Islamische Theologie (ZITh

The ancient practice of casting binding or unbinding spells by knot tying and loosing was well known in the medieval Eastern Christian and Islamic world and referred to in the literature of the time. Perpetuating earlier practice, the use of knots as an apotropaic device featured in two- and three-dimensional artefacts can be associated with royal, mystical, astrological, alchemical or magico-medical processes. The repetition of interlaced and knotted forms was apparently intended to intensify their beneficial effect by invoking the concept of continuous, endless protection. Since snake imagery is eminently suited to replicate strands, their likeness is often found in these contexts.

We find such ophidian trails on three enigmatic gold-woven silk textiles that line the famous mantle of Roger II (r. 1105 [as count]/1130 [as king] – 1154), the Norman ruler of Sicily and southern Italy. While the lining fragments have an uncertain provenance and cannot be dated securely, the outer face of the famous red silk cloak was woven in the royal workshopin Palermo and is framed by an Arabic inscription in Kufic dating it to the year 528/1133–4. Featuring a monumental central palm tree separating addorsed tigers attacking camels, the outer face contrasts starkly with the intricate allover lattice of the lining fragments. Importantly, the knot-like lattice is composed of interlaced serpent(-dragon)s that enclose and contain groups of human figures, trees, birds and foliate motifs. According to the motifs, the fragments are commonly referred to as the “Dragon,” the “Tree of Life,” and the “Bird” cloth.

Not much attention has been paid to the discovery of a silk fragment from Samangan province in Afghanistan, now preserved in the al-Sabāh Collection in Kuwait, which is closely related to that of the “Bird Cloth”. This paper focuses on the compositional treatment of the Western Asian and “Sicilian” fragments, in the context of the extraordinary convergence of Muslim and Byzantine stylistic influence at Roger’s culturally diverse court.

Panel 4: *Icons and Relics*

*Framing the Cross: Liturgy, Prayer and Object in Personal and Public Ritual after 1187*

**Anne E. Lester**, Johns Hopkins University

This paper proposes to trace the change in meaning and practice of the use of relics of the Cross in the aftermath of the loss of Jerusalem in 1187. After that date, the once victorious symbol of the cross came to be freighted with a different sense of loss and of failed ambition. I will look at the proliferation of cross relics and reliquaries in the west in the decades between 1190-1240 and correlate those objects and their use to changes in the celebration and liturgical rights surrounding the Exhalation of the cross (September 14th) and the Invention of the Cross (May 4th) as well as additional devotions to the cross put in place as part of renewed crusade campaigns to the east. By exploring a series of case-studies of Byzantine cross relics and reliquaries in the west, the paper investigates the meaning and use of eastern objects in the lands of Picardy, Flanders, Champagne and the Paris basin. I am particularly interested in small objects, long overlooked in the scholarship, but still extant in museum collections. Many of these Byzantine crosses and reliquaries were later embedded in frames that suggest changing perceptions of devotion and meaning across the later Middle Ages. The paper also seeks to consider how ideas of Byzantine and eastern devotional practices were understood, imitated, and acculturated in the west.

Panel 4: *Icons and Relics*

*Embodying the Light of God: Polyvalent Iconographies at Three Medieval Syrian Shrines*

**Stephennie Mulder**, The University of Texas, Austin

To what degree is the function and reception of the symbolic meaning of objects universal? Or, to be more precise, did medieval Islamic iconography express meaning in the way scholars have argued it did in the Western art historical tradition, or were aesthetic signs understood and apprehended in some different way by medieval Muslims? My object will be to think about this larger question through the lens of something concrete and specific: namely, the “mihrab image,” a term used to describe a common decorative motif in Islamic art. Traditionally, such images have been interpreted as symbolic representations of the light of God.

However, three medieval Syrian examples of the “mihrab image” demonstrate how this well-known symbol may have had shifting, ambiguous and polyvalent meanings, that both encompassed and extended beyond this typical interpretation: for such signs could be read as carrying meaning for members of both Islam’s primary sects, Sunni and Shi’a.  This analysis of the “mihrab image” shows that within Islamic art, aesthetic signs can be the simultaneous carrier of meanings both specific and universal.

Panel 4: *Icons and Relics*

*Ritual Objects and the Construction of Aristocracy in the Latin East*

**Nicholas Paul**, Fordham University, NY

The importance of ritual objects to the articulation of authority in the medieval world, from cups and rings to ceremonial weapons and rods of office, is generally very well attested. For the European Christian feudal aristocracy, whose claims to status and authority were continuously challenged both by other members of the warrior elite, by new urban elites, and by increasingly centralized states, the need to continuously re-inscribe distinction called for increasingly elaborate performances, in which material culture played a central role. Less clear, both because of lacunae in the surviving sources and a lack of scholarly investigation, is the place of such ritual material in the lives of the Frankish aristocracy of the Latin East or "crusader states". How important were ritual objects for the Frankish nobility? Did their proximity to sacred sites of the Holy Land alter their relationship with sacred material? To what extent did they participate with their non-Latin and non-Christian neighbors and subjects in a shared culture of ritual objects? Did the material culture of this society have any influence on material rituals or ritual materials of the Latin West? While the limited survival of material and textual sources from the Latin East means that we cannot fully answer all of these questions, several examples from the two centuries of Frankish occupation of the littoral reveal that a focus on such ritual objects may nontheless shed important light on this short-lived but influential political community.

