

## Chapter IV

### The Shared Culture of Objects\*

In 1959 the distinguished philologist Muhammad Hamidullah published a text entitled *The Book of Treasures and Gifts*.<sup>1</sup> The manuscript of the text, preserved in the public library of Afyonkarahisar in Turkey, is, as far as we know, unique, and it contains a number of oddities and misunderstandings introduced by later copyists. However, Hamidullah established that the original author of the text was one al-Qadi al-Rashid Ibn al-Zubayr, probably an official of the Fatimid court or an administrator of some sort in Cairo, who had been, among other things, an eyewitness to the dramatic events that shook the Fatimid regime after 1060 and that included, in 1067–68, the looting of the imperial palace in order to pay the army. No dated or datable event recorded in the text is later than 1071.

The book consists of 414 separate accounts, some quite short, others going on for several pages, of treasures kept, found, looted, or inherited by, mostly, Muslim rulers and of gifts exchanged within ruling circles of the Muslim world on the occasion of marriages, convalescences, circumcisions and other social or personal events, as well as between Muslim and other rulers. These accounts are organized into uneven sections dealing with the functions around which objects were exchanged or acquired. The book is not a work of *belles-lettres*, as it is poorly composed and makes little effort at literary effects, in spite of several quotations from poetry. It is in reality a sort of digest, with information restricted to the relatively limited topic of gifts and treasures.<sup>2</sup> It does not claim completeness (in fact, the copy we possess may well have been a summary from some larger opus), but there is a curious coherence in the book, a coherence of tidbits strung together, akin to the coherence of the “living” or “home” sections of today’s newspapers and magazines. The book does not include moral judgments about the evils

---

\* First published in *Byzantine Court Culture from 829 to 1204* (Washington, DC, 1997), pp. 115–29.

<sup>1</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, ed., *Kitab al-Dhakha'ir wa al-Tuhaf* (Kuwait, 1959).

<sup>2</sup> The exact literary genre to which it belongs is unclear to me, and the book is not mentioned in the great encyclopedias such as C. Brockelmann, *Geschichte der arabischen Literatur*, 5 vols (Leiden, 1936–42), or F. Sezgin, *Arabische Schrifttum*, 11 vols (Leiden, 1975 ff.).

of wealth, a common theme of medieval writing in Arabic or Persian. It is not a "Mirror of Princes" proposing patterns of behavior for rulers, nor is it an account of marvelous and odd things from remote lands. In short, there is something unclear about the genre to which the book belonged or the exact medieval audience for which it was destined.

Some of the accounts in Ibn al-Zubayr's book are clearly legends and fancy stories [116] dealing with exotica like the treasures of the kings of China and the peculiarities of Tibetan and Hindu rulers. But an unusually large number of his stories are verified or verifiable through other sources, plausible for a variety of reasons, or actual eyewitness accounts. It is the latter, more particularly the reports about the looting of the Fatimid palace, that brought attention to this text when it was first published.<sup>3</sup> A number of the stories pertaining to relations between Muslim and non-Muslim courts were already noted some thirty years ago, but were not often used by scholars of medieval art whose reading habits do not usually include *Arabica* or *The Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*.<sup>4</sup> The recent completion of a translation of the text with various commentaries, which one hopes will soon be published,<sup>5</sup> is an occasion for me to return to this source and to explore the topic of Byzantine court culture from the very special point of view of the information found in a book on past and present gifts and treasures for readers from the Arab, primarily Muslim, world.

Regardless, however, of the audience to which it was directed, this text contributes to something I would like to call the anthropology of the object. What I mean by that is an understanding or an appreciation of the thousands of items, which we usually exhibit or publish in terms of technique, time and place of manufacture, and decoration, as active ingredients in the fabric of daily or ceremonial life or as carriers of real or contrived memories. But this fabric of common or ceremonial behavior and these memories are not, most of the time, provided directly by the objects, but indirectly through their appearance in a written text. The difficult question is always to define the boundaries between a written document meant to be read or heard and images or objects meant to be seen or used. The problem is a well-known

---

<sup>3</sup> Although not the last word on the subject, O. Grabar, "Imperial and Urban Art in Islam," *Colloque International sur l'Histoire du Caire* (Grafen, 1972; repr. in *Studies in Islamic Art* [London, 1976]), pp. 183–5, contains most of the operative bibliography with respect to the arts. It is sad that the evidence from this event has not been picked up, to my knowledge at least, for further discussions of the arts available in Cairo in the eleventh century.

<sup>4</sup> Muhammad Hamidullah, "Embassy of Queen Bertha of Rome to Caliph al-Muktafi billah in Baghdad, 293H/906," *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 1 (1953); idem, "Nouveaux documents sur les rapports de l'Europe avec l'Orient musulman au moyen âge," *Arabica*, 7.3 (1960), pp. 281–300.

<sup>5</sup> Ghada H. Qaddumi, *A Medieval Islamic Book of Gifts and Treasures*, Ph.D. diss. (Harvard University, 1990), now published as *Book of Gifts and Rarities* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

one for sculpture and painting, where a one-to-one relationship can be established between a text and an existing or destroyed work of art.<sup>6</sup> It is a more difficult one for objects, since texts are related to classes and types of objects rather than to individual ones. A full discussion of this particular and more theoretical topics should include those accounts in Ibn al-Zubayr's book which deal with lands other than Byzantium. However, that discussion will not be pursued in this essay, even though it is probably the most interesting contribution of this book to the history of the arts.

