Book Reviews


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In debates with text-oriented historians of Islam, I often find myself explaining the difference between archaeology and art history. For these historians, “things” (or in the polished term, “material culture”) are obtained in similar ways and raise similar questions. In the reality of Islamic studies, some themes are indeed dealt by the two disciplines. Moreover, archaeologists sometimes address their objects of study from art-historical perspectives, and art-historians might draw on archaeological field methods.

There are two basic characteristics that distinguish archaeology from art history, a closely related discipline. The first one is the significance of the spatial or temporal context in which an object is found. Thus, “an object as an object, alone, is mute” (Hodder and Hutson 2003, 171). The second is probably the neo-Marxist ideology of leading schools in archaeology which make us search for the silent voices of “regular people.” From various reasons, archaeological excavations and surveys of settlements rarely produce the same objects that are found in private collections. Thence, field archaeologists are satisfied by a kiln, a wall, or even a clear stratigraphy. “Pretty things,” and the plausibly-rich people that possessed them, are left for art historians.

One should bear in mind, however, that expensive objects do not necessarily belong only to rich people. Second, we do not always know how things were valued by various ancient societies (Kilger 2007, 259–261). Third, the manufacture of an expensive object necessitates exchange networks for its raw materials as well as workshops; both involve people of varied communities. Fourth, even the rich are entitled to an archaeologist enquiry about their daily life.

Discussing rock crystals highlights some of these aspects. The volume offers a rich span of perspectives and research questions, including a wider temporal context, historiography of the research, and the link to glass. The topic is approached chiefly through studies of rare and expensive decorated objects along with texts. Rock crystal artefacts which are dated to the 9th–14th centuries are found almost exclusively in church treasuries and private collections. In contrast, archaeological excavations which yield them are scarce. Excavations in areas with rock crystal and steatite mines in Madagascar and in an adjacent island, Mayotte/Mawuti, confirm this provenance and suggest its trade routes and distribution methods during the 9th–12th centuries (Pradines). Moreover, the Cirebon Shipwreck near Java (Indonesia), from the 10th cen-

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tury, presents both finished objects and raw blocks (at Pilz, 171). An excavation of a 12th-century rock crystal workshop in Cologne/Köln (Germany) unearthed raw pieces, waste, grindstone fragments and iron hammers. The workshop’s location, adjacent to the archbishop’s palace, suggests that he was the workshop’s patron (Burianek and Höltken 2017, at Gerevini, 94).

Whereas some of the historical sources or famous crystal objects repeat, and overlapping may have been reduced, reading the whole book results in a grounded understanding of the topic. The nineteen chapters demonstrate the cultural and economic relations between Africa, the Middle East and Europe. Most distinct is the travel of artefacts in the Abbasid and Fatimid periods presumably from Iraq and Egypt to church treasuries in Europe. Moreover, most chapters depict the alternative fate of artefacts which—in Schiffer’s terminology (1987, 7)—did not “end” in an archaeological context, but retained a “systemic context” mode. Several examples demonstrate how artefacts were not only stored to this day, but were also re-decorated (e.g. Crowley, 151).

Many of the ancient texts agree on the high variation of rock crystals and on their quality valuation based on their transparency. Some of the volume’s contributors accept that hierarchy and add labour—namely, the sophistication of carving techniques and designs—and size to their considerations. Nevertheless, a will of the Venetian merchant Pietro Vioni from the 13th century, which presents relative values of objects inter alia from rock crystals and glass (Gerevini, 193), questions that theory.

Objects made of rock crystal are mainly considered as court-related. Still, some of the evidence implies a broader clientele. Nāṣir-i Khusraw (d. 1074) describes rock crystal objects sold in the lamps market of Fusṭāṭ. He also mentions two sorts of production, for the court and the elite (Pradines, 46). A study of pendants and beads from burials of the 5th–8th century in central and Western Europe points to a pattern in which burials with more artefacts correlated with dark or transparent crystals, implying that these two characteristics are representative of higher value (and hence more wealth) (Kornbluth, 76). However, beads of the spindle whorl type, from varied qualities, show no pattern, which I interpret as representing also the somewhat less rich.

Despite the common usage of the written sources by most authors in the volume, there is very little criticism to their reliability (see Gerevini, 89–90). Likewise, there is too little discussion of the challenges in linking the literal descriptions with the physical evidence (see Krueger, 167). Another shortcoming is that the size of the objects is noted in several chapters, especially with regards to chronology and geography, but the illustrations often lack scale. Finally, theoretical discussions, or definitions, for “luxuries” and “elites” are missing.

The volume triggers further questions. For instance, the absence of rock crystals from excavations in the Middle East should be investigated. Is it possible that debris was used in other industries, or that artefacts were recycled (like marble)? I would also be intrigued to learn about complete assemblages in specific treasuries. This might reveal the biography of rock crystal objects in these contexts. Finally, the usage of additional documents, such as lists of brides’ gifts in the Geniza, may indicate some of the rock crystal contexts in “real life.”
References