Panel 4: *Icons and Relics*

*Holy Land Souvenirs among Latin Christian Pilgrims to Jerusalem*

**William Purkis**, University of Birmingham

The period of Latin rule over the holy city of Jerusalem (1099–1187) prompted a surge in the numbers of pilgrims travelling to the Holy Land from across the medieval Christian world. Among the consequences of this significant uptick in Christian pilgrim traffic was a concomitant rise in the demand for sacred souvenirs from the *loca sancta*, from deluxe reliquaries to mass produced lead ampullae as well as a range of more impromptu and makeshift devotional objects. Drawing on both textual and material evidence for twelfth-century practices of sacred souveniring, this paper will consider some of the ways in which Jerusalem’s Latin Christian elites sought to meet the needs of the pilgrim market, and examine some of the more entrepreneurial practices that emerged within the city and its holy hinterland. In so doing, the paper will explore the interplay between the creators and consumers of sacred material culture and the opportunities for creativity that the medieval Jerusalem pilgrimage industry presented.

Panel 5: *Mosque Artifacts and Symbols*

*A Tile Panel from Damascus and Its Iconography*

**Lorenz Korn**, University of Bamberg

A tile panel in the Aga Khan Museum collection that can be attributed to Damascus of the late 16th century, shows the image of a mihrab with a typical arch and a hanging lamp. The image of the niche is supplemented by two black elements in a central position disturbing the realism of the image. These can be identified as representations of the Prophet’s sandals or footprints. The paper attempts to analyse this element in terms of iconography and iconology within the wider context of religious ideas and ritual. The veneration of the Prophet Muhammad and his relics blossomed during the Ottoman period, but its development can be traced back to earlier centuries. Comparison of different representations will allow us to reach some conclusions as to the object that is visualized with this characteristic silhouette shape and the contents that it communicated. The depiction of the relic in combination with the mihrab presents several problems for understanding the function of the image.

Panel 5: *Mosque Artifacts and Symbols*

*Sacred Sound to Sacred Light: Understanding the Evolution of Maghribi Bell-Lamps*

**Ali Asgar Alibhai**, the University of Texas, Dallas

This paper discusses the ritualistic character of medieval mosque lamps through their religious symbolization in medieval Islamic society. More specifically, it will highlight the persistent practice of constructing lamps from Christian bells in the medieval Maghrib and how these artifacts can be read as acoustically based rituals in medieval Islamic soundscapes.

The daily sound of cityscapes in the medieval Islamic world was filled with the echoes of the *adhān*(Muslim call to prayer), while in the medieval cities of Christian lands, the chiming of bells dominated the acoustic atmosphere. Religious rituals like these daily calls to prayer are intended to spur the human senses, resulting in the reaction of a “divine” or “spiritual” impulse. Keeping this in mind, medieval Islamic material culture consists of several different types of ritual objects that not only brought visual pleasure, but also a positive and memorable enticement to the other senses. Mosque lamps were such a ritual object. Lit daily, they offered both a practical purpose and served as a didactic device to worshippers reminding them of divine light, spiritual guidance, and religious authority through their illumination. As a result, medieval mosque lamps, especially those of royal commission, were given further importance through the intricate Islamic ornamentation, epigraphy, and patterns.

In the medieval *Maghrib*between the tenth and fifteenth centuries, mosque lamps gained an additional ornamental component that enhanced the ritualistic experience of the worshipper viewing and experiencing them. During this time period, medieval Muslims were in constant struggle for political control of territory in al-Andalus, and as a result the rituals of the recital of the *adhān*and bellringing came into direct conflict. Consequently, medieval mosque lamps also morphed in response to these competing symbols and the rituals attached to them. Bells were looted from Christian churches in Iberia by Muslim rulers who transported them across long distances to add them to the construction of mosque lamps. This paper argues that these *Maghribi*bell-lamps signify an added element to the ritualistic lighting of mosques. The worshipper witnessed divine light engulfing Christian bells, but more importantly, silenced bells, signaling the triumph of one ritual over another. This paper will discuss this peculiar *Maghribi* historical and cultural phenomenon in *light*of Islamic ritual practices related to sound and light.

Panel 5: *Mosque Artifacts and Symbols*

*Ritual Objects in the Mosque of Tiberias*

**Ayala Lester**, Israel Antiquities Authority

“Allah is the Light of the heavens and the earth. His light is like a niche in which there is a lamp, the lamp is in a crystal, the crystal is like a shining star”, (Koran, Surah 24: 35).