I shall begin by providing all the examples from the *Kitab al-Dhakhā'ir* which deal with Byzantium. Most of them had already been translated into French over thirty years [117] ago by Hamidullah himself, but he did not attempt to go beyond the identification of their historical circumstances. Some of them are known in part or as a whole from other Arabic, Muslim or Christian, sources as well, but I have not sought such parallels as may exist in Greek sources, nor have I culled anew classical Arabic texts.<sup>7</sup> With one or two exceptions, all the examples will be between 900 and 1070. The closing date is obviously such because the source stops around 1072. It is also a legitimate one, because the twelfth century introduces, at least within the context of Seljuq domination in the Muslim world and as a result of the Crusades, a largely different configuration in the anthropology of courtly objects.<sup>8</sup> I shall suggest at the end that the tenth and eleventh centuries set the stage for that configuration in more interesting ways than those of merely preceding it.

A more curious point is the relative absence of examples before 900. The four that exist are remarkably short and imprecise: a present of silver, gold, precious stones and silk (all raw materials) given to Emperor Maurice by Khosro Parviz in the sixth century (account 5); the gold and mosaics (again raw materials) given to al-Walid for the mosque of Damascus (account 9); musk and sables added by al-Ma'mun for a present to the Byzantine emperor, probably Theophilos, in order to outbid the latter in a munificence which is not otherwise specified (account 31); fancy silk cloth and an equally fancy belt given by a Byzantine king to a governor of Azerbaijan who, in turn, gave it to Caliph al-Mu'tadid between 892 and 902 (account 62). There is not much for the historian to garner in these accounts, and all they evoke is

<sup>6</sup> Without going back to Pausanias or to Pliny, the issue has been raised, among others, by H. Maguire, *Art and Eloquence in Byzantium* (Princeton, 1981); Paul Magdalino, "The Bath of Leo the Wise and the 'Macedonian Renaissance' Revisited: Topography, Iconography, Ceremonial, Ideology," *DOP* 42 (1988), pp. 97–118, and M. Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention* (New Haven, Conn., 1985).

<sup>7</sup> A. A. Vasiliev and M. Canard, *Byzance et les Arabes*, 2 vols (Brussels, 1935; repr. 1968), vol. II, pp. 278–9, mentions Ibn al-Zubayr's recently published book and contains the only comparative sources I used systematically.

<sup>8</sup> Much has been written about the artistic changes that characterize architecture from the late eleventh century on and the other arts from the middle of the twelfth century. See R. Ettinghausen and O. Grabar, *Islamic Art, 650–1250* (London, 1987), pp. 328 ff.

within the standard statement of known and obvious facts or of perfectly trite minor events. Both the tone of the texts and the character of the information change drastically as we move into the tenth century.

After presenting Ibn al-Zubayr's stories, I will discuss briefly where possible visual illustrations for his accounts can be found. There is not a single instance where I (or anyone else so far) have been able to match a textual reference with a specific remaining object. All that can be done is to identify types and classes of things that existed in the past and that have at times been preserved through accidents of history. Then a series of additional observations derived from the texts will lead me to wider issues of interpretation and to some comments on objects of courtly art between the tenth to twelfth centuries.

(1) Accounts 73 and 74 deal with an event recorded otherwise in several Arabic chronicles but not in the detailed fashion of Ibn al-Zubayr.<sup>9</sup> The event is the arrival in Baghdad of a Byzantine embassy with gifts sent to Caliph al-Radi by Romanos Lekapenos, together with Constantine and Stephen ("leaders of the Byzantines", the Arabic [118] being *ra'is*, "head"),<sup>10</sup> presumably his children.<sup>11</sup> What is given is the text of the Arabic translation of the letter allegedly sent from Constantinople which accompanied the gifts. The Greek text was written in gold and the Arabic translation in silver, thereby indicating that the letter was written down in both languages in Constantinople. The indicative value of the letter is complicated by the following words found at the end of the presumed translation, as reported in the eleventh century: "I, the translator, ask you to excuse my description of the gifts since I have not seen them with my own eyes so that I could describe them properly." The interpreter of today has even further difficulties in that he cannot understand or translate appropriately into English many technical terms that may have been clearer to the tenth-century writer or the eleventh-century copyist.<sup>12</sup> For the purposes of this paper, I shall skip these technical issues, which are not central to this volume's concerns with the Byzantine court, but rather to techniques of manufacture, although at some point the latter must receive full scholarly attention by gathering together practicing artisans from different lands as well as classical Hellenists and Arabists.

<sup>9</sup> Vasiliev and Canard, *Byzance et les Arabes*, II, pp. 278–9.

<sup>10</sup> Since we are dealing with a translation from the Greek, it is curious that the relationship of Constantine and Stephen to Romanos is not more explicit. This may have something to do with the assumed Greek original.

<sup>11</sup> There was around that time a patriarch named Stephen, but his dates (925–8) do not quite fit and the Constantine is unlikely to have been Romanos' predecessor.

<sup>12</sup> Qaddumi's thesis is the first attempt to find appropriate contemporary equivalents for these technical terms, but some of her interpretations are only first steps in what should become a major investigation of the vocabulary for manufacturing in classical Arabic.

