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Syria

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MOBILE MEANINGS: A GLOBAL APPROACH TO A DAGGER FROM GREATER SYRIA

HEATHER BADAMO

AT THE FURUSIYYA Art Foundation in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, a dagger arrests the beholder with its striking display of power and protection (**Plates 7.1a–b**).¹ One's first impression is of a dazzling implement—glittering, magnificent, and extraordinary. Just over a foot long, the dagger is crafted from silver and embellished with a profusion of engraved imagery. Closer inspection reveals a unique combination of forms: an Arabic inscription, images drawn from the Islamic princely cycle, and an icon of a Christian warrior saint in a pose of victory. Scholarly consensus locates its production to the twelfth- or thirteenth-century luxury industries of Greater Syria, a region characterized by its complex mosaic of Christian and Islamic polities and notable for its extreme religious, linguistic, ethnic, and cultural diversity. The objects that emerged from this context often exhibit a synthesis of artistic languages and values that speaks to the interdependence of Christian and Muslim communities. The Furusiyya dagger exemplifies this kind of production, particularly its depiction of a warrior saint, a figure with clear Christian associations that, nevertheless, received interfaith veneration during this period (**Figure 7.1**).

The dagger dates to a period in which the rulers of Greater Syria vied with one another for power and prestige, routinely establishing military alliances, trade agreements, and diplomatic relations across religious divides. In the midst of very real military conflict of crusade and jihad, economic and strategic concerns often trumped religious ideologies.² Rivalries between the rulers of key cities, such as Cairo and Damascus, sometimes led Ayyubid princes to ally themselves with Frankish armies on the battlefield.³ The alliance between al-Salih Isma'il, emir of Damascus (r. 1237–1245), and the Franks of Acre is an example of this

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1 Mohamed, *Arts of the Muslim Knight*, 155–57.

2 Antony Eastmond's new book, *Tamta's World*, came to my attention too late for me incorporate his insights into this complex social milieu.

3 Humphreys, *Saladin to the Mongols*, 275.

Figure 7.1. A warrior-saint killing a dragon: detail of the Furusiyya dagger (Plate 7.1a–b). Vaduz, Lichtenstein: Furusiyya Art Foundation (R-937). Photo: Furusiyya Art Foundation.

phenomenon, resulting in the seemingly incongruous spectacle staged at the Battle of La Fourbie (17–18 October 1244), in which Muslim warriors went into battle under flags emblazoned with crosses. Conversely, Franks such as Bohemond IV of Antioch (r. 1201–1216, 1219–1233) established alliances with al-Zahir Ghazi, the Ayyubid emir of Aleppo (r. 1186–1216), and Kaykaus I, the Seljuk sultan of Rum (r. 1211–1220), in an effort to prevent attacks from Leo I, the Christian king of Armenian Cilicia (r. 1187–1219).⁴ Important fortified cities changed hands frequently, a circumstance epitomized by the frontier site of Belias/Bānyās. Between 1128 and 1229, the city changed hands eight times, coming under the control of five different political regimes including the Zengids, Ayyubids, Frankish Crusaders, and Normans of Sicily. In both the Crusader polities and Ayyubid principalities, a range of Eastern Christian communities made up a substantial part of populations that also included pilgrims, foreign merchants, and armies of diverse

⁴ Köhler, *Alliances and Treatises*, 270–71.

ethnic make-ups.⁵ The courts of the region employed people of different religious and cultural backgrounds as translators and diplomats. In the thirteenth century, both the Sejluk sultan, Kaykhusraw I (r. 1192–1196, 1205–1211), and the king of Cyprus, Hugh I Lusignan (r. 1205–1218), employed Greeks from their realms to serve as ambassadors and envoys.⁶ This was a world in which geographic regions, cultural groups, and religious domains did not always neatly align, requiring a flexible approach in negotiating complex political relations.

This context is central to any understanding of the Furusiyya dagger, since it was made to operate in milieus defined by complex social identities. Examining the dagger offers an opportunity to explore how the conditions within medieval contact zones undermined the stable identities of objects, producers, and owners assumed in traditional art historical scholarship. Focusing on the flexibility of its iconography, I investigate how its images might have acquired different meanings and resonances in culturally and religiously diverse milieus, enabling the dagger to communicate an array of messages for diverse audiences. In doing so, I build on a way of thinking about objects that has emerged over the past two decades in scholarship on art and exchange, which privileges aspects of mobility and social complexity over fixed artistic and social identities. Closer examination of the dagger reveals a degree of ambiguity that contradicts the persistent perception of the Crusader era as a period of conflict of monolithic socio-political groups defined by clear divisions of cultural, religious, regional, and linguistic differences.

