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Christian Themes in Thirteenth-Century Islamic Metalwork

To find an explanation for the appearance of Christian scenes and figures on a number of thirteenth-century Islamic metal objects remains one of the most intriguing problems in Islamic art. Many of these objects, such as the canteen now in the Freer Gallery of Art, are well known and have been subjected to detailed study; others have only recently been given attention and have yet to be properly examined. All of them, however, have been attributed to workshops in Syria and Egypt on the grounds that a number of formal devices common to those areas during the first half of the thirteenth century are characteristic of these objects[1]: the figures are for the most part precisely drawn; they have sharp, meticulously undercut edges; and they tend to be set against elaborately worked backgrounds composed of tightly controlled arabesques, scrolls, or interlacing swastikas.[2]

Unfortunately, despite the localization of these works their meaning remains elusive for two reasons. One is that only a small number of them have inscriptions to help us understand their complex iconography; the other is that interpretations of this iconography have almost always concentrated on its Christian elements. Throughout, scholars have assumed that, because of their similar provenance and their shared use of Christian themes, these objects form an isolated group, distinct from the rest of thirteenth-century metal-

Plate 1. Candlestick. Signed Dā'ūd b. Salāma al-Mawṣilī. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Syria, 1248–49.

Plate 2. Ewer. Signed Aḥmad al-Dhakī al-Mawṣilī. Keir Collection, London. Syria, 1242.

work. But the inconsistent and often confusing use of Christian images on these objects has frequently led to vague explanations based on the relationship of the artists and their patrons to the Crusades, while their non-Christian elements have either been downplayed or ignored entirely.[3] It is time, then, to reexamine them. In doing so we shall first look at them as a group and then focus on two — the Freer basin and the Louvre plate — in an attempt to suggest a new interpretation both for them and for the group as a whole.

To date, fifteen objects with Christian themes have been identified: three pyxes,[4] three incense burners,[5] three ewers (one of which has been made into a cup),[6] three large plates,[7] a candlestick,[8] a canteen,[9] and a basin.[10] Four of these bear inscriptions that allow us to date them. The candlestick (plate 1) is signed by Dā'ūd b. Salāma al-Mawṣilī and dated 646/1248–49; the ewer now in the Keir Collection (plate 2) bears the signature of Aḥmad al-Dhakī al-Mawṣilī and the date 640/1242–43; and the basin in the Freer Gallery of Art (plates 3 and 4) and a plate in the Louvre (plate 5) have inscriptions mentioning Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb (r. 636–47/1239–49), placing them sometime in the 1240s.

When we examine the function, quality, and iconography of all these objects, it becomes apparent that they do not form a coherent group, that their Christian elements depart so frequently from standard Christian iconography that they do not provide a consistent program, and that only when these elements are seen in terms of the culture which produced them does their iconography become understandable. The functions served by the fifteen objects are clearly varied. The inscriptions of the Louvre plate and the Freer basin, the large size of all the plates, and the impractical size and weight of the canteen[11] (plates 6 and 7) suggest they served primarily ceremonial purposes. In contrast, the small size of the pyxes (plates 8–10) and the incense burners (plates 11 and 12) and the worn condition of the latter indicate prolonged and probably private use.

The quality of these objects also varies. Some, like the Freer canteen and basin with their elaborate compositions and well-drawn figures, are products of extremely fine craftsmanship. Others, like the incense burner in the Cleveland Museum and the pyxis in the Victoria and Albert Museum, with their crudely drawn figures, have humbler origins. Still others, such as the pyxis in the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the incense burner in the British Museum, fall somewhere in between. These objects are distinguished from such works as the Freer canteen by their more roughly drawn figures, less intricate compositions, and more simply rendered details. Although the state of preservation of a number of these objects (including often obvious restorations of the drawing of the inlay [plate 1][12]) makes formal judgments precarious, their formal manners seem to show a similar variety. For instance, the simple drawing of the figures on the Cleveland and Berlin incense burners is very different from the flat, segmented depiction of elongated, awkwardly posed figures on the Homberg and Musée des Arts Décoratifs ewers (plate 13) and the plate in the Hermitage (plate 14). These three objects are related to one another not only by their shared figural types, but also by their common use of silver dotted borders and simplified backgrounds. Both of these manners are, in turn, different from the repetitive drawing of the short, stocky figures on the Victoria and Albert pyxis.

The same freedom is found in the choice of

Plate 3. Basin. Inscribed to Sulṭān al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Syria, c. 1240–50.

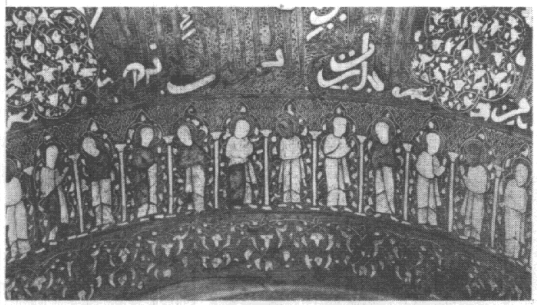


Plate 4. Basin: detail. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Syria, c. 1240–50.

Christian iconography. Scenes taken from the Gospels appear on three of the pieces (canteen, basin, and candlestick), but on none of the others. Several (Metropolitan Museum of Art pyxis, Musée des Arts Décoratifs ewer, and the central medallion on the canteen) use an emblematic or hieratic image. Frequently the figures depicted are not taken from sacred writings but represent contemporary members of the church engaged in processions and liturgical activities, such as censing (Victoria and Albert pyxis, Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi cup [plate 15], Metropolitan Museum of Art pyxis, Keir ewer, and all three of the incense burners). Nonspecific holy figures placed within an arcade are also common (plate 4).

The degree of detail of this imagery differs greatly from object to object. On the canteen the narrative scenes are elaborate and specific; on the Freer basin the rendition is so summary that in at least one instance, the so-called medallion of the Last Supper, the detail is insufficient to identify the scene with a particular Christological episode, although this medallion may represent one of Christ's miracle. The portrayal of individual figures shows a comparable range. On the Hermitage plate the garments are drawn in detail sufficient to distinguish various types of vestments; the Freer basin, the pyxes, and the incense burners display a more generic figural type.