The formal letter is addressed from Romanos, Stephen and Constantine, highest placed (*al-'usama'*) in Byzantium and “believers in God”, to “the honorable and magnificent sovereign of the Muslims”, and avoids references to Christ or the Prophet which could create friction. After wishes for peace and for characteristic ransom and truce settlements, it continues:<sup>13</sup>

we have sent ... some fine articles which reveal the deep-rooted affection and sincere sympathy we have for your brethren [presumably the Muslims]. The articles are:

three gold beakers inlaid with precious stones;

a rock crystal flask encased in gilded silver, decorated and studded with precious stones and pearls; on top of its lid there is a rock crystal lion;

another rock crystal flask which was on one side encased with gilded silver latticework studded with precious stones, in the center of which there are roundels; on the other side there were four silver threads overlaid with gold;

a silver gilded vessel in the shape of a gourd and a tankard, both inlaid with precious stones;

a gilded bucket-like jar inlaid with precious stones and studded with precious stones and pearls; it is inscribed at the mouth with [the statement]: “God’s voice over waters (or over life)”;<sup>14</sup> [119]

another two-handled jar of gilded silver studded with pearls and various kinds of gems; on its lid is mounted the sculpture of a peacock;

a gilded silver bucket inlaid with precious stones and studded with pearls and precious stones;

another gilded bucket studded with precious stones;

a small three-handled gilded silver jar inlaid with precious stones and engraved with representations of small birds and of narcissi, and inscribed at the mouth;<sup>15</sup>

a small eight-sided gilded silver casket inlaid with precious stones, its oblong lid studded with pearls and precious stones; inside the box are three narrow scarves (?) of linen decorated with gold and large gilt roses, three narrow scarves decorated with gold and small roses; three raw-silk turbans, the edges of which are decorated with gold;

a silver case for several large goblets, inlaid with precious stones and inscribed at the mouth: “O God, strengthen king Romanos”;

a small gilded silver jar with two small handles studded with precious stones and pearls; on its handle and rim there are three figurines of peacocks;

a case containing two knives whose handles are of bezoar encased with gold wires and inlaid with precious stones; on top of the handles are profusely ornate emeralds decorated with gold;

<sup>13</sup> What follows is a simplified translation that avoids almost all problematic terms and does not provide the Arabic equivalents, which can be found in Qaddumi’s work.

<sup>14</sup> Hamidullah edited the text with “life” (*al-hayat*) and suggested “water” (*al-miyah*) as an alternative, but preferred the latter in his translation because it correctly identifies a passage from the psalms (29:3) which was in fact used on objects, as was pointed out by I. Ševčenko, and therefore serves to authenticate the text of the letter.

<sup>15</sup> Qaddumi’s translation here differs from Hamidullah’s, but seems to reflect the text more accurately.

two other knives with handles decorated with small pearls and other stones; their case is studded with rubies, pearls, and black stones, and their scabbards are of gold profusely adorned with pearls;

a heavy battle-axe with a head made of gilded silver inlaid with precious stones and studded with pearls; on its shaft there is silver latticework profusely adorned with gilded silver;

three knives, one of which is profusely decorated with gold; the other two are of silver, and one of them has a gilded handle;

seven brocade covers, one with a design of eagles in two colors, another with a floral design in three colors, another with three-colored stripes, a red one with colored foliate design, the design of yet another one consisting of trees on a white ground, two with the design of a hunter set in a roundel on a white ground, two with crouching lions on a yellow ground, two with eagles set in roundels;

ten pieces of red *siglatun* fabric;<sup>16</sup> ten more pieces of violet cloth; five pieces of multicolored *siglatun*, five pieces of white *siglatun*; twenty pieces of striped cloth;

four pelts, one of which is called *kabak* (with sable collar), the second of white fox, the third is *balis*, and the fourth is called *baks*;<sup>17</sup>

as to covers, two are of velvet with a design on a violet ground representing an eagle in a roundel and horse riders above;

two more wrappers with a similar design but without velvet pile;[120]

another one with a palm tree design and a green background;

ten pieces of thin brocade, one with the representation of a riding king with a flag in his hand, another with a bird fighting a lion with its two wings. Two others with a winged beast, another with an eagle seizing an onager, one with a unicorn, another one with wild goats in six roundels, another one with fifteen roundels on a white ground; one more with a rhinoceros seizing a leopard, another with a winged quadruped with small eagles in the four corners;

ten large velvet outer garments, one of emerald green *siglatun* cloth with elephants within its stripes; the other had within its borders rosettes, in the center of which there are ducks and other birds;

a *siglatun* cloth with birds within its borders, another one with unicorns, while the borders of another one are decorated with a yellow lion; another one has lion heads with wide-open mouths and a tree in the center;

another has inside its borders figures of riding kings and a unicorn and inside a winged quadruped;

ten colored pieces with borders decorated in the *barmaniyah* (?) way; ten green hooded mantles with borders with ten protomes of beasts of burden;

ten kerchiefs with images.<sup>18</sup>

Such is a slightly simplified English version of a presumed translation into Arabic of a Greek text accompanying gifts brought from Byzantium to Baghdad. Most of these objects are plausible in the sense that, except perhaps

<sup>16</sup> For the various uses of this term, which also means "scarlet," see R. B. Serjeant, "Material for the Study of Islamic Textiles," *Ars Islamica*, 15–16 (1951), p. 301, for further references.

<sup>17</sup> These terms are all unclear, and there has been no attempt to elucidate them further.

<sup>18</sup> Other translations are possible, such as "borders" or "representations." The point seems to me that identifiable items were shown, whatever they were.

for a certain extravaganza of precious stones, verbal descriptions agree with types of objects, techniques and decoration known otherwise. At this stage of presenting the accounts in Ibn al-Zubayr's text, however, the response of Caliph al-Radi to the "three leaders of the Byzantine people" is particularly interesting: "the Commander of the Faithful has complied with what you have anticipated from your gift and has provided the envoy with what manifests his respect for you, instead of exposing you to shame and loss of pride, so as to prove yourself to be above [mere] opportunism. A list of this gift [i.e., the one al-Radi sends back with the Byzantine envoy] will be attached to this letter." The meaning is, I believe, that a comparable set of presents was sent to Romanos, so as not to humiliate the Byzantine emperor by appearing to treat his gift as a sort of bribe. Unfortunately we do not possess, at least to my knowledge, an Arabic or Greek list of the other half of the exchange.