The Furusiyya Dagger: Functional and Iconographic Ambiguities

In the premodern era, daggers were a standard component of elite male dress across the medieval world. A short-bladed weapon designed for cutting and stabbing, the dagger is a multi-purpose tool characterized by versatility: it can be employed for hunting, warfare, and utilitarian tasks. Daggers are rarely mentioned in manuals of court etiquette or in treatises on weapons, likely a symptom of their ubiquity and normalization—nearly every man carried a dagger, affixed to a belt or suspended from a baldric at the right hip.⁷ Textual sources such as chronicles, memoirs, and hunting treatises suggest that daggers served a range of functions from personal protection to hand-to-hand combat. They were part of the standard gear of infantry, the last resort of cavaliers, and a tool for the courageous hunter

⁵ Prawer, *Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem*, 214–32.

⁶ Papacostas, “Crusader States and Cyprus.”

⁷ Peterson, *Daggers and Fighting Knives*, 12; Thompson, *Daggers and Bayonets*, 22–23. Women also carried knives designed for cutting and carving.

pursuing game at close quarters.⁸ Their intimate association with male pursuits and weapon ensembles made them recognizable attributes of masculinity.⁹ Luxury versions of these quotidian artifacts were status symbols, as indicated by the quality of materials and craftsmanship extant examples display.¹⁰ Such daggers moved easily across cultures and religions, exchanged as gifts, carried off as loot, and traded as commodities.¹¹

The Furusiyya dagger is a particularly multivalent artifact, since it has no inscriptions that might identify its origins, patronage, or ownership. Within the past decade, scholars have attributed its production to a variety of sites in the Mediterranean, including Seljuk Anatolia, Ayyubid Syria, and the Crusader States.¹² Its geographic indeterminacy arises, in part, from its manufacture, which synthesizes technical features of Seljuk and western European weapons, an unusual engraving technique, and a geographically indeterminate style with affinities to Frankish, Ayyubid, and Seljuk objects. To further complicate matters, the iconographic repertoire creates links to the Christian art of Norman Sicily, the Crusader polities, and Greater Syria, as well as Ayyubid and Seljuk art produced in Syria, Iran, Anatolia, and the Jazira.¹³ The dagger thus represents the cross-cultural mobility of people, techniques of production, and materials during the Ayyubid era, topics that Eva Hoffman has examined in the context of Christian and Muslim relations in the twelfth-century Mediterranean.¹⁴

While it is impossible to determine the precise identity of the dagger's owner, the central motif of the warrior saint makes it likely that he was Christian. The prominently positioned figure resembles types employed in Coptic and Syrian Orthodox art and likely represents St. George or St. Theodore, who were both renowned dragon-slayers. When viewed alongside the fragmentary paintings of St. Theodore and St. Sergios in the Church of Mar Tradros in Qara, Syria, its debt to local Christian art is clear. The motif replicates the equestrian format; blessing hand of God; flying cloaks; and the saints' accoutrements, a Crusader pennant and

⁸ For the use of daggers in combat, see Usama ibn Munqidh, *Book of Contemplation*, 89; Nicolle, *Early Medieval Islamic Arms*, 125–26. For their use in hunting panthers and lions, see Ibn Mangli, *De la chasse*, 77, 83–84. For daily use, see Holmes, “Life among the Europeans,” 30.

⁹ Thompson, *Daggers and Bayonets*, 22.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Alexander, *Islamic Arms and Armor*, cat. 75. There are numerous examples from the period in Mohamed, *Arts of the Muslim Knight*.

¹¹ al-Qaddumi, ed. and trans., *Book of Gifts*, 105, 108, 182, 191, 217, 240.

¹² Mohamed, *Arts of the Muslim Knight*, 155; Jenkins-Madina, “Dagger,” 430; Canby et al., eds., *Court and Cosmos*, 146.

¹³ Hillenbrand, “Art of the Ayyubids,” 23–25.

¹⁴ Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability.”

