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The Medieval Mediterranean Between Islam and Christianity: Cross-Pollinations in Art, Architecture and Material Culture

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the medieval mediterranean between islam and christianity: cross-pollinations in art, architecture and material culture

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The Medieval Mediterranean between Islam and Christianity: Cross-Pollinations in Art, Architecture and Material Culture, edited by Sami Luigi de Giosa & Nikolaos Vryzidis, centers inter-religious art produced by the two religions that held political control of the sea during the Middle Ages. Resisting Peregrine Horden's and Nicholas Purcell's argument about the Mediterranean being far more atomized in *The Corrupting Sea* than previously understood (Horden and Purcell 2000), the collection takes something of a middle path. Employing a micro-historical methodology, this work evidences the "fragmented yet inter-connected" (1) nature of the sea through the artistic productions of Christianity and Islam. While religious works are the centerpieces of these chapters, the discussion around them further elucidates the well-established blending of the sacred and profane. Though not offering any new frameworks to describe this complex interplay, the collection does exemplify the difficulty of pinning down the appropriate terminology for the objects born out of this cultural interaction. This latter point is made explicitly in the foreword by Mariam Rosser-Owen who addresses the limits of "Mediterraneanism" (xiv) as well as what is meant by "Islamic" Art (xv), the latter phrase which scholars continue to grapple with (Shaw 2019).

The collection consists of ten case studies divided into three constellational focuses–trade, ritual and architecture. The chapters on trade center on portable objects including Cretan ceramics, Iberian textiles, the significance of balsam, and Islamic influences on Italian book-bindings. The second section addresses various "hybrid" religious artifacts such as the spoliation of Byzantine marble by the Ottomans, the complicated life of a pre-modern candlestick, and the linguistic changes and reinterpretation of *tiraz* (embroidered textiles) by Coptic Christians. Finally, the architectural section attends to the Mamluk Sultan an-Nasir Muhammad's appropriation of Christian art in relation to the Cairo Citadel, a Georgian church which taps into both Byzantine and Islamic visual traditions, and the Christian deployment of *muqarnas* (the honeycomb structure common in Islamic architecture) in Anatolia.

The introduction includes a helpful breakdown of the abstracts for individual chapters rather than embedding commentary about the relationship of the chapters to one another within the main text. Both the editorial choices of dividing these themes and providing a brief glance at the contributions makes navigating the book much easier for those only interested in particular sections or types of media. The placement of the black and white images in the chapters they accompany is well-done. A reader can easily follow along without having to flip too much back and forth in order to remember or to encounter the figure referred to. There is also a series of colored plates. Though it is an industry standard, the placement of plates at the center of the collection is somewhat cumbersome, especially given the number of chapters and probably could have been moved to their respective sections for greater readability.

While there is not the space to go through the subtleties of each of the chapters, I do want to draw particular attention to three chapters that embody the richness the collection offers as a whole. Indeed, their respective contributions of pedagogical value, new interpretation of much-discussed materials, and the under-investigated object of inquiry capture a spirit that the editors clearly wanted to convey. Alison Ohta's chapter serves as an excellent and very readable update on previous scholarship regarding "Islamic influence" (108) on Italian book covers as exemplified in the work of Mack (2002). This chapter traces the connections between Persian, Mamluk, Ottoman and ultimately Italian ornamentation of book covers while acknowledging the important structural differences of how Europeans bound their objects differently than the Islamic polities. With its clear argumentation and relative brevity, this work can serve as an accessible reading with applicability to undergraduate students as an introduction to the immediately recognizable iconographic borrowings from one side of the Mediterranean to the other and crossing the religious/secular divide to be employed for copies of the Qur'an and Cicero alike.

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Sami Luigi De Giosa delivers a very helpful overview of Mamluk *spolia* practices and the extant scholarship surrounding this conversation, while also posing new explanations for the re-use of Christian columns. Acknowledging the previous interpretations about these architectural decisions functioning as a propaganda tool to represent Islamic victory over Latin Christian crusaders (Behrens-Abouseif 2007; Rabbat 2010), he suggests that another reason might be because of the location from which they were sourced and the myths surrounding these objects. De Giosa posits that an-Nasir Muhammad took the columns for the Cairo Citadel from Hermopolis Magna because of their purported talismanic properties. In doing so, he champions different reasons for the act of appropriation beyond the expected political ones of anti-Crusader sentiments.

Finally, Arielle Winnik's chapter demonstrates the potential meanings of the Coptic-inscribed Benaki textile during different phases of its wearer's existence. Through this example of Christian *tiraz,* she explains how this material highlights the social status of its wearer in specifically Christian modes and embodies Christian epistemology for life and the hereafter. Thus, this material parallels some of the qualities attributed to its Islamic counterpart while also gaining new implications to satisfy different confessional practices and beliefs. Although not the central focus of her chapter, she notes early on "when employed in Christian settings, Arabic *tiraz* were just as 'Christian' as examples inscribed with Coptic and/or Greek" (200). This powerful statement serves as an important reminder for how the function of an object is activated differently based on who interacts with it.

Despite the well-researched and thoughtful quality of all chapters, there remains a glaring lacuna in the collective bibliography that pulls focus from the collection's broader goals of painting an inter-connected Mediterranean. Neither the introduction nor any individual contribution mentions the valuable scholarship of the "Global" medieval that has been produced over the past decade and a half. On one hand, a generous reading of this missing historiography would be to say that this is a result of readability. As suggested by the introduction's clear layout it could be that the editors wanted to highlight the chapters themselves and did not want to bog the reader down in a discussion of theory. Another plausible explanation could be disciplinary differences. After all, the term "Global Middle Ages" was originally coined in 2003 by literary scholar Geraldine Heng, and its theoretical application remains largely (though not exclusively) within literary studies (Heng 2021; Keene 2019; Lomuto 2023). Yet, on the other hand, the collection's bibliography does not include important work from art historians which uses this language. Noticeably missing is any citation to Alicia Walker's article "Globalism," though many of the chapters engage in the same intellectual impulses behind that piece, which demonstrates the Byzantine Empire's relationship to Islamic and Southeast Asian visual culture (Walker 2012). In general, there appears to be a purposeful shying away from the term "global" in favor of terms such as "cross-cultural." This unfortunate omission was a lost opportunity to contend with and perhaps critique a theoretical model that has increasingly become part of medievalist scholarship.

Overall, the collection is a valuable contribution to the broader conversation of cross-cultural exchange that well describes Christian/Islamic interaction within the Mediterranean. Material religion scholars may benefit from the micro-historical methodology. A deep dive into the complicated interactions that produced these objects brings cross-confessional nuances to the surface that can sometimes be lost or made vague when taking a bird's eye view of the Mediterranean. Thus, while the collection does not pose a response to "globality," the sum of its parts does gesture at this mode of thinking, if only ever implicitly.

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