The belief that light has been given to the believers by the divinity is embodied in the placing of mosque lamps in the hall of the mosque, and facilitated by glass vessels that enable the distribution of light through its transparent walls. The mosque lamp is characterized by its vase shape with handles on the globular body, to which metal chains were attached so that it could be suspended from the ceiling. Early evidence of this tradition exists within the mosque of Tiberias, which was constructed during the Umayyad period and endured until the second half of the eleventh century. Fragments of mosque lamps and a few brass chains were found in-situ within the excavations of the site conducted by Katia Cytrin-Silverman.

Mosques illuminated by lamps were discussed by Islamic historians who described al-Haram al-Sharif in Jerusalem. The chains, made of brass, are composed of uniform alternating straight and figure three massive links. Identical chains were found at nearby sites in Tiberias. They were produced in a local workshop whose artisans maintained commercial connections with Damascus, Caesarea and throughout the Mediterranean basin as far as the west coast of Spain.

Panel 7: *Magical Artifacts*

*A “Voodoo Doll” from Fustat and Related Magical Recipes*

**Gideon Bohak,** Tel Aviv University

A short article published 90 years ago presents an interesting magical assemblage found in Fustat (Old Cairo), and made up of a clay jar, inside which a wax “voodoo doll” with thorns stuck in its head was suspended upside-down with a cord, above a layer of lime (Charles Bachatly and H. Rached, “Un cas d’envoûtement en Égypte,” *Bulletin de la Société Royale de Géographie d’Égypte* 17/3 (1931), pp. 177-181). The date of the object is unknown, but the presence in medieval and modern Muslim magical texts of recipes for the production of similar figurines has been noted both in the original publication and in several subsequent publications. In my presentation, I will discuss several magical recipes from the Cairo Genizah – that is, from Fustat itself – with instructions for producing such “voodoo dolls.” My aim is twofold: On the one hand, to show the great similarity between some of the magical recipes found in the Cairo Genizah and those found in the Muslim magical texts. On the other, I aim to show how the production of a ritual object such as a “voodoo doll” is guided not by religious or aesthetic considerations, but by the desire to cause maximum harm to the ritual’s intended victim. To do so, I will also present a few other “voodoo dolls” from Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.

Panel 7: *Magical Artifacts*

*Translating Demons: On the Demonic in Late Antique Jewish Magical Artifacts*

**Avigail Manekin-Bamberger**, The Hebrew University of Jerusalem

As rabbinic literature and numerous magical amulets make clear, the Jews of late antiquity lived in fear of demons. But how do we as modern readers understand the “demonic”? Seemingly, the answer is simple; demons are harmful beings that are to be expelled in a variety of ways. Incantation bowls, for example, contain exorcisms for a diverse variety of demons and demonesses, sometimes accompanied by illustrations, such as for the well-known Lilith and her entourage. But the term “demon” is also used in scholarly dictionaries to translate concepts such as “curses,” “oaths,” “excommunications,” when they appear on ancient magical amulets. In my paper, I will present this phenomenon and offer a new proposal for translating the demonic in late antique Jewish magic.

Panel 7: *Magical Artifacts*

*A Unique Assemblage of Late Islamic Magical Artifacts from Netafim Camp 2, a Site on the Darb al-Ḥajj, Southern Israel*

**Itamar Taxel**, Israel Antiquities Authority, and **Uzi Avner**, Dead Sea and Arava Science Center

Archeological findings from the Muslim pilgrimage road between Cairo and Mecca, the Darb al-Ḥajj al Maṣri, are currently preserved in the Eilat region of southern Israel. These include sections of the road, camp sites, quarries and other structures associated with the road. Most of these remains date to the Mamluk and Ottoman periods. In one camp site (Netafim 2), an assemblage of unusual objects were found. These include fragmentary clay rattles, votive clay incense burners, anthropomorphic and perhaps zoomorphic clay figurines, color quartz pebbles and some seashells. The clay objects originated in Egypt as indicated by their fabric. Based on their nature and the literary survey, we suggest that the discussed artifacts were related to popular magic. The magical rituals, the nature of which remains unclear to date, were likely carried out at the site by a professional sorcerer, who offered his/her services to the pilgrims.

*Concluding Session*

*Objects as Sources for the Study of Religious Life in the Eastern Mediterranean (the Middle Islamic Period)*

**Yehoshua Frenkel**, University of Haifa

Material objects are a source for gaining new historical insights. Coins and glass stamps, for example, provide data on the immergence of the Islamic Caliphate prior to the earliest narrative Arabic sources. Careful investigation of objects (metal, wood and stone) promises innovative directions. In the field of Mamluk studies it will supplement the rich and well researched documented history of the Sultanate. Concentrating on the reconstruction of religious life and practices, the proposed research will look into material sources: mosques’ furniture (including lamps), incantation bowls, astrolabes (pray directions), prayer mats, and amulets.