Figure 7.2a–b. Wall paintings from the church of Mar Tadros, showing Saints Theodore (top) and Sergius: Qara, Syria, thirteenth century. Images © Heather Badamo.

spear, which presumably once impaled a dragon (Figures 7.2a–b).¹⁵ The dagger's image enlarges the hand of God and adds a cross to the saint's shield, amplifying its message of Christian victory. By the twelfth century, Seljuks were also venerating

¹⁵ Carr, "Iconography and Identity," fig. 5; Immerzeel, *Identity Puzzles*, figs. 39, 65, 82; Bolman, ed. *Monastic Visions*, figs. 4.8, 6.24, 7.3.

warrior saints, raising the possibility of Muslim ownership.¹⁶ Nevertheless, the Furusiyya dagger's image includes specifically Christian elements, such as the hand of God and cross-emblazoned shield, making Christian ownership more plausible.¹⁷ Bashir Mohamed has suggested that it belonged to a Crusader.¹⁸ While I am sympathetic to this idea, it is worth noting that the local Christian elites of this region also included Armenians, Georgians, Greeks, and converts from Islam of various backgrounds.

In striking contrast, the remainder of the dagger's motifs can be found in both the Christian and Islamic art of the eastern Mediterranean. Most of its decoration derives from the Islamic princely cycle, a repertoire of motifs centred on elite pursuits such as hunting, drinking, and conviviality.¹⁹ On the scabbard, quadrupeds pursue a hare, a bird of prey attacks a deer. At the mouth of the scabbard, an Arabic inscription reads: "increasing glory and good fortune."²⁰ Such inscriptions are extremely common, found on metalwork, ceramics, and ivory objects at all levels of production. The handle features geometric ornament, a single griffin, and quillons that curve into abstract dragon heads. The themes of hunting, piety, and glory resonated broadly in this period, and these motifs are all common in the art of the central Islamic lands.

The themes of the dagger are designed to resonate with its function. A costly artifact, it was made for use in the elite pursuits of hunting and feasting.²¹ Though often regarded as pastimes, these social practices were vital tools of governance, employed to cement bonds of loyalty, dispense princely favours, and display royal authority. They constituted a stage for elite performances, casting courtiers in the ambivalent roles of spectators and spectacles.²² In this context, dress was a key medium for communicating an array of information about wealth, rank, ethnicity, political affiliations, and status. Courtiers invested in sumptuous garments and accoutrements, designed to articulate their political, ideological, and cultural aspirations. In the eastern Mediterranean, the elites of the Georgian, Armenian, and Frankish courts emulated the dress of their more prestigious Byzantine and

¹⁶ Pancaroğlu, "Itinerant Dragon-Slayer"; Wolper, "Changing Frontiers."

¹⁷ Seljuk images of dragon-slayers differ in that they present the dragon-slayer as a princely hunter or a winged man. See the examples in Pancaroğlu, "Itinerant Dragon-Slayer."

¹⁸ Mohamed, *Arts of the Muslim Knight*, 156.

¹⁹ Grabar, *Formation of Islamic Art*, 154.

²⁰ Trans. Canby et al., *Court and Cosmos*, 146.

²¹ I thank the anonymous reviewer for pointing this out.

²² See, for instance, Normore, *Feast for the Eyes*; Allsen, *Royal Hunt*.

Islamic rivals, seeking to enhance their status and authority by adopting “more ‘universal’ modes of dress.”²³ The Furusiyya dagger is a manifestation of this strategic self-presentation. Suspended from a baldric—a type of belt worn across the chest and favoured by Franks, Ayyubids, and Seljuks alike—and exhibiting an unusual blend of Christian and Islamic elements, the dagger was a visible and eye-catching accoutrement.²⁴