This long passage also suggests a remarkably extensive cast of characters involved in the making of the text we possess: in Constantinople, some official gathering the gifts and making a list in Greek, having it translated into Arabic by someone who has not seen the gifts, which were presumably already packed; then in Baghdad, a process of administrative and ceremonial acknowledgment of reception and eventually the copying of the text put together in Constantinople into a work for the general public. Even larger numbers of people must have been involved in the packaging, protecting, delivering and [121] eventual storing of the objects. The budgetary implications of this text are quite staggering, above and beyond the value of the items it describes. It may well be possible to identify within the service structure of the Byzantine as well as 'Abbasid courts the individuals or at least positions involved in the transactions suggested by this gift and the spaces needed for the successful enactment of these transactions.

(2) Account 82. In 1046 Constantine IX Monomachos sent a gift to the Fatimid caliph al-Mustansir on the occasion of the signing of a treaty renewing for ten years the armistices at the frontier between the two realms. The mercantile attitude of a contemporary observer establishes first that the value of the gift was 216,000 Rumi (i.e., Byzantine) gold coins plus 300,000 Arabic dinars. Perhaps economic historians can establish the value involved in the gifts, which included one hundred fifty beautiful mules and selected horses, each of them covered with a brocaded saddle cloth, and fifty mules carrying fifty pairs of boxes covered with fifty pieces of floss-thin silk brocade. The animals were led by two hundred Muslim prisoners of war who had been held in captivity, and the boxes contained one thousand pieces of different kinds of brocade, three hundred pieces of thin brocade, red Rumi belts bordered with gold, high turbans embroidered with gold, drapes for curtains, and brocade kerchiefs in which clothes were wrapped.



(3) Accounts 84 and 85. In 1053 Michael VI sent a gift to al-Mustansir which included: Turkish slave boys and girls; partridges, peacocks, cranes, aquatic birds, ravens, and starlings, all of which were white; huge bears that played musical instruments; Saluqi hounds and guard dogs; boxes and chests that numbered over seven thousand and contained “fine things,” unfortunately not described. Two boats were used to transport all of this. The more interesting part of this story is that, after delivering the gifts in Cairo, the Byzantine messenger sailed to Jaffa, accompanied by Fatimid sailors, whence he went to pray in the church of the Holy Sepulcher in Jerusalem and to deliver gifts from the Byzantine emperor to the church rebuilt about a generation earlier. The list of these gifts is provided: a short sleeveless gold waistcoat studded with all kinds of splendid precious stones; two gold crosses, the length as well as the width of each being three and a half cubits, weighing one whole qintar (around 45 kg)<sup>19</sup> and adorned with rubies and other precious stones; many gold trays adorned with precious stones; two gold ewers, the capacity of each being twenty Baghdadi *ratls* of wine; several gold chandeliers with gold chains and in their center small birds of rock crystal; many long drapes or curtains of thick embroidery with an abundance of gold threads and precious stones; and other such church equipment. All of this was exhibited on Easter day.<sup>20</sup>

(4) Account 91. In 1057 the Seljuq ruler Tughrilbek sent to the Byzantine emperor, presumably Michael VII, a pearl-encrusted vest on the front of which was sewn or [122] otherwise affixed the seal of Solomon in red rubies and weighing 45 *mithqals* (c. 20 grams); a hundred silver candlesticks with large ceremonial candles; one hundred and fifty apricot-colored Chinese<sup>21</sup> porcelain dishes; one hundred garments, each composed of two pieces of cloth interwoven with gold; two hundred pieces of *siqlatun* cloth; two hundred pieces of black and white striped cloth; ten drum-shaped scent baskets lined with leather and filled with camphor and aloeswood. All of this, reports our author, was valued at 2,400 dinars, which seems rather cheap by comparison with what the Byzantine emperor sent to Cairo, but then the text adds that he (emperor or ambassador) also “was paid 50,000 dinars in cash.”

(5) Accounts 97 to 99. Our author goes back in time and recalls that the Byzantine emperor Michael, probably the same Michael VII, had offered to

<sup>19</sup> These and subsequent evaluations of weight and length measures are approximate guesses based on Walther Hinz, *Islamische Masse und Gewichte* (Leiden, 1970).

<sup>20</sup> The events that led to the sending of this gift have been discussed by R. Ousterhout, “Rebuilding the Temple,” *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 48 (1989), pp. 66 ff.

<sup>21</sup> The term used is *sini*, which could either mean “Chinese” or refer to a fancy technique of manufacture, such as one of several varieties of luster wares.



the mother of al-Mustansir five bracelets of jewelry inlaid with glass of five colors: deep red, snow white, jet black, sky blue, and deep azure. It was beautifully fashioned, and its inlaid design was of the finest craftsmanship. The same emperor is also supposed to have sent to al-Mustansir three heavy saddles of enamel inlaid with gold. He mentioned that they were from among the saddles of Alexander the Great. But in the following account a saddle is described in great detail and, says our author's informant, on the saddle there was a piece of paper with the handwriting of al-Mu'izz, the Fatimid caliph who established Cairo in 969, saying: "the Byzantine emperor offered us this saddle and the bridle after we entered Egypt." And the minister of the time added that it was one of the saddles that had belonged to Alexander the Great and had been transferred by the latter to the Byzantine treasury.