The relationship of the Christian elements to the overall iconographic program of each object also varies considerably. In some cases the Christian theme forms the sole element of the object's decorative scheme, as on the pyxes, incense burners, and the Hermitage plate, but more frequently it is combined with other imagery commonly found on Islamic metalware. On several of the objects (Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi cup, Louvre

Plate 5. Plate. Inscribed to Sulṭān al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb. Musée du Louvre, Paris. Syria, c. 1240.

plate, Piet-Lautaudrie plate, Musée des Arts Décoratifs ewer, and Freer basin), the Christian and Muslim themes are equal partners in the decoration; on others, the Christian imagery dominates either through the proportion of the surface it covers (candlestick and Keir ewer) or in the detail with which it is rendered (canteen).

These distinctions in the formal relationship of the Christian imagery to the overall program of each object underscore the more important point that this imagery is so full of deviations from standard Christian iconography that it lacks coherence. These deviations have usually been explained as textual misinterpretations arising from the semiliteracy of the artists.[13] But in the majority of cases this is not a sufficient explanation, since the discrepancies are not the result of misunderstood passages but of divergences from the established pictorial traditions of the medieval Christian world. Their nature and number suggest that the artists who made them were familiar with eastern Christian iconography in only a general way.

Three types of departures from standard Christian iconography can be identified: misunderstanding of the nature and order of cycles, errors in details and composition, and loss of meaning. On the objects with narrative scenes the mistakes lie in the very selection of the scenes. The five scenes on the Freer basin (Virgin and Child with angels, the Annunciation, a miracle scene[?], the Entry into Jerusalem, and the Raising of Lazarus) do not form any coherent Christian cycle. The ordering of the scenes is also incorrect: the Raising of Lazarus should precede the Entry into Jerusalem. A similar problem is found on the Musée des Arts Décoratifs candlestick, which contains four medallions depicting, respectively, the Presentation in the Temple, the Baptism of Christ, the Christ Child's first bath, and probably the Last Supper. Of the two infancy scenes, the Christ Child's first bath is a vignette which has no textual source and is only rarely found isolated from the Nativity.[14] Neither the Annunciation nor the Nativity, both normally found in the cycle of the Life of Christ, are present.

Anomalies in details and compositions are even more abundant.[15] The representation of Lazarus on the Freer basin as a bust-length profile emerging from a sarcophagus is unprecedented in eastern Christian art. The Gospel story of the canteen begins as it should with the Annunciation, but that event is treated in an undistinguished and inconsequential fashion ill-suited to the inauguration of sacred history. Gabriel and the Virgin are simply two of some twenty-five figures, most of them apparently either saints or clerics, standing in an arcade. The scene has been placed on the flat side of the canteen, so its position is not prominent, as it should be, and many of the usual attributes of this scene, such as the Virgin's *suppe-*

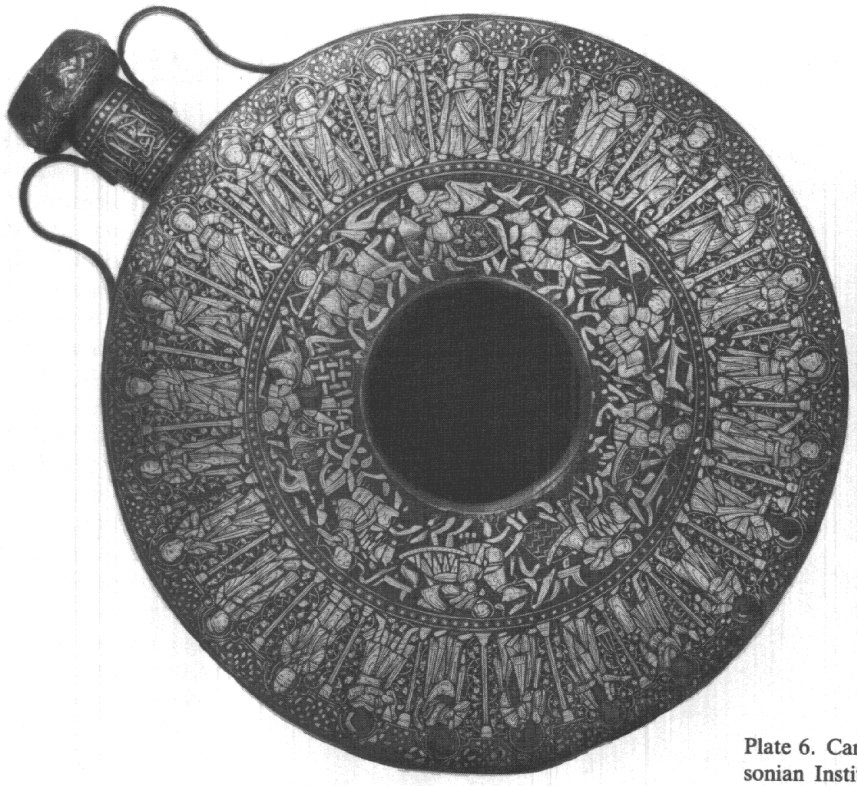


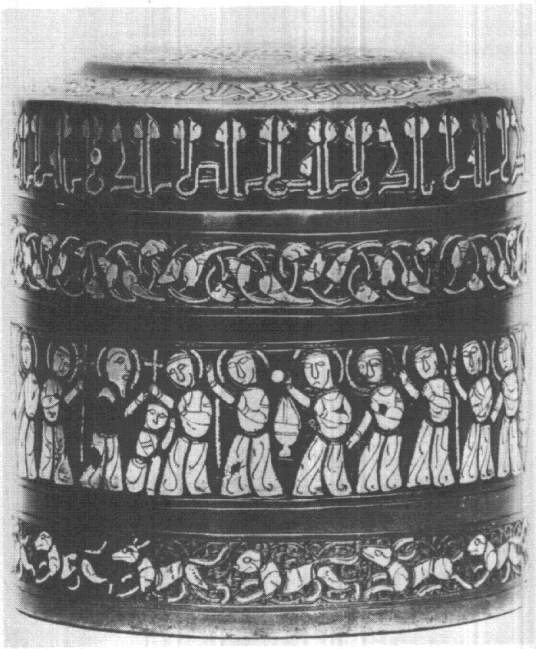
Plate 6. Canteen: flat side. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Syria, c. 1245–50.

Plate 7. Canteen. Smithsonian Institution, Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C. Syria, c. 1245–50.

Plate 8. Box. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Syria(?), c. 1240.

Plate 9. Box. Hariri Collection, Museum for Islamic Art, Cairo. Syria(?), c. 1240.