The synthesis of different artistic languages admits the dagger to a corpus of artifacts made for local elites, whose tastes, intellectual culture, and social mores were shaped through longstanding contact and interchange between Christian and Islamicate cultures. These artifacts are epitomized by a group of Ayyubid metalwork objects and enamelled glass that combine motifs of princely leisure pursuits with images of Christian religious figures, holy sites, or rituals.²⁵ The objects, which include a canteen, incense burners, candlesticks, basins, flasks, and cups, have been variously interpreted as diplomatic gifts, souvenirs, and liturgical objects, as well as general affirmations of a shared culture that emerged in the thirteenth century.²⁶ The variety of interpretations calls attention to the multivalent resonances of heterogeneous artifacts, illuminating their capacity to generate simultaneous and overlapping meanings. The dagger differs from these wares in its clearly non-liturgical and aggressive function; yet, its multivalent iconography generates similar ambiguities. Dragons, for example, were potentially heraldic, astrological, mythological, hagiographic, astrological, and talismanic.²⁷ Furthermore, aspects of the dagger appeal to popular beliefs: Arabic inscriptions and depictions of warrior saints appear in sacred, secular, and magical contexts. Neither wholly religious nor completely secular, neither exclusively Christian nor Islamic, neither distinctly Eastern nor Western, the dagger exhibits semantic flexibility and multiple resonances, as opposed to tight and internally consistent references. Its themes of animal combat and victory point to the hunt as an actual practice and a political construct that provided a flexible source of cultural, political, and religious significance for elite patrons and viewers. Taking my cue from its imagery, I focus on the meaning of the object within the performative context of the hunt, though the dagger was surely used for the closely related activity of feasting as well.

²³ Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 74.

²⁴ Nicolle, *Medieval*, 126; Alexander, *Arts of War*, 14–19.

²⁵ Baer, *Ayyubid Metalwork*.

²⁶ For bibliography and a summary of the issues, see Hillenbrand, “Art of the Ayyubids,” 31–32.

²⁷ Kuehn, *Dragon*; Pancaroğlu, “Itinerant Dragon-Slayer:”; Berlekamp, “Symmetry, Sympathy, and Sensation.”

Mobile Political Theatre

In the medieval era, Eurasian rulers sponsored festivals, sporting events, banquets, drinking parties, and hunts to display power, enforce existing social hierarchies, and signify competitiveness in the international arena. The hunt stands out from these, owing to its explicit use of violence and dominance to establish legitimacy. To kill a wild beast was to dramatize the existence of “natural” hierarchies.²⁸ In royal rhetoric, the hunt functioned as a metaphor of conquest, and, in royal practice, as an instrument of intimidation. Commanding numerous retainers, animal handlers, and huntsmen—many from distant lands—it advertised the ruler’s ability “to refashion social worlds in order to create physical landscapes suited to royal status and power.”²⁹ A medieval chase required an enormous outlay of wealth and organization, which presented an obvious parallel to the resources needed for a military expedition.³⁰ In Greater Syria, hunts led by minor rulers evoked the glory of the caliphal and Byzantine empires, along with their predecessors, Persia and Rome. For all the aspiring powers of the Mediterranean, indeed, the hunt was an established means of articulating imperial ambitions, and rulers vied with one another for the largest and most fantastic menageries, the greatest numbers of kills, the highest quality hunting animals, and the finest weapons.³¹ Motivated by “imperial envy,” elites in northwestern Europe copied elements of the hunt from their southern counterparts.³² For instance, Count Robert II of Artois (1267–1302) assembled his own menagerie for the garden park of Hesdin after spending years in Sicily, where the residue of the earlier Norman–Sicilian empire included stunning examples of Islamo-Norman architecture, hunting parks, and lodges.³³ A member of the French royal family, he borrowed and transformed aspects of the Mediterranean models, participating in a globalizing process of co-adaptation that minimized the external differences between polities.

Constituted through competition among vying states, the royal hunt was also an institution that fostered multiple forms of mobility. Frederick II, Holy Roman Emperor and king of Sicily (1194–1250), customarily travelled with a menagerie

²⁸ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 157.

²⁹ Farmer, “Aristocratic Power,” 64; Allsen, *Royal Hunt*.

³⁰ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 213–28.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 37–41, 134, 204.

³² I borrow this concept from Maclean (*Looking East*, 22), who proposes it over “otherness,” since it “involves identification as well as differentiation, of sameness of well as otherness, of desire and attraction as well as revulsion.”

³³ Farmer, “Aristocratic Power.” I thank Carol Symes for bringing this to my attention.

of elephants, camels, giraffes, apes, lions, leopards, bears, and birds. The animal entourage elicited wonder, but also functioned as a display of political capital, documenting contacts with distant, fabled lands.³⁴ Rulers sought out prized hunting animals and attracted notable animal trainers, sending specialists in multiple directions. Frederick II employed Muslim handlers for his menageries, while the Byzantine emperor Isaac I Komnenos (r. 1057–1059) employed an eleventh-century Norman noble and military officer famed for training hunting birds.³⁵ Politics could calibrate their relations with each other through such agents, as well as through other media. For example, Frederick II's manual on falconry enabled the expansion of hunting and animal training techniques beyond the Mediterranean, inspiring the creation of pleasure parks in northern Europe.³⁶ The translation of technologies and techniques, the transportation of animals and huntsmen, relied on far-flung trading contacts and coordinate economies, intensifying the interdependence of rival polities and fostering a degree of homogenization among warrior elites.

