

Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe

EDITED BY ISABELLE DOLEZALEK
AND MATTIA GUIDETTI



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This book argues that the provenance of early modern and medieval objects from Islamic lands was largely forgotten until the “long” eighteenth century, when the first efforts were made to reconnect them with the historical contexts in which they were produced.

For the first time, these Islamicate objects were read, studied and classified – and given a new place in history. Freed by scientific interest, they were used in new ways and found new homes, including in museums. More generally, the process of “rediscovery” opened up the prehistory of the discipline of Islamic art history and had a significant impact on conceptions of cultural boundaries, differences and identity.

The book will be of interest to scholars working in the history of art, the art of the Islamic world, early modern history and art historiography.

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Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	vii
<i>List of Contributors</i>	xi
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	xiv
 Introduction: Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe	 1
ISABELLE DOLEZALEK AND MATTIA GUIDETTI	
 PART I	
Changing Perceptions	21
 1 Changing Perceptions of Middle Eastern Objects and Cultures in Eighteenth-Century Europe	 23
ANNA CONTADINI	
 2 Reading Ottoman Banners in the State of the Church	 55
MATTIA GUIDETTI	
 PART II	
Protagonists	75
 3 Oluf Gerhard Tychsen: Orientalist and Object Interpreter in Rostock	 77
ISABELLE DOLEZALEK	
 4 Beyond Manuscripts: Maronite Christians as Object Interpreters in Early Modern Europe	 101
TOBIAS MÖRIKE	

PART III

Whose Heritage? 123

- 5 The “Baptistère de Saint Louis”: The Making of a “Historical Monument” 125

CARINE JUVIN

- 6 “*Nuestros árabes*”? The Rediscovery of Spanish Islamic Architecture from an Enlightened Gaze 144

MIRIAM CERA BREA

Index 170

Figures

0.1	Drawing of a medallion from the so-called “Veil of Sainte Anne”, published in von Murr’s <i>Inscriptio Arabica</i> (Nuremberg, 1790), pl. I	4
1.1	Schön, <i>Turkish Atrocities in Vienna Woods</i> (Nuremberg, 1530). Engraving on paper	26
1.2	Ottoman wicker shields, silk thread and metal boss, seventeenth century. Venice, Museo Correr. Francesco Morosini Collection	27
1.3	Dioscorides, <i>De Materia Medica</i> , probably Syrian, dated 642/1244. Manuscript on paper, ink, watercolours and gold leaf. Bologna, Biblioteca Universitaria, Cod. arab. 2954. Luigi Marsili Collection	28
1.4	Astrolabe made by ‘Abd al-‘Alī ibn Muḥammad Rāfi‘ al-Jūzī, engraved by his brother Muḥammad Bāqir, for Shāh Sulṭān Ḥusayn. Iran, dated Sha‘bān 1124/September–October 1712. Brass with silver inlay. London, British Museum, OA+369. Hans Sloane Collection	29
1.5	Drawings of Abbasid silver and copper coins. Venice, Museo Ca’ d’Oro (Galleria G. Franchetti). Jacopo Nani collection. From Assemani, <i>Museo Cufico Naniano</i> (Padua, 1787–8), vol. 1, pl. II.	31
1.6a	The “Coupe de Charlemagne”, North Jazira/Syria, early thirteenth century. Enamelled and gilded glass, with metal mount. Mount: French, thirteenth century, silver gilt. Chartres, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. no. 5144	33
1.6b	Drawing of the “Coupe de Charlemagne”, surmounted by a ribbon with the inscription in Arabic and its Latin translation, subtitled “Verre de Charlemagne conservé dans le trésor de Chateaudun”, eighteenth century, from <i>Recueil factice ancien</i> . Paris, BnF, Department of Prints and Drawings, Ve. 20, fol. 12bis. Watercolour on paper	34
1.6c	Transcription of the inscription on the “Coupe de Charlemagne”, with translation in Latin, late sixteenth century, signed by Frédéric Morel. Ink on paper. Chartres, Musée des Beaux-Arts, inv. no. 4152. Gift from M. Bellier de la Chavignerie	34
1.7	(a) Pisa Griffin. Al-Andalus, late eleventh to early twelfth century. Bronze (leaded gunmetal) with incised decoration. Pisa, Museo dell’Opera del Duomo (b) Representation of the Griffin on Pisa Cathedral. From Martini, <i>Theatrum Basilicae Pisanae</i> (Rome, 1705), pl. 7. Engraving on paper	35