Plate 10. Box. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. Syria(?), c. 1234–40.



daneum, a representation of her house at Nazareth, and an indication of the presence of the Holy Spirit by rays of light or a dove, are missing. Byzantine representations of the Nativity usually show a ray of light falling on the Christ Child, Joseph with his back turned to the Virgin, the Christ Child reclining in his bath (from the tenth century on), and an angel turning toward the shepherds to announce the Nativity and indicate the Star of Bethlehem to them. On the canteen, however, Joseph faces the Virgin (in a pose which echoes that of the handmaiden attending the child's bath), the Christ Child is upright in his bath, and all three angels on the right of the cave face toward it and thus away from the shepherds.

Errors of detail also appear in the Baptism of Christ on the Musée des Arts Décoratifs candlestick.[16] Not only is Christ clothed, but he is not blessing. John, on the right side of the image, appears to be baptizing with his left hand. Instead of angels, two unspecified figures stand on the left. The configuration of the Jordan River as two horizontal bands with a fish located below them has no parallel in Byzantine art. Perhaps the most striking omission of all is the absence of any indication of the Holy Spirit, whose descent is integral to the Gospel account of this event (see Matthew 3: 16–17), and which is specifically called for by the text of John's Gospel. Finally, the Virgin on the Musée des Arts Décoratifs ewer wears some sort of headgear (a crown?) nowhere found in

Plate 11. Incense Burner. British Museum, London. Syria, c. 1240. (Reproduced by Courtesy of the Trustees of the British Museum.)

Plate 12. Incense Burner. Cleveland Museum of Art. Syria(?), c. 1230–40.

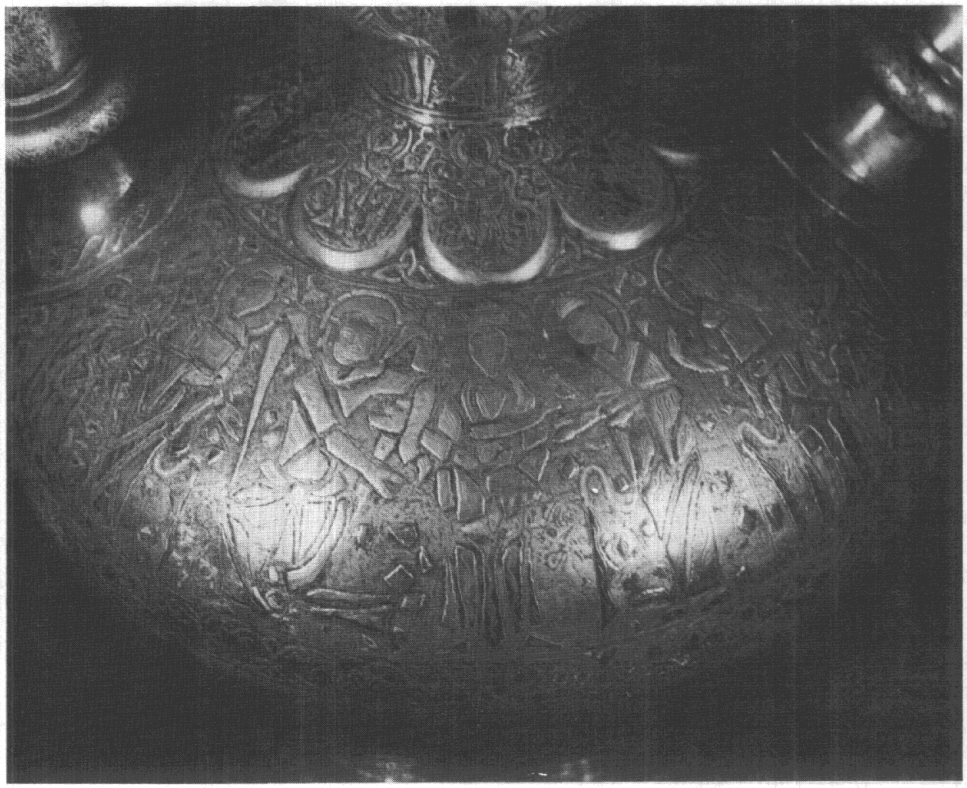


Plate 13. Ewer: detail. Musée des Arts Décoratifs, Paris. Syria, c. 1240–50.

Plate 14. Plate. Hermitage Museum, Leningrad. Syria, c. 1240–50.

Plate 15. Cup. Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi, Istanbul. Syria(?), c. 1240.

Byzantine iconography.[17] It can, however, be found in Western imagery, and Ottonian and Romanesque art in France and Germany also provide parallels for Lazarus as a half-length figure and for a reduced iconography of the Annunciation. The possibility, therefore, that the source of the imagery on the metalwork objects lies in the less rigid, more varied iconographic traditions of the early medieval West cannot be ruled out.[18]

Iconographic peculiarities resulting in loss of meaning owing either to misunderstood or to omitted details can most clearly be illustrated by the Presentation scene on the canteen. The deviations from traditional Christian iconography of this composition include the absence of Joseph's offering, the presence of the Christ Child alone on the altar, the two short vertical objects carried by the second figure from the left (presumably meant to represent the two doves called for in the Gospel of Luke, 2:22–24), the container for the doves carried by the figure behind Joseph (suggesting a conflation of imagery in the depiction of the small birds), and the absence of a clearly identifiable Simeon (Mary has taken his place on the right side of the altar). The most telling error is found in the essential attribute of the prophetess Anna; instead of the scroll on which her speech "of him to whom all were looking for the redemption of Jerusalem" (Luke 2:38) is inscribed, we find her clutching a strip of drapery. As a result, though superficially the form has been retained, the meaning of her presence at the Presentation has been lost.

Similar errors affect the last scene on the canteen, Christ's Entry into Jerusalem. Standard iconography calls for Christ to be followed by at least two of his disciples, but both are missing, unless the figure floating in the upper left corner of the scene is meant to depict one of them. The young boys who should be casting their coats down before Christ as he enters Jerusalem are arranged on the canteen in such a way that their garments are both behind and in front of the Saviour and his mount. The young boys in the Entry into Jerusalem on the pyxis in the Metropolitan Museum of Art are also misunderstood: instead of casting their coats down, they stand facing one another and holding a coat between them. Nor are they in any way related to the figure of Christ who hovers above them: they, too, have lost their meaning.

The identification of the scene on the Musée des Arts Décoratifs candlestick, although it has been called a Last Supper, is also unclear. The composition of six figures organized in two symmetrical groups may have been meant as a miracle scene, possibly the Multiplication of the Loaves or the Miracle at Cana. The two figures floating above the main action (possibly derived from angels) whose veiled hands carry nothing (the sphere above is ambiguous) suggest that two separate scenes have been conflated.