(6) Account 101. In 1062 our author hears from a freed slave of the governor of Sicily that Basil, the Byzantine king (in this story probably a generic Basil), had given to the former slave's master a casket in which there was a medium-sized stone that could be used to cure dropsy.

(7) Account 105. In 1071 the Hamdanid Nasir al-Dawlah gave to Emperor Romanos IV Diogenes a gift worth 40,000 dinars. It included: two long sticks of aloeswood; five unique rock crystal objects with characteristics that are difficult to understand; a large tapering bucket with enormous capacity; brocade cloth with representations of wine-colored eagles on white ground, weighing 4,000 *mithqals* (168 kg) and valued at 1,000 dinars; cloth embroidered with gold and heavily encrusted; all sorts of pieces of cloth cut for a variety of purposes; beautiful jewelry, and all sorts of utensils. In exchange the Byzantine emperor sent to Nasir al-Dawlah gifts that included a compact embroidery with gold threads that was so heavy it was all a single mule could carry.

(8) Account 105. The felt cloak of Romanos IV that had been taken from him when he besieged Aleppo in 1031 was given to the new governor of Aleppo by the daughter [123] of the previous one. "Its trails, sleeves, and openings were adorned with pearls of great weight. At the back and front of the cloak were gold crosses adorned with rubies."

(9) Accounts 161 to 164. This is another version of the celebrated story of the Byzantine embassy that went to Baghdad in 917.<sup>22</sup> It does not bear directly on the present subject, except for being a striking illustration of the display throughout the whole city of Baghdad of practically every person,

<sup>22</sup> Vasiliev and Canard, *Byzance et les Arabes*, II, pp. 239–43; O. Grabar, *The Formation of Islamic Art*, 2nd edn (New Haven, Conn., 1987), pp. 159–64.

animal and object controlled by the caliph. Such showy displays existed also on a more modest scale. Thus, according to account 173, when a certain Basil was sent as an envoy to Caliph al-Hakim, fairly early in Fatimid times, the latter “wished to furnish the throne room with unusual furnishings and to hang up extraordinary wall hangings. He ordered that the storerooms of furniture be searched, and twenty-one bags of such things were found, which had been carried by caravan from Qayrawan in Tunisia to Cairo.” Each piece had a slip attached to it which identified its technique and the time of its manufacture. In the foreground of the throne room a shield was hung which was adorned with all sorts of costly precious stones, illuminating its surroundings. “When sunlight fell on it, the eyes could not look at it, as they became tired and dazzled.” Aside from its rare reference to the visual impact made by objects, this account offers a glimpse into what may be called the curatorial world of court treasuries, with identifying cards attached to every object.

(10) Account 229. When Marwan was captured by the ‘Abbasids in Egypt in 750, there was in his treasury a table of onyx with a white background and black and red stripes. It had gold legs. There was also a goblet of Pharaonic glass with an image in high relief representing a lion and a man kneeling in front of him while fixing an arrow on his bow. These particular objects, the second one of which was certainly some late antique gem, were kept by the ‘Abbasids and eventually given to a king of India. The interest of this story is that, like several other accounts (none, however, involving Byzantine objects from the period under consideration), it indicates a double mobility of objects. There was an internal mobility, whereby the imperial households used for practical purposes or played with things found in the treasury and passed them on to children, slave girls, or convalescing spouses. A precious object with a known pedigree was once found as a door stopper in Cairo or Baghdad, and many a wondrous item was destroyed as children’s toys. And then there was an external mobility, as the gifts found in one place or belonging to one person were sent to someone else, in a continuous exchange of expensive white elephants.

(11) Account 263 is a curious passage that is like a moment from the *Book of Ceremonies* seen by a Muslim Liutprand, but without the venom of the bishop of Cremona. In 1071 one Ibrahim b. Ali al-Kafartabi, who had been in Constantinople, related that he saw [124] Emperor Romanos Diogenes on the day of their (the Christians’) great feast, probably Easter.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Although not an important point for our purposes, it should be noted that at Easter time of 1071, the fateful year of Mantzikert, the emperor was campaigning in Armenia. Al-Kafartabi must have been relating something he had seen earlier.

He was wearing a garment of the kind their emperors wear with great difficulty, as they are neither able to bear it properly nor to sit with it, because of its heavy weight and because they are too weak. The garment contained thirty thousand pearls, each of which weighed about one *mithqal* [this makes something like 126 kg, which is certainly too much]; it is priceless, nothing comparable being known on earth. Al-Kafartabi told me that the emperor was accustomed to wear, during his travels, casual garments adorned with precious stones and large pearls of various kinds. Each garment was worth about 200,000 dinars. He saw Emperor Michael frequently wearing some of these clothes, in different styles, on his military expeditions. He also informed me that the Byzantine emperors had crowns for different occasions that were suspended over their heads. One was the “largest crown;” which was of gold adorned with various rubies, together with a variety of other jewels. The crown was usually suspended over the emperor’s head when he sat in his audience room to receive the natives of his empire and the envoys of kings. Another was the crested crown, which he set on his head when he returned from a campaign in which he had vanquished his enemy. This crown was studded with precious stones, and its crest which protrudes over his face had pieces of ruby in it. The emperor sat on his gold throne studded with precious stones or on a studded gold *salin* [probably a rendering in Arabic of the Greek *sellion*]. He always let his legs come down from the throne or the *salin* to rest them on a footstool upholstered with heavily embroidered brocade. He had two red boots on his feet. A complete pair was worn only by the emperor. Those inferior to him wore one boot in red and the other in black. He also told me that he saw there [presumably the Byzantine palace] a piece of ambergris that looked like a huge camel kneeling in the center of a large platform.