viii *List of Figures*

1.8	“The Mosque” at Kew Gardens designed by William Chambers and its plan (1763). From Chambers, <i>Plans, Elevations, Sections</i> (London, 1763), pl. 27. Engraving on paper	37
1.9	Depiction of the end of the dance during a Sufi Mevlevi <i>mukabele</i> (<i>Les Dervichs dans leur Temple de Péra, achevant de tourner</i>). From de Ferriol, <i>Explication des cent estampes</i> (Paris, 1715), Coloured engraving on paper	38
1.10	Lady Mary Wortley Montagu with her son, Edward Wortley Montagu, and attendants. Attributed to Jean-Baptiste Vanmour, ca. 1717. Oil paint on canvas. London, National Portrait Gallery, NPG 3924	39
2.1	Processional canopy used during the festivity of the Blessed Sacrament in Loreto. Sagrestia della Basilica Santuario della Santa Casa, Loreto	56
2.2	Drawing of the Grand Vizir’s banner (Naples: presso Giuseppe Rosselli a spese di Antonio Bulifon, 1684). Museo della Città di Bologna	58
2.3	Frontispiece of the Notification of the Turkish banner sent by the Polish king to the Santa Casa in Loreto (Ancona: nella Stamperia Camerale, 1684)	61
2.4	Notification of the Turkish banner sent by the Polish king to the Santa Casa in Loreto	62
2.5	The Ottoman banner sent to Loreto. Wawel Castle in Krakow, inv. n. 145	63
2.6	Tosi, “Notizie sullo stendardo turco donato dal maresciallo Veterani alla metropolitana di Urbino”. Biblioteca Centrale Umanistica dell’Università di Urbino, Fondo Antico Urbino 93, f. 322, 2	65
2.7	Back side of the Ottoman banner in Urbino. Museo Diocesano of Urbino	66
3.1	Tracings of coins using various techniques. Rostock University Library, Mss. orient. 253 (8a), f. 83r	78
3.2	Von Murr asking Tychsens to decipher the inscription on the mantle. Letter sent on 26 July 1780. Rostock University Library, Mss. orient. 284 (7), f. 132r	81
3.3	Illustrations of the cathedra from San Pietro in Castello, 1749. Cornelio, <i>Ecclesiae venetae antiquis monumentis</i> (Venice, 1749), 194	82
3.4	Fragments of an embroidered textile with Kufic inscription (VI and VII) found in a codex from a Benedictine monastery in Lüneburg. Gebhardi, <i>De re literaria coenobii S. Michaelis</i> (Lüneburg, 1755), 20, pl. I	84
3.5	Delsenbach’s illustration of the imperial regalia, including the mantle and its Kufic inscription. Ebner von Eschenbach, <i>Wahre Abbildung der sämtlichen Reichskleinodien</i> (Nuremberg, 1790), pl. V	85
3.6	Von Murr’s woodcut of the inscription on the mantle, consisting of 13 parts to be glued together; drawn in 1774 and cut 1777. Von Murr, <i>Beschreibung der sämtlichen Reichskleinodien</i> (Nuremberg, 1790), appendix	86