The additional, nonnarrative Christian figures who adorn all the objects except the Victoria and Albert pyxis are more generalized types. Nonetheless they too display certain anomalies with regard to traditional Christian iconography. The twenty-five figures in the arcade on the flat side of the canteen are of many types: bishops, saints, and people engaged in liturgical ceremonies (that is, carrying chalices and codices). They are not organized typologically, nor are they identifiable. Even those engaged in liturgical activities remain simply generic holy figures, since the ceremonial acts they are apparently engaged in are devoid of any Christian meaning. For example, of the many figures on these vessels who carry censers none is censing anything in particular or participating in any recognizable ceremony; the censers are simply decorative attributes. It is exactly this generic holiness that is nowhere found in eastern Christian art, and in fact could have only been conceived by individuals who were in contact with, but not participants in, the Christian culture of the thirteenth century.

One observation that can be made about these deviations is that they often show a predilection for symmetrical compositions. This formal consideration was never without theological or symbolic implications in Byzantine art. A second is that the iconographic nature of these peculiarities cannot be explained in terms of a strictly Christian context. Although some scholars have tried to attribute these anomalies to not very knowledgeable Christian artists, this ignores their very nature. They are often rooted in purely visual considerations rather than in textual misconceptions, and they never appear in contemporary Syrian or Egyptian artifacts of undeniably Christian origin such as two well-known Gospel manuscripts, one in the Vatican Library, the other in the British Museum.[19]

These departures from standard iconography are, however, only "errors" from a Christian point of view. If they are considered within the broader context of thirteenth-century Syrian and Egyptian culture, they cease to be deviations and become part of a consistent Islamic iconography. The area concerned is a relatively well-defined part of the Ayyubid empire, which stretched from Egypt in the west to Syria in the east, Upper Mesapotamia in the north, and to most of the Yemen in the south. The culture of this area in the thirteenth century reflected a remarkably harmonious political and economic *modus vivendi* between Christians and Muslims. Both Egypt and Syria during the second and third quarters of the thirteenth century underwent dramatic political and economic changes. The Crusades, which had been the central political phenomenon at the beginning of the thirteenth century, ceased to be a major problem in 1229 when Frederick II agreed to a ten-year truce with al-Malik al-Kāmil and was ceded Jerusalem in return. The peace was crucial for the Ayyubids, since resisting the Third Crusade had greatly depleted their treasury. Confrontations between the Muslims and the Crusaders did not cease, but they became more narrowly regional in scope. As a result, by the 1240s an intricate series of alliances had been worked out between various Ayyubid factions and the Latins. In 1240, for instance, al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl and al-Nāṣir Dāʾūd ceded to the Latin Kingdom of Acre large parts of Palestine, including Jerusalem, in return for their help against al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. The alliance, however, fell through later in the same year, when the Crusaders realized that al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ was more powerful than either al-Ṣāliḥ Ismāʿīl or al-Nāṣir Dāʾūd. The constant reshaping of these alliances transformed the Westerners from an external threat into an internal political force.[20] In the process they became an integral part of the social fabric of the Ayyubid world.

The 1230s and 1240s were also the years of the first great migrations of peoples forced west by the Mongol invasions, through whom new themes and ideas entered the artistic vocabulary of thirteenth-century Syria and Egypt. The way these various elements were borrowed and eventually incorporated into Islamic works of art is eloquently described by Niẓāmī in his *Iskandar nāma.*

I took up materials from every book;
I bound on them the ornament of verse
More than new histories,
Jewish, Christian, and Pahlavi.
I chose from every book its charm;
Took out from every husk its grain.[21]

Although Niẓāmī was writing in northwestern Iran just before the Mongol invasion, the eclecticism reflected in his lines became characteristic of the somewhat later culture which produced our fifteen metalwork objects. This eclectic spirit and the political and social events of the first half of the thirteenth century that inspired it provide the general setting for all the objects. It both explains their use of Christian imagery and prevents us from isolating them as a group from the general production of thirteenth-century inlaid metalwork.

The Freer basin and the Louvre plate are both inscribed to the Ayyubid sultan, al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, who ruled Diyarbakr in the years 1232–39, Egypt in 1239–49, and Damascus in 1239 and again in 1245–49. The Freer basin's exterior has four decorative bands, of which the uppermost is composed of a large Kufic inscription containing five medallions with scenes from the life of Christ. The second and widest band is made up of five panels depicting a polo game, each with four figures and separated from the next by a medallion of human and animal heads. Below this band is a narrow frieze of running animals divided into equal parts by five small medallions showing single figures playing musical instruments. Each medallion is located directly under one of the polo-game panels, which are in turn aligned with the scenes from the life of Christ. The fourth band is composed of various decorative motifs held together by a tightly controlled arabesque.

The interior of the basin also has four decorative bands. Along the rim is a frieze of running animals similar to the one on the exterior of the basin, below which is a band of lengthy inscription. The third band has an arcade of thirty-nine figures dressed in long vestments and carrying liturgical objects. The last band is identical to the lowest band of floral designs on the basin's exterior.[22]

The basin's two inscriptions both mention al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. The exterior inscription reads, "Glory to our master, Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the wise, the illustrious, the learned, the efficient, the Defender [of the Faith], the warrior [of the frontiers], the supporter [of Islam], the victor, Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb Abū [*sic*] Muḥammad b. Abū Bakr b. Ayyūb."[23] The inscription on the interior is written in naskh and repeats many of the same phrases: "Glory to our master, Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the wise, the illustrious, the learned, the efficient, the Defender [of the Faith], the warrior [of the frontiers]; the supporter [of Islam], the conqueror, the victor, Najm al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn, the lord of Islam and the Muslims, Abu'l-Fatḥ Ayyūb b. al-Malik al-Kāmil, Nāṣir al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abū Bakr b. Ayyūb, the beloved of the Commander of the Believers [that is, the caliph], may his victory be glorious."[24]

The second object, the Louvre plate, has six decorative bands on its exterior: the first two of them are inscriptions along its rim, the third is a series of sharply pointed, interlacing arches, and the fourth is a third inscription separated from the band above by a thin row of dots, as are all the remaining bands. The fifth band is the widest and is composed of twelve interlaced medallions. Reading from right to left and starting with the beginning of the inscription above it, the medallions can be divided into two groups, each having two pairs of fighters and two pairs of Christian figures separated from one another by a horseman or a polo player.[25] The last band is yet another inscription. The center of the plate is covered by a large arabesque radiating from a central star.