This text is a wonderfully contemporary one, as it exhibits the ignorant curiosity so characteristic of most of our own press of today.

(12) Account 340. A very short one and a very peculiar one, which I will quote in its entire brevity.

When Basil, son of Romanos, the emperor of Byzantium, died in the year 410 [1019–20], he left 6,000 baghdadi *qintars* of gold coins and jewels worth 54 million dinars.

Such are the stories and accounts in the *Kitab al-Dhakha’ir* which pertain to Byzantium: I have left out only the indirect references found in the description of the Fatimid [125] treasures, but these texts are, relatively speaking, better known and would not add much substance to my argument.

Before turning to a number of concluding statements, I would like, however, to bring out one last account, which is only tangentially pertinent to Byzantium, but which can serve as a sort of foil for my conclusions. It is account 69 dealing with the gifts sent in 906 by Bertha, the Frankish queen, to al-Muktafi in Samarra.<sup>24</sup> The gifts involved are: fifty swords, fifty shields,

<sup>24</sup> This is the passage translated by M. Hamidullah in the *Journal of the Pakistan Historical Society*, 1 (1953).

fifty Frankish spears; twenty pieces of cloth woven with gold threads; twenty Slavic eunuchs; twenty pretty and gentle Slavic slave girls; ten huge dogs that even lions and other beasts of prey cannot withstand; seven falcons; seven hawks; a silk tent with all its furnishings; twenty pieces of cloth, much of a special wool that is in an oyster from the bottom of the sea and assumes different colors according to the hours of the day; three Frankish birds which, when they see poisoned food or drinks, utter horrible screams and clap their wings until the message gets across; beads that extract arrowheads and spear tips painlessly, even after flesh had built around them. The letter that accompanied the gift was on white silk in a script that “was similar to the Rumi (i.e., Greek) script, but more harmonious.” Among its more bizarre features, the letter contained a proposal of marriage.

The problem was that no one at al-Muktafi’s court could read Latin. Finally a Frank was found in the department of fancy garments who read the letter and translated it into Greek. Then Ishaq b. Hunayn, the well-known figure in translations from Greek into Arabic and in early ‘Abbasid science, was summoned, who translated the Greek into Arabic. The plausibility, if not veracity, of this account seemed assured until the appearance of Ishaq b. Hunayn, which is a bit as though Shakespeare was called to translate some missive received by Queen Elizabeth from the doge in Venice. But, of course, it is precisely this sort of mediation by a well-known figure in cross-cultural connections which gave the seal of authenticity in the eleventh century to an account that would have remained a hearsay story without it.

What sort of conclusions or hypotheses can one draw from these accounts which vary in tone, verisimilitude, and objectivity and whose complete understanding *as texts* would also require comparison with stories in the same book involving Central Asia, China, Tibet and India? I will only pick up a few specific threads from the stories and then elaborate a number of wider considerations.

The first specific point is that there exists a body of artefacts from the tenth, eleventh and twelfth centuries which is typologically and functionally related to the items listed or described by Ibn al-Zubayr.<sup>25</sup> In the absence of specific identifications of described objects, the examples that can be proposed have the peculiarity that they come from both Byzantine and Islamic sources, or in reality alleged sources, as in many cases several places of manufacture can be proposed for the objects involved. What is more important [126] than the place of origin of the objects and even than their date is that their utilization and appreciation was shared by all courts, Christian or Muslim,

<sup>25</sup> A simple list can be made from catalogs of exhibitions such as: *Arts de l’Islam* (Orangerie, Paris, 1971), nos 127, 129, 227–30, 271, 273, 294; Musée du Louvre, *Byzance* (Paris, 1992), esp. pp. 208–407; and H. R. Hahnloser, *Il Tesoro di San Marco* (Florence, 1971), pls LXXXIX ff.

once exclusively Christian signs and images are removed or avoided altogether.<sup>26</sup>

Three examples of objects associated with courts which are at times later than the texts I have quoted but which are very much within the period considered by this volume can help in elaborating the point of a shared culture. The first one is the celebrated cup in the San Marco treasury, presumably made in Constantinople, with perfectly clear but meaningless Arabic letters and perfectly clear but iconographically senseless classical figures.<sup>27</sup> The other one is the mantle of Roger II with a legible Arabic inscription different in content from any known inscription on an object and with a perfectly understandable imagery which cannot be easily explained, if at all, and with a shape and a lining that make it Latin European.<sup>28</sup> The third one is the Innsbruck cup with its nearly illiterate princely inscriptions in Arabic and Persian, its images which are at the same time quite clear and too numerous to make sense, its almost vulgar covering of every side of the cup, and its technique for which a Georgian source has recently been proposed but which is not associated with the northern Mesopotamian area of its patron.<sup>29</sup> In these instances, three different patrons used simultaneously Arabic letters, classical and mythological motifs for objects that do not fit within the narrow boundaries imposed by religious art or within the art sponsored by the faiths involved, but which belong to a common court art of luxury comparable to the art of couturiers and cooks today.<sup>30</sup>

None of these impressive creations has in fact a geographical or historical, probably not even a temporal, home. They reflect a culture of objects shared by all those who could afford them and transformed by their owners or users into evocations of sensory pleasures. The visual effects of the objects were then transferred into written form, in Ibn al-Zubayr's text, with two additional components. One is the almost vulgar physicality of objects identified in

<sup>26</sup> In fact, one of the examples I gave mentions the crosses found on an imperial robe.