3.7	Tychsen's etching of the cathedra and its inscription, dated 1787. Rostock University Library, <i>Alphabeta orientalia</i> , Mss. orient. 280(1), f. 17r	88
3.8	Alphabet table by Büttner, showing "Arabic" letter types on the left. Rostock University Library, <i>Alphabeta orientalia</i> , Mss. orient. 280(1), f. 7r	89
3.9	Tychsen's alphabet notes for deciphering the cathedra's inscription. Rostock University Library, <i>Alphabeta orientalia</i> , Mss. orient. 280, f. 37r	90
4.1	Shoes and <i>jalabiya</i> of Spaada Habaisci conserved in the curiosity cabinet in Friedenstein Castle in Gotha	103
4.2	Signature of Spaada Habaisci. Niedersächsisches Landesarchiv Abteilung Wolfenbüttel VI Hs 6 Nr. 31. Arabien. G. S. A. v. Prauns Ausarbeitung: Besuch eines – Prinzen in Blankenburg 1727	104
4.3	Assemani, <i>Museo Cufico Naniano</i> (Padua, 1787), 54	105
4.4	Lozano y Casela, <i>Antigüedades Árabes de Granada y Cordoba Parte 2</i> (Madrid, 1804), pl. XIV	108
4.5	Daniel Gotthilf Moldenhawer, drawing of the Leyre casket. Niedersächsische Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek Göttingen, 2 Cod Ms. Arab. 134, f. 27v	110
5.1	Baptistère de Saint Louis, Paris, Musée du Louvre, LP 16	126
5.2	Léonard Gaultier, <i>Représentation des Cérémonies et de l'Ordre de Garde au baptême du Dauphin</i> , 1606, Paris, Petit Palais, Musée des Beaux-Arts de la Ville de Paris, GDUT10084	127
5.3	General view of Vincennes Castle, 1790–8. From Millin, <i>Antiquités nationales</i> vol. 2, N°X (Paris, 1790–8), pl. 12, 68	129
5.4	Plate with general views of the Baptistère, 1790–8. From Millin, <i>Antiquités nationales</i> , vol. 2, N°X (Paris, 1790–8), pl. 10, 62	132
5.5	Inner view of the Baptistère	133
5.6	Plate of the main outer frieze, 1790–8. From Millin, <i>Antiquités nationales</i> , vol. 2, N°X (Paris, 1790–8), pl. 11, 63	134
5.7–5.8	Baptistère de Saint Louis, the main outer frieze	135
5.9	Baptism of the imperial prince Napoleon-Eugène on 14 June 1856. Gaildrau, <i>Baptême de S. A. le Prince Impérial</i> – Bibliothèque nationale de France, RESERVE FT 4-QB-370 (146)	137
6.1	Mezquita de Córdoba	145
6.2	Casiri, <i>Bibliotheca Arabico-Hispana</i> (Madrid, 1760), frontispiece. Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. 2/23189	147
6.3	"Plan of the Mosque of Cordova in Moorish Times", in Swinburne, <i>Travels through Spain in the years 1775 and 1776</i> (London, 1779). Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. ER/2442	150
6.4–6.5	"ANTIGVEDADES ARABES DE ESPAÑA" and "DESCRIPCION DE LA SANTA IGLESIA CATHEDRAL DE CORDOBA" in <i>Antigüedades Árabes de España</i> (Madrid, 1804), pl. 1 and 26. Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. ER/1816	151
6.6	Masdeu, <i>Historia crítica de España</i> (Madrid, 1783), frontispiece, vol. XII: "España árabe". Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. 1/28639	154

x *List of Figures*

6.7	Juan Agustín Ceán Bermúdez, “Noticia de los Arquitectos Árabes de que la hallamos por las inscripciones”. Manuscript Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. MSS/ 21458/7	156
6.8	Conde, <i>Historia de la dominación de los árabes en España</i> (Madrid, 1820), frontispiece, vol. 1. Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. 2/ 72542	158
6.9	Murphy, <i>The Arabian Antiquities of Spain</i> (London, 1813), frontispiece. Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. ER/1213	159
6.10	“Interior view of the Mosque at Cordova” in Murphy, <i>The Arabian Antiquities of Spain</i> (London, 1813), pl. 6. Biblioteca Nacional de España, sig. ER/1213	160

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Introduction

Rediscovering Objects from Islamic Lands in Enlightenment Europe

Isabelle Dolezalek and Mattia Guidetti

The heatedly debated question of whether Islam belongs to Europe occupies a central place in current political discourse surrounding the inclusion – or indeed, exclusion – of migrants from North Africa, the Near East and elsewhere within the frame of the European Union. Identitarian visions of pan-European traditions and customs, which have Christianity at their heart, are contrasted with the religious background of migrants from predominantly Islamic countries.¹ This carries wide-reaching implications for perceptions of Islamic culture as distinct from and sometimes even opposed to European culture and heritage. Such a binary opposition leaves little room for the perception of present and historical entanglements. Yet people, thoughts and objects from Islamic lands have formed an integral part of European culture for centuries.