The two major inscriptions are both written in naskh.[26] The interior inscription reads:

> Glory to our master, Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the learned, the just, the Defender of the Faith, the warrior of the frontiers, the defender of the shores, the one who approaches the heavens, the victorious, Najm al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn, the sultan of Islam and Muslims, the repressor of paganism and polytheism, the conqueror of the Kharijites and the religious rebels, the establisher of justice in the two worlds, the helper of the weak and unfortunate, the helper of man, the aid of the imam, the sultan of the Arabs and of the Persians, Abu'l-Fatḥ Ayyūb b. al-Sulṭān al-Malik al-Kāmil Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr b. Ayyūb.[27]

The inscription along the plate's rim is longer and more conventional in its phrasing.

> Lasting glory, long and healthy life, gentle and happy existence, good fortune, kindness and endurance, rising fortune, favorable destiny, lasting well-being, and a long life to the owner. Lasting glory, long life and health, gentle and happy existence, good fortune, favorable destiny, perfect good fortune, perpetual prosperity, lasting well-being, [*alif-lam-ya-alif*] to its owner. Lasting glory, long life and health, gentle and happy existence, good fortune, kindness and endurance, great and untold well-being, decisive authority, rising fortune, favorable destiny, perfect good fortune, perpetual prosperity, lasting well-being to the owner.[28]

The repetitive use of stock phrases here suggests that the plate may have been a vessel intended for commercial use and then modified for al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ after the design had been started. The alterations must have been made early in the process, however, for its iconography otherwise conforms to that of the Freer basin.

Two other inlaid metalworks inscribed to al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ provide insights into our objects. They are both basins. The first, now in the Museum for Islamic Art in Cairo, has a plain exterior. Its interior is divided into three bands, two of them ornamental.[29] The uppermost, along the rim of the vessel, is a frieze of running animals; below it is an inscription containing six medallions whose subjects are two polo players, a horseman, a pair of dancers, a pair of musicians, and two figures sitting cross-legged, one of them offering a cup to the other. The third band, like the first, is a frieze of running animals. The inscription, written in naskh characters, reads: "Glory to our lord, Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the wise, the just, the champion of the faith, the defender of the territories, the defender of the shores, assisted by God, the triumphant, Najm al-Dunyā wa 'l-Dīn, sultan of Islam and the Muslims, Ayyūb b. Muḥammad."[30]

The second basin is now in the Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Mediaeval Archaeology at the University of Michigan (plate 16).[31] Its exterior is divided into four bands, beginning with a narrow one of braiding along the upper edge. The second — and the most important for our purposes — consists of a long inscription separated into equal parts by six medallions, which depict horsemen hunting wild animals with swords and bows and arrows. The third band is a frieze of running animals, and the last an interlacing scroll pattern that repeats itself around two axes. The interior of the basin is badly worn and devoid of decoration except for a large central medallion of zoomorphic figures. The inscription on its exterior reads, "Glory to our lord, Sultan al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ, the wise, the just, the assisted, the victorious, the defeater, Najm al-Dīn Abu'l-Fatḥ Ayyūb b. Muḥammad b. Abī Bakr b. Ayyūb, may his victory be glorious."[32]

The iconographic themes of the four works inscribed with the names of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ can be divided into six groups: hunters, fighters, polo

Plate 16. Basin. Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Mediaeval Archeology, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor. Syria(?), c. 1240.

players, musicians and dancers, scenes from the life of Christ, and individual Christian figures. The first two themes, hunting and fighting, are found in one form or another on three of the four objects (the Freer basin is the exception). Introduced into medieval Islamic art in the tenth century and adopted into the princely cycle,[33] they represent bravery, strength, and skill, virtues esteemed by the upper class. That hunting was regarded as a royal pastime finds its poetic confirmation in the words of Farrukhī of Sīstān: "The air was happy with the breeze, the earth was with its dress [of flowers]. The world was happy with beauty, the king was happy with hunting."[34] It was also used as a metaphor for bravery. In medieval Islamic poetry, Masʿūd Sʿad, writes, "You are a victorious king, a Khusraw, a lord; you are a city-conquering general and a lion-hunting king."[35]

Fighting was an equally appropriate princely activity, since it too provided the prince with opportunities for demonstrating his strength and valor. Farrukhī of Sīstān combines it with hunting in a panegyric to his patron, Maḥmūd of Ghazna.

Sometimes your sword raises dust from the enemy's head;
Sometimes your arrow takes vengeance on the lion's breast.
Alas for the enemy to whom in a battle you say, "Take this!"
Alas for the lion to whom in the hunt you say, "Take that!"
On hunting day it matters not to you if it be fox or lion;
In battle it matters not to you if it be foot soldiers or horsemen.[36]

The use of polo players in the iconography of the Freer basin, the Louvre plate, and the Cairo basin also fits into the category of royal pastimes. In the poetry of Minūchīhrī, who lived in the eleventh century, polo playing was used as a metaphor for leisure: "Take gold, scatter musk, take the cup and the kiss; drink wine, give a flower, play polo, and hunt."[37] The importance of polo as a princely sport is further developed in the poetry of Farrukhī of Sīstān: "There were four things for kings to do: feasting, polo, war, and hunting."[38]

Polo playing, however, takes on a special meaning in the works dedicated to al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. He was extremely fond of the game. The fifteenth-century historian al-Maqrīzī writes of him: "Sultan al-Malik al Ṣāliḥ Najm al-Dīn Ayyūb . . . bought a field for three thousand Egyptian dinars from Amir Ḥasan al-Dīn Thaʿalab b. al-Amīr Fakhr al-Dīn Imsāʿīl b. Thaʿalab al-Jaʿfarī in the month of Rajab, in the year 643 [1245]. The field is beautiful, and the Sultan built upon it great lookouts and bestowed upon it great honor. When it was ready he began riding on it and playing polo."[39]

The polo players on the Freer basin, the Louvre plate, and the Cairo basin do not appear on the Kelsey Museum bowl. Their inscriptions also differ: only the first three use the titles *al-murābiṭ* ("holy warrior") and *al-muthāghir* ("defender of the frontiers"). Since al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ did not use these titles consistently before 1243–44 it is tempting to attribute the two basins and the plate to the latter part of his reign.[40] This attribution is confirmed, in part, by the title *khalīl amīr al-muʾminīn* ("beloved of the Commander of the Believers") on the Freer basin, which was not used by al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ until 1247, when he received his caliphal investiture. This evidence, however, must be treated carefully, as many Ayyubid sultans used this phrase without official investiture.