<sup>27</sup> A. Cutler, "The Mythological Bowl in the Treasury of San Marco in Venice," in D. K. Kouymjian, ed., *Studies in Honor of George C. Miles* (Beirut, 1974), for an early interpretation, and I. Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "The Cup of San Marco and the 'Classical' in Byzantium," *Studien zur mittelalterlichen Kunst, 800–1250: Festschrift für Florentine Mütterich* (Munich, 1985), for a more recent one that moves toward the explanation I am proposing here.

<sup>28</sup> The mantle is often illustrated, as in J. Sourdél-Thomine and Bertold Spuler, *Die Kunst des Islam* (Berlin, 1973), fig. 199 and p. 265, with a brief bibliography. For recent work see T. Al Samman, "Arabische Inschriften," *JbKSWien*, 78 (1982), pp. 114 ff. The lining is now dated in the thirteenth century: Arne E. Wardell, "Panni Tartarici," *Islamic Art*, 3 (1988–9), p. 110, with references.

<sup>29</sup> See now Scott Redford, "The Innsbruck Plate and Its Setting," *Muqarnas*, 7 (1990), pp. 119 ff, with references to earlier publications.

<sup>30</sup> H. Belting, "Kunst oder Objekt-Stil," in *Byzanz und der Westen* (Vienna, 1984), for a general statement about this common art; G. T. Beech, "The Eleanor of Aquitaine Vase," *Gesta*, 32 (1993), for a rock crystal belonging to the common arts. There are many comparable examples.

medieval texts or modern descriptions as large, heavy, shiny, expensive, and covered with precious stones or gold threads or with striking images or magic inscriptions. The second is the awareness of technical and functional distinctions in the sociological sense of the word, that is to say, as statements of quality and worthiness rather than of ways of manufacture. This awareness is expressed in the presence [127] of a specific vocabulary of verbs and nouns which are often impossible to translate and for which my own competence, at least, is limited both as an Arabist and as a technologist. The importance of this linguistic differentiation lies in its implication that the reading of words elicited some form of recognition or wonderment on the part of readers who were probably no more competent than I am, because the differentiation itself was important regardless of what it meant. The further elaboration of this particular point would take me away from the more immediately significant conclusion I propose, which is that a culture of shared objects implies a certain commonality of court behavior and of court practices. This commonality seems to me more appropriate than the "influences" from the East which had, in the past, identified the tenth century.<sup>31</sup>

A second specific point is that there are several concurrent hierarchies in the items listed in Ibn al-Zubayr's text. For instance, there are raw materials among them (I include in this category animals and slaves), semi-manufactured products like a piece of cloth, and fully manufactured objects ready to be used. The first category, that of raw materials, is relatively rarely ever mentioned in exchanges between Muslims and Byzantines, just as it is rare for China and India, also centers of old civilizations. But raw materials dominate in things coming from Western Europe, North Africa, steppic Eurasia, and eventually Africa and southeast Asia. Semi-manufactured products are mostly textiles (and, curiously, medical or pseudo-medical items like aphrodisiacs), and they are more frequent among items sent from Cairo or Baghdad to Constantinople than the other way around, but the evidence from this single source is too thin to secure the conclusion that the Byzantine court imported more semi-manufactured items than it exported.

A more interesting point concerning hierarchies of objects and of their use may be that all but one of the examples above deal with exchanges between the highest-ranking authorities, the Byzantine emperor and the caliphal courts of Byzantium, Cairo and Cordoba (there are no examples of Cordoba–Byzantine exchanges in Ibn al-Zubayr, but these exist elsewhere).<sup>32</sup> The one major exception occurs in 1071–2, when a Hamdanid *amir*, a second-rank ruler, sends a present to the Byzantine emperor, who, admittedly, was camping nearby. When we turn to the twelfth century, however, the loci of exchanges increase enormously, as the whole of Spain, Sicily, Anatolia, the Caucasus, Syria and Mesopotamia

<sup>31</sup> A. Grabar, "Le succès des arts orientaux," *MünchJb*, 2 (1951), for example.

<sup>32</sup> Vasiliev and Canard, *Byzance et les Arabes*, II, pp. 324–8, among many other places.

all develop centers involved in exchanges of gifts with each other and with Byzantium, in fitting response to the multiplication of centers of authority.<sup>33</sup> In the ninth century, booty and very limited local exchanges predominated, as 'Abbasid or Byzantine rulers apparently dealt with each other only for the exchange of prisoners.<sup>34</sup> Should one attribute an apparent change, some time early in the tenth century, in the climate of the relationship between Byzantine and Muslim courts to changed politics or to economic and technological changes? Is it in fact valid to conclude that there occurred a change in the behavior between courts? [128]

A third factual detail is the paucity of mythical or unusual objects in these accounts involving Byzantium and the Muslims, the saddles of Alexander the Great being the only exception. This contrasts with other accounts in Ibn al-Zubayr's book and in many other sources of the same times which are full of fantastic stories about the tables of Solomon, David, the Prophet Qarun, and Constantine, strange animals, gigantic women, roaring lions, singing birds, and many other imaginary or mythical fixtures. *Mirabilia* came from the East, strange animals from the East and from North Africa, prophetic or imperial souvenirs from the Mediterranean with occasional detours elsewhere.<sup>35</sup> The speculative conclusion that emerges is once again that the objects shared by the Byzantine and Muslim courts were used as expressions of a competition, but one that, like the sporting events of today, involved the same functions, forms and values. And in Cordoba, Aght'amar, or Palermo, smaller but not always poorer or cheaper versions of the same games occurred. But these games were not shown in quite the same way everywhere, as Muslim courts enjoyed the pageantry of enormous displays like the 917 one in Baghdad, which was repeated on a smaller scale elsewhere.<sup>36</sup> I do not quite know what the Byzantine court did with its treasures and with the gifts it received.