From the early Middle Ages onwards, objects from various regions under predominantly Islamic rule circulated in Europe as objects of trade, gifts or booty. Luxury wares, such as ivories, rock crystals or silk textiles, for instance, formed part of a shared and entangled court culture of objects that was appreciated by Muslim and Christian patrons alike and on all sides of the Mediterranean.² These objects were valued for their formal and material qualities, and for the technical skills necessary for their production.³ Simplistic conceptions that specific objects belonged to one or another cultural sphere thus ought to be questioned and revised.⁴ While relatively little is known about the uses of Islamicate⁵ objects in Latin court culture, these objects often found a secondary use in church treasuries, following endowments by courtly patrons. In fact, many if not most of the objects from Islamic lands which arrived in Europe in the Middle Ages and have survived to this day are preserved in ecclesiastical contexts.⁶ A textile from eleventh-century Egypt preserved in a church treasury in southern France is but one example. The so-called “Veil of St Anne”, once balled up in a transparent glass vessel in the cathedral treasury of Apt, was regularly displayed in processions, together with other relics attributed to St Anne.⁷ In the process of its transfer to and appropriation in a Latin Christian context, this imported Fatimid textile was turned into a Christian relic. In other cases, “Oriental” objects were used as relic containers. This is the case with two enamelled glass flasks from Syria, which had allegedly been filled with earth from the Holy Land. Formerly in the possession of Rudolph IV (1339–65), these were given to the cathedral treasury of St Stephen in Vienna.⁸

While the appreciation of their material qualities seems to have played a major role in the reception of Islamicate objects in European contexts, they took on various connotations, depending on the context of their use and on the circumstances of their

arrival in church treasuries and elsewhere. While the flasks above would probably have been perceived as products of the Holy Land, a group of Islamicate ivory caskets from Iberia, on the other hand, seem to have carried connotations of Christian triumph over the “infidels” after the conquest (“*Reconquista*”).⁹ Yet others, such as the “Veil of St Anne” or the coronation mantle of the Holy Roman Empire (made in Sicily in 1133), were endowed with fictitious origins and attributed to key figures of Christianity, thus leading to their transformation into Christian relics and to their appropriation within local histories.¹⁰ As a result of their inclusion into local cult and customs, the foreign provenances of Islamicate objects in Europe were often forgotten.

This volume pursues the hypothesis that the long eighteenth century, a distinctive period that shaped national and European identities, was also a period in which the origins of these objects were “rediscovered”. We argue that eighteenth-century scholars and their investigative focus on the objects’ production brought about a process of demystification marking a clear departure from previous conceptions of object identities and the “imaginative memories” for which many of these objects stood.¹¹ Of course, this process is not to be considered a sudden break with the past.¹² Rather, we suggest that the process of questioning and rediscovering provenances was a progressive development, one which, in Europe, had a particular impetus that culminated in the eighteenth century. This process paved the way for the scholarship and art historical classifications of the following centuries.

The chronological frame of our volume, defined as the long eighteenth century, contributes to bridging the gap between the pre-modern period and the nineteenth century; for both these periods, the reception of Islamicate objects in Europe has been studied more extensively. As Finbarr Barry Flood and Nebahat Avcıoğlu say, the eighteenth century “bracketed between the enduring hostilities of the Renaissance and the rigid academic taxonomies of the nineteenth century [...] appears unique as a time of flexibility, mobility, and possibility, as regards European relationships with and representations of the Orient”.¹³ Studies such as Margaret Meserve’s *Empires of Islam in Renaissance Historical Thought* (2008) consider the extent to which antagonisms and conflicts – especially with the Ottoman Empire – shaped the reception of Islamic culture in Europe before the eighteenth century.¹⁴ However, this was also a time of increasing material exchange between Italian courts and Islamic lands, based on an appreciation of the forms, materials and techniques imported from the East, which laid the foundations for later scholarly endeavours. The many facets of these early exchanges and approaches to Islamic culture were addressed, for instance, in a volume from 1999 edited by Charles Burnett and Anna Contadini.¹⁵ A large number of publications centred on the nineteenth century, on the other hand, address the fascination in Europe with objects and ornaments from the Islamic “Orient”.¹⁶ With our focus on the eighteenth century, in contrast, we propose to address a period of the reception and study of Islamicate objects in Europe which has been largely neglected in the scholarship to date. The volume also turns to material culture¹⁷ – to the interpretation of “things” – in an attempt to complement earlier, more text-based analyses of Oriental studies in eighteenth-century Europe, such as Alexander Bevilacqua’s seminal *The Republic of Arabic Letters: Islam and the European Enlightenment* (2018).¹⁸

Of course, both “Europe” and the “Orient”, or the “Islamic Lands”, from which the objects in our case studies originated, are not homogenous entities. They are multifaceted, politically and culturally diverse. One of the major dividing lines,

between Catholic southern Europe and the Protestant North, plays a role in several contributions to this volume.¹⁹ The Islamic lands addressed here, on the other hand, cover a vast geographical range; they include not only the Near East and North Africa, but also parts of southern Europe. As the contents and structure of this volume indicate, we have not sought to offer a comprehensive overview, but rather a number of significant case studies.