The fourth iconographic theme, musicians and dancers, is found on the Freer and Cairo basins. Just as the hunters and polo players are metaphors for the skill and bravery of the princes, so musicians and dancers are metaphors for leisure and the good life, as in the poetry of Asʿadī Ṭūsī: "Then they retired to a garden for pleasure and feasting. First they cured their hangovers, then they set to feasting and music. . . . Goblets like moons in the hands of drinkers were sprinkling the jewels of the Pleiades. The nobles were reclining on the meadow among the grasses, hyacinths, and jasmine, cups in their hands, their eyes fixed on dark-haired beauties, their ears attuned to nightingales."[41]

A less explicit, but more lyrical image is evoked by Niẓāmī in the beginning of his *Iskandar nāma*:

After the assault of Zang, the king of Rūm rested: and the object came to his grasp,

He became restful and sleepy, wine was circulated in the assembly:
He ate and drank wine on the feast of Nawrūz.
He listened to the song of singers.
Until the time of sleep, far from the king would not be the musician, nor the cup bearer, nor music and wine.[42]

But when we finally come to the last two themes — the scenes from the life of Christ and the Christian figures — on the Freer basin and the Louvre plate we run into trouble, for they seem to have no place in a program of royal iconography, though in both instances they are clearly integrated into the decorative scheme of the vessel. In the Freer basin they are vertically aligned with the polo players and musicians; in the Louvre plate they are framed by the polo players,[43] a formal relationship that suggests they are iconographically related as well.

A possible explanation is provided by several passages found in the popular poetry of the thirteenth century. In the *Iskandar nāma* of Niẓāmī, the poet compares Alexander's to Jesus' powers: "From the king's justice thousands of hearts dead become alive; but the enemy appears not in the road. Like Jesus, he made many live."[44] A similar reference to Christ is made in the *Haft paykar,* where Niẓāmī describes Bahrām Gūr's winter palace in the following terms: "Darkness, become a messmate of the light; a tulip growing from a houri's locks. A Turk related to the race of the Greeks, the luster of the eyes of Hindus called. The torch of Jonah, or the speaker's lamp; the feast of Jesus, the garden of Abraham."[45] In the *Makhzan al-asrār,* Niẓāmī devotes an entire chapter to Jesus. In it he counsels adopting the modesty and discretion exemplified by Christ: "they have deemed it advisable to take away thine ass and thy load, so that, like Jesus, thou mayest reach the door of the heart, and arrive at thy destination without an ass and a load."[46]

Niẓāmī's use of the imagery of Christ as a just and divinely inspired king finds its visual complement in the imagery of the Freer basin. In both cases it is not the reference to a specific event from the life of Christ that is important, but the general association of the ruler with Christ's exceptional qualities. Strict adherence to Christian iconographic formulas was not essential.

There are no visual allusions to Jesus on the Louvre plate, but the inscription on the interior of the vessel provides us with a literary equivalent of the Freer basin's medallions: "The one who approaches the heavens, the victorious, Najm al-Dunyā wa'l-Dīn, the sultan of Islam and Muslims, the repressor of paganism and polytheism, the conqueror of the Kharijites and the religious rebels, the establisher of justice in the two worlds, the helper of the weak and the unfortunate, the helper of man, the aid of the imam."[47]

The special status given to Christ in the Freer basin and the poetry of Niẓāmī reflects Islam's acceptance of Jesus as a prophet and is not confined to these works. In sura 3 of the Qur'an, the house of 'Imran, Jesus says, "I have come to you with a sign from your Lord. I will create for you out of clay as the likeness of a bird; then I will breathe life into it and it will be a bird, by the leave of God. I will also heal the leper, and bring to life the dead, by the leave of God."[48]

The Christian figures on the inside of the Freer basin and in the medallions of the Louvre plate cease to be so puzzling when considered within the context of Islam's awareness and acceptance of certain Christian themes and ideas. They simply demonstrate the incorporation of motifs drawn from the everyday world of the Ayyubids into their iconographic schemes. It was not the reference to specific members of the church or to standard Christian cycles but the general evocation of Christianity that was essential.

The generic use of these images has its reflection in the thirteenth-century Ayyubid literature. Usāma b. Munqidh, for instance, devotes an entire chapter of his autobiography to "An Appreciation of the Frankish Character."

One day I entered this mosque, repeated the first formula, "Allāh is great," and stood up in the act of praying, upon which one of the Franks rushed on me, got hold of me, and turned my face eastward saying, "This is the way thou should pray!" A group of Templars hastened to him, seized him, and repelled him from me. . . . They apologized to me saying, "This is a stranger who has only recently arrived from the land of the Franks, and he has never before seen anyone praying except eastward."[49]

The understanding and sensitivity of this passage, and indeed of the whole chapter, are especially remarkable since Usāma fought against these very Templars in the Second Crusade.

Christian figures also appear frequently in the court poetry of al-Mālik al-Ṣāliḥ. One of the most elaborate examples comes from Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr, a close follower of the sultan's until he fell out of favor in 1248.

Thoughtful people, pleasant people,
Serious and flighty, truthful and imaginative,
In the home as much as in the taverns,
Illustrious Coptic priests, as you know,
Among whom one finds good men respected
For their charity. One of them recites

His prayers in a voice that recalls a
Flute. In their black burnooses, moons
In the middle of darkness, faces like
Images praying before images, beneath
Their robes slender waists, to them we
Went, and they left nothing in their
Cellars, there we passed a happy and
Unforgettable day.[50]

Both Bahā' al-Dīn Zuhayr's poetry and Usāma's autobiography are important because they testify to the daily encounter of Christians and Muslims in Ayyubid Syria and Egypt. Moreover these passages, like the passages from Niẓāmī, demonstrate that the use of Christian subjects was common to thirteenth-century Ayyubid imagery. The Christian figures of the Freer basin and the Louvre plate are clearly part of its repertory. They represent, just as do the hunt or the musicians, a dimension of contemporary culture incorporated into the iconography of the prince. In the Freer basin, however, these figures do not all carry the same iconographic value. The scenes from the life of Christ on the exterior, for example, are meant to be seen in direct relationship, both formally and contextually, to the polo players and musicians. The figures in the arcade are less visible and function more as a decorative band than as a major iconographic element.