Before concluding, one nagging difficulty should be mentioned in these interpretations of passages in an eleventh-century written text. A whole century before Ibn al-Zubayr, the great historian al-Mas'udi used the very same descriptive terms (but without Ibn al-Zubayr's technological precision) to refer to the gifts given or received by Khosro Anushirvan in the sixth century from China and India and especially to the gifts exchanged by the Byzantine emperor Maurice and the Persian grandee Bahram Chobin.<sup>37</sup> And

<sup>33</sup> Lucy-Anne Hunt, "Comnenian Aristocratic Palace Decoration," in M. Angold, ed., *The Byzantine Aristocracy IX to XIII Centuries* (London, 1984), for examples.

<sup>34</sup> See Vasiliev and Canard, *Byzance et les Arabes*, I, for a list of these meetings.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., pp. 366 ff.; C. J. F. Dowsett, trans., *The History of the Caucasian Albanians* (London, 1961), p. 129. And there are many examples in Ibn al-Zubayr. An anthology of such sources would be a most welcome enterprise.

<sup>36</sup> See above.

<sup>37</sup> Mas'udi, *Tanbih*, trans. B. Carra de Vaux (Paris, 1897), p. 236, for an early example of Byzantine merchants in Cairo.



so the skeptical historian may wonder whether his eleventh-century text is a conventional rather than specific description of expensive things. The lovingly listed beautiful things which can be identified through remaining types of objects may just be empty verbal formulas. Or perhaps, since Mas'udi wrote in the tenth century, that is to say, the very century when exchanges increased between Byzantium and the Muslim world, it is the reality of a new art of fancy objects which created in Mas'udi's time a new vocabulary for the description of objects, and this vocabulary was artificially used for earlier times, but unnaturally continued for the following two centuries.

On the whole, I prefer, therefore, to assume the authenticity of Ibn al-Zubayr's text and to argue that we are not yet at the next stage, the one that grows in the twelfth century and commercializes both the making of objects and the memories associated with them. This later stage is symbolized by a celebrated aquamanile in the Louvre with two inscriptions on the breast of the bird. One, in Arabic, says *'amal 'abd al-malik al-Nasrani*, which could mean "the work of the slave of the Christian king," or "the work of Abd al-Malik the Christian." The other inscription, preceded by a Maltese cross, is in Latin, and says *opus Solomonis erat*, which could be translated as "this was the work of [129] Sulayman (a Muslim or Jewish or Christian artisan somewhere in the Mediterranean area)," or "this was a terrific job," or "of Solomon (the Hebrew king, as a souvenir sold to an unsuspecting Crusader or merchant)."<sup>38</sup> If we put it together with so many silver bowls found in Ukraine and published by Darkevich,<sup>39</sup> or with the numerous inlaid or simply chased candleholders, ewers and kettles all over the Near East, we have, I believe, the massively multiplied, feudal or urban, reflection, at times handsome and impressive, at other times vulgar and clearly imitative, of the court art of objects in the tenth and eleventh centuries. What had been created in the latter can be summed up in the words Peter Brown has used recently for the fourth century: "the vigorous flowering of a public culture that Christians and non-Christians [I would add Muslims and non-Muslims] alike could share."<sup>40</sup>

But, obviously enough, these objects did not represent *the* culture of the Byzantine court with its icons, church visits and prayers, with a visual as well as literary Christianity overwhelming everything. They did, on the other hand, represent much more of the culture of Muslim courts, whose piety was not expressed as much in visual terms and whose rulers were not

<sup>38</sup> The object has often been illustrated and used in exhibition catalogs, as in *Arabesques et jardins de paradis* (Paris, 1989), no. 119, p. 148. The only in-depth study is still the one by A. de Longpérier, "Vase Arabo-Sicilien," *Revue archéologique*, 6 (1865), pp. 356–67, repr. in *Ceuvres*, vol. I (Paris, 1883), pp. 442 ff.

<sup>39</sup> V. P. Darkevich, *Svetskoe iskusstvo Vizantii* (Moscow, 1975), all of whose interpretations I do not share, but whose groups of objects are quite accurate.

<sup>40</sup> P. Brown, "The Problems of Christianization," *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 82 (1993), p. 96.

accompanied by an organized ecclesiastical system and by a highly developed and precise liturgical practice. Where, then, did these objects operate within Byzantine court culture, if icons were brought to cure the sick, to promote victories or happy births, to celebrate weddings, or to crown emperors? They appeared, I submit, *after* the event. Once cured, wedded, crowned, or victorious, the emperor and his entourage sought a pleasure they rarely wrote about, as in the exceptional case of Constantine VII admiring the Arabian cup from which he drank before going to bed,<sup>41</sup> or in the materials used for the making of the official clothes in which princes were represented in something like the Skylitzes manuscript.<sup>42</sup> My contention is that this culture of sensory pleasure was much more widely shared than the religiously specific one of the church and the icon, the mosque and the Holy Book, which, then as now, separated people from each other while winning for all of them eternal life.

---

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Kalavrezou-Maxeiner, "The Cup of San Marco," p. 173, on the basis of an indication by I. Ševčenko.

<sup>42</sup> A. Grabar and M. Manoussacas, *L'illustration du manuscrit de Skylitzes* (Venice, 1979), color pl. II, figs 42, 72, 75, etc., as just one set of examples of clothes that could have come from either culture.