As the contributions assembled here show, what played a central role in the scholarly effort to reinterpret objects in the Enlightenment period, on both sides of the Protestant–Catholic divide, was the recognition and decipherment of inscriptions. Several recent publications have addressed European endeavours in learning Oriental languages from the Renaissance onwards.²⁰ There has been an emphasis on institutions and chairs of Oriental languages in universities,²¹ on networks of correspondence between scholars, on mother-tongue teachers and instructors who travelled through Europe from the late seventeenth century onwards,²² and on publications of grammars and dictionaries, such as Franciszek Meniński's *Linguarum Orientalium Turcicae, Arabicae, Persicae institutiones, seu grammatica Turcica*, published in Vienna in 1680.²³

Oriental manuscripts with historical texts were deemed potential sources of knowledge;²⁴ objects with inscriptions became carriers of information about themselves and about the cultures in which they were produced.²⁵ In fact, the knowledge of Oriental languages was one of the cornerstones of the rediscovery of objects and their provenances. It was central also to the establishment of broader cultural categories: the attention to chronology and succession helped to make sense of the progression of Islamic history and define similarities and differences among Islamic dynasties. Unsurprisingly, therefore, the first objects in European collections to be newly interpreted as groups of objects from Islamic lands in the eighteenth century were those that carried inscriptions. Increasing knowledge of Oriental languages, access to primary written sources and wide-ranging networks of scholarship thus promoted a new paradigm of knowledge, one which, we argue, also contributed to shaping a new sensibility for dealing with the material legacies from Islamic lands and those in Europe that had experienced periods of Islamic rule (such as Spain).

The rediscovery of the North-African provenance of the “Veil of St Anne” and the ensuing demystification of this supposedly authentic Christian relic provides an example of this process. In 1714, Joseph-François de Remerville wrote a history of the relics of St Anne preserved in the church of Apt, which included the “Veil”.²⁶ He spotted the textile's Arabic inscription – which he mistook for Old Coptic – and raised doubts about the relic's authenticity. Ultimately, his misinterpretation of the Arabic script allowed him to cling to the attribution of the textile to the lifetime of St Anne, when, he believed, Old Coptic would have been in use.²⁷

A parallel line of investigation connects the Fatimid textile of Apt to the Vatican Library in Rome, and to two among the most renowned German Orientalists of the second half of the eighteenth century. Around 1781, an exchange of letters took place between Luigi Gaetano Marini (1742–1815), the Prefect of the Vatican Archives in Rome, and Jacob Georg Christian Adler (1756–1834), a biblical scholar, numismatist and Orientalist, who also authored the *Museum Cuficum Borgianum*.²⁸ These dealt with drawings of objects with Arabic inscriptions that Marini sent to Adler for translation.²⁹ The drawings themselves bore no indication of the object that they depicted,



Figure 0.1 Drawing of a medallion from the so-called “Veil of Sainte Anne”, published in von Murr’s *Inscriptio Arabica* (Nuremberg: Adam Schneider, 1790), pl. I. (Munich, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, urn:nbn:de:bvb:12-bsb10516452-5).

but two of them illustrated a pair of medallions of the “Veil of St Anne”.³⁰ Adler published an initial translation of what was visible in the drawings as early as 1783 (see Figure 0.1).³¹

This was later re-elaborated by Christoph Gottlieb von Murr (1733–1811), who published a copy of the drawing from the Barberini Archive in 1790.³² A further attempt at translation was made some decades later by Michelangelo Lanci.³³ Although all the scholars involved ultimately failed to connect the drawings to the “Veil of St Anne”,³⁴ they were able to correctly attribute the inscription to the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Musta‘lī.

In 1851, Abbot André Gay took up Remerville’s studies of the Apt textile, unaware of the decipherment of its inscriptions on the basis of the Vatican drawing. With the help of Étienne Marc Quatremère de Quincy (1782–1857), a French Orientalist, he published a reading of the Arabic inscription, which revealed its date and place of production: the Egyptian city of Damietta in AD 1096–97 – the period of the caliph al-Musta‘lī. This reading, which is still accepted today, paved the way for later studies on the “Veil of St Anne”, which focus on the historical context of its production in Fatimid Egypt, its original shape and function and the technique used to make it.³⁵ Yet despite his Christian-myth-shattering discovery, Abbot Gay – like Remerville before him – still found a way to preserve the textile’s attribution to St Anne, by speculating that the textile must have been taken by Frankish Crusaders during the First Crusade