All four objects inscribed to al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ are related by their common use of the iconography of the prince. In the case of the Kelsey Museum basin this iconography is rather simply rendered; only images of the hunt are employed. But these figures still relate the basin to the more complex princely cycles of the Louvre plate and the Freer and Cairo basins, where the iconography has been amplified by the addition of polo players, musicians, fighters, and, in the Freer basin and the Louvre plate, Christian figures.

The relationship of these objects to each other, reflecting as they do the tastes of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ's court, implies that during the mid-thirteenth century Christian themes were regarded as acceptable elements in the iconography of the aristocratic patrons of the Ayyubid empire, a conclusion supported by the literature of the period. The objects cannot be explained using internal evidence alone. They must be seen in conjunction with poetry, in particular, for it is there that many of the themes used on these objects find their literal equivalents. Together, objects and poetry demonstrate that a number of new metaphors whose source lies in the popular imagery of contemporary life entered the vocabulary of the Ayyubid world.

CAMBRIDGE, MASSACHUSETTS

NOTES

1. Thirteen of these objects were first brought together as a group by D. S. Rice, "The Seasons and the Labors of the Months in Islamic Art," *Ars Orientalis* 1 (1954): 1–39; see especially pp. 33–34.

2. D. S. Rice, "Inlaid Brasses from the Workshop of Ahmad al-Dhaki al-Mawsili," *Ars Orientalis* 2 (1957): 320–24.

3. For instance, M. S. Dimand, "A Silver Inlaid Bronze Canteen with Christian Subjects in the Eumorfopoulos Collection," *Ars Orientalis* 1 (1954): 18: "These bronzes, including the one in the Eumorfopoulos collection, must have been made for Christians by Christian craftsmen who followed closely the style of Muhammadan art. It is quite improbable that a Muhammadan would have used an object on which, besides Christian scenes, warriors against the Muhammadan faith are represented." Although Dimand's interpretation of the band of horsemen on the canteen is probably incorrect (see L. T. Schneider, "The Freer Canteen," *Ars Orientalis* 9 [1973]: 137–54, especially pp. 143–45), his statement underscores the necessity of analyzing the iconography of all aspects of the decorative program of each object before drawing any conclusions.

4. Metropolitan Museum of Art pyxis: L. Pollak and A. Muñoz, *Pièces de choix de la collection du comte Grégoire Stroganoff à Rome* (Rome, 1912), vol. 2, pl. 143. Victoria and Albert Museum pyxis: D. S. Rice, "The Brasses of Badr al-Din Lu'lu," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 13 (1950): 631–32. Museum for Islamic Art (Cairo) pyxis, Hariri Collection: G. Migeon, *Exposition d'art musulman* (Alexandria, 1925), pl. II.3 (unavailable to authors).

5. British Museum incense burner, Henderson Bequest no. 679: D. Barret, *Islamic Metalwork in the British Museum* (London, 1949), p. 15, fig. 21a. Staatliche Museen Preussischer Kulturbesitz (Berlin) incense burner: M. Aga-Oglu, "About a Type of Islamic Incense Burner," *Art Bulletin* 27 (1945): 28–45, figs. 8–9: Cleveland Museum of Art incense burner, no. 37.26: H. C. Hollis, "An Arabic Censer," *Bulletin of the Cleveland Museum of Art* 25 (1938): 137–38 and plate facing p. 134.

6. Türk ve Islam Eserleri Müzesi (Istanbul) cup, reg. no. 102: Eva Baer, "A Brass Vessel from the Tomb of Sayyid Battal Ghazi," *Artibus Asiae* 39 (1977): 299–335. Keir Collection (London) ewer, no. 131: G. Fehervari, *Islamic Metalwork of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Keir Collection* (London, 1976), p. 105, pl. 1; and Rice, "Inlaid Brasses," pp. 311–16. Musée des Art Décoratifs (Paris) ewer, no. 4413: J.-P. Roux, *L'Islam dans les collections nationales* (Paris, 1977), p. 178, pl. 383.

7. Hermitage Museum plate: F. Sarre and F. R. Martin, *Die Ausstellung von Meisterwerken Muhammedanischer Kunst in München 1910* (Munich, 1912), vol. 2, no. 3055, pl. 153. Musée du Louvre (Département des Antiquitiés Orientales) plate, no. 360: A. Melikian-Chirvani, *Arts de l'Islam des origines à mille sept cents dans les collections publiques françaises* (Paris, 1971), p. 104, pl. 153. Ex-collection Piet-

Lautaudrie plate: G. Migeon, "Collection de M. Piet-Lautaudrie," *Les Arts* 92 (1909): 2–32, especially pp. 24, 26.

8. Musée des Arts Décoratifs (Paris) candlestick, no. 4414: Roux, *L'Islam dans les collections nationales,* p. 160, pl. 332.

9. Freer Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) canteen, no. 41.10: Esin Atil, *Art of the Arab World* (Washington, D.C., 1975), pp. 69–73.

10. Freer Gallery of Art (Washington, D.C.) basin, no. 55.10: Atil, *Art of the Arab World,* pp.65–68; formerly known as the d'Arenberg basin. A sixteenth object, a fragment of a candlestick recently discovered and soon to be published by Hayat Salam-Liebich, is now in the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts.

11. Schneider argued that the presence of the "truncated pit" which "shows signs of wear" indicates that the canteen served a practical purpose (Schneider, "Freer Canteen," p. 153). Holes have been punched inside the neck of the canteen to control the flow of water out of it. Nonetheless, these features alone cannot demonstrate continuous "practical use of the canteen," which even empty is weighty enough.

12. For instance, on the candlestick, on the faces of the figures on the Cleveland incense burner, and on the Freer basin.

13. For instance Aga-Oglu ascribed the objects to Christians "thoroughly schooled in the principles of Islamic art" ("Islamic Incense Burner," pp. 33–35). Rice suggested that the artists were Muslims who selected themes that would not offend their Muslim patrons ("Inlaid Brasses," p. 316). Schneider explained the iconographic deviations as the products of Christian artists who were unfamiliar with the "finer points of the Biblical tradition," their ignorance also being indicated by the errors and omissions in the inscriptions ("Freer Canteen," p. 150).

14. See Ernst Kitzinger, "The Hellenistic Heritage in Byzantine Art," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 17 (1963): 97–115, especially pp. 100–05.

15. Standard Byzantine iconography of the eleventh through thirteenth centuries has been used for comparison throughout this analysis. For examples of the Byzantine tradition, see Dionysiou cod. 587m (second half of the eleventh century): S. M. Pelekanides et al., *The Treasures of Mount Athos: Illuminated Manuscripts* (Athens, 1974), 1:162–219, 434–46; Panteleimon cod. 6 (twelfth century): ibid., 2:172–93, 352–58; the mosaics of Monreale Cathedral (1180s): Otto Demus, *The Mosaics of Norman Sicily* (London, 1949); frescoes of Mileševa (c. 1230): S. Radojčić, *Mileševa* (Belgrade, 1963); Sopoćani (c. 1260–70): V. Djuric, *Sopoćani* (Belgrade, 1963); other thirteenth-century frescoes in Serbia, e.g., at Studenica, Prilep, and Arilje: G. Millet and A. Frolow, *La peinture du moeyn âge en Yugoslavie,* 4 vols. (Paris, 1954–69).

16. Photograph in the collection of the Fogg Art Museum, Harvard University, no. 555 3dc P21M(d). 9a–10.

17. For the crowned Virgin, see M. Lawrence, "Maria Regina," *Art Bulletin* 7 (1924–25): 150–61. Lazarus appears as a half-length figure on the triumphal column at Hildesheim, c. 1000–10, and on a capital in the cloister at Moissac, c. 1100; the authors owe these references to Professor Ilene H. Forsyth. Simple, two-figure renderings of the Annunciation are common; that on the lintel of the south portal of the west façade of Chartres Cathedral is a well-known example (c. 1144).

18. Schneider, "Freer Canteen," p. 141. For the iconography of this scene, see D. Schorr, "The Iconographic Development of the Presentation in the Temple," *Art Bulletin* 28 (1946): 17–32.

19. See J. Leroy, *Les manuscrits syriaques à peintures conservés dans les bibliothèques d'Europe et d'Orient* (Paris, 1964), pp. 280–313, pl. 70–99 (Vat. Bibl. apost. syr. 559 and B.M. add. 7170). The remaining manuscripts Leroy publishes confirm that in thirteenth-century Syrian and Egyptian works of certain Christian origin, no iconographic anomalies similar to those of the metalwork appear. See also Hugo Buchthal, "The Painting of the Syrian Jacobites in Its Relation to Byzantine and Islamic Art," *Syria* 20 (1939): 136–50.

20. R. S. Humphreys, *From Saladin to the Mongols: The Ayyubids of Damascus, 1193–1260* (Albany, 1977), pp. 275–300.

21. Henry W. Clarke, *The Sikandar Nama,e Bara', or Book of Alexander the Great* (London, 1881), pp. 111–12.

22. The center of the interior base is badly worn. It appears to be divided into three concentric bands, the outer one filled with arabesques. The second band contains five medallions with three figures in each medallion. The center of the base consists of a large, radiating pattern made up of zoomorphic designs. The exterior of the base bears a large European coat of arms which has been identified as that of the counts of Borniol. See Atil, *Art of the Arab World,* p. 68.

23. Ibid.

24. Ibid.

25. The order is: a polo player, two archers aiming their bows at each other, the combatants with raised shields, a second polo player, two figures dressed in Christian clothing and holding bishops' crosses, two figures also dressed in Christian clothing, one holding a cross, the other swinging a censer, a third horseman (it is impossible to tell if this figure is also supposed to represent a polo player since it is almost illegible), two archers fighting one another, two combatants with raised shields, a polo player, two Christian figures holding bishops' crosses, and two Christian figures, one holding a cross, the other holding a censer.

26. There are also two graffiti on the exterior of the plate. See Melikian-Chirvani, *Arts d l'Islam,* p. 105.

27. Translated from the Arabic text; see ibid., p. 104.

28. Ibid.

29. Museum for Islamic Art (Cairo) basin: W. Izzi, "An Ayyubid Basin of al-Salih Najm al-Din," *Studies in Islamic Art and Architecture in Honor of Professor K. A. C. Creswell* (Cairo, 1965), pp. 253–59.

30. Ibid., p. 255.

31. Kelsey Museum of Ancient and Mediaeval Archaeology (University of Michigan, Ann Arbor) basin: Oleg Grabar, "Two Pieces of Islamic Metalwork at the University of Michigan," *Ars Orientalis* 4 (1961): 360–66.

32. Ibid., p. 361.

33. According to Eva Baer, the themes of hunting and fighting were introduced into medieval Islamic art in the tenth century and immediately became part of the princely cycle. Many of these images, such as the rider with a bird from one of the medallions on the Cairo basin or the two combatants with raised shields on the Louvre plate, have prototypes that can be traced back to Sasanian models (see Baer, "Brass Vessel," p. 333).

34. W. Hanaway, "The Concept of the Hunt in Persian Literature," *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston* 69 (1971): 23.

35. Ibid., p. 24.

36. Ibid., p. 26.

37. Ibid., p. 23.

38. Ibid., p. 22.

39. Abu'l-ʿAbbas al-Maqrīzī, *Khiṭāṭ al-misr,* Bulaq edition (Cairo, 1270/1854), 2: 98 and 198.

40. Unfortunately, no detailed study exists of al-Malik al-Ṣāliḥ. Inscriptions of the sultan are published in G. Wiet, J. Sauvaget, et al., *Répertoire chronologique d'épigraphie arabe* (Cairo, 1929), 11: 88, 144–49, 183–84, 196–99.

41. Hanaway, "The Concept of the Hunt," p. 24.

42. Clarke, *Sikandar Nama,* p. 231.

43. In the Freer basin the polo players in the central band are the largest figures, followed by the smaller scenes from the life of Christ above and the even smaller musicians below.

44. Clarke, *Sikandar Nama,* p. 98.

45. C. E. Wilson, *The Haft Paikar of Nizami of Ganja* (London, 1924), p. 106.

46. G. H. Darab, *Makhzanol Asrar, The Treasury of Mysteries of Nezami of Ganjeh* (London, 1945), p. 229.

47. See above, note 27.

48. A. J. Arberry, *The Koran Interpreted* (New York, 1955), p. 80.

49. P. K. Hitti, *An Arab-Syrian Gentleman and Warrior in the Period of the Crusades: Memoirs of Usāmah ibn-Munqidh (Kitāb al-Iʿtibār)* (New York, 1929), p. 164.

50. J. Rikabi, *La poésie profane sous les Ayyûbides et ses principaux représentants* (Paris, 1949), p. 252.