As part of this princely *lingua franca*, hunting was also a force that set diplomacy in motion. The historical record teems with episodes documenting the exchange of hunting animals, expeditions, and game in political negotiations. For instance, Richard the Lionheart of England (r. 1189–1199) sent falcons to Salah ad-Din (1137–1193) in the hopes of initiating talks,³⁷ while the Egyptian sultan Baybars (r. 1260–1277) sent a giraffe to Michael VIII (r. 1259–1282), emperor of Byzantium, negotiating for slave trade routes on the Black Sea.³⁸ These episodes were part of the regular exchange of diplomatic gifts across cultural and political frontiers, which often included the material accoutrements of the hunt as well.³⁹ The chase was itself an occasion for cementing personal bonds of loyalty and political alliances, as witnessed by the efforts of the Frankish baron Reginald of Sidon (1130–1202) to secure the friendship and favour of Al-Adil, the emir of Damascus (r. 1200–1218).⁴⁰ On a more formal level, diplomatic receptions often involved invitations to the hunt, sometimes to celebrate the formation of wider political

³⁴ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 204; cf. Ševčenko, "Wild Animals."

³⁵ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 262–63.

³⁶ Farmer, "Aristocratic Power," 668.

³⁷ Ibn Shaddad, *Rare and Excellent History*, trans. Richards, 215.

³⁸ Ševčenko, "Wild Animals," 78.

³⁹ *La Continuation*, 68; trans. Edbury in *Conquest of Jerusalem*, 71.

⁴⁰ Steven Runciman, *History*, 3:60. See also Usama Ibn Munqidh's account of King Fulk of Jerusalem (r. 1131–1143) hunting with the amir Mu'in ad-Din (d. 1149): *Book of Contemplation*, 205–6.

alliances.⁴¹ In the twelfth century, the Georgian queen Tamar (r. 1184–1213) and her consort, David Soslan, concluded a military agreement with a minor Muslim prince by heading to the countryside, where they spent a week “feasting and carousing, exchanging presents, hunting and watching games.”⁴² As rulers used the hunt to consolidate power and negotiate the hierarchical relations between polities, they affirmed its centrality to the exercise of power, acting as agents of its diffusion.

Luxurious hunting gear and objects bearing hunting imagery were thus made and consumed by the many, often competing, courts across the Mediterranean. Artifacts like the oliphant, an ivory horn for hunting and battle, demonstrate how the material culture of the hunt could mediate multiple encounters. As scholarship by Eva Hoffman, Antony Eastmond, and Avinoam Shalem has shown, the materials, facture, and decoration of oliphants point to the trans-hemispheric connections that linked Africa, Asia, and Europe.⁴³ Extant examples are decorated with an international visual language, which facilitated their migration from east to west, and often from secular to sacred contexts.⁴⁴ On the Walters horn, for instance, the carved decoration consists of a medallion interlace that frames lions, birds, rabbits, antelopes, and deer, while a pair of twining serpents undulates along its inner curve (**Figures 7.3a–b**). In his analysis, Shalem highlights how hunting imagery transmits values of courage and power, appealing to Christian and Muslim ideals of the warrior.⁴⁵ This horn belongs to what Oleg Grabar has called a “shared culture of objects,” referring to luxury commodities that circulated in the Mediterranean, characterized by an international style whose courtly motifs could cross confessional boundaries in ways religious iconography could not.⁴⁶ Yet Michelle Warren has shown how the circulation of oliphants in medieval contact zones could also undermine the shared values and aspirations assumed by this approach. The sound produced by the oliphant in the epic *Chanson de Roland*, she argues, communicated multiple, even contradictory, messages to the warring Franks and Saracens who heard it, at once transmitting and transcending ideologies of religious difference.⁴⁷ Warren points to the contingency of meaning produced by intersections of

41 Nizām al-Mulk, *Book of Government*, trans. Darke, 94–98.

42 Vivian, trans., *Georgian Chronicle*, 127–28.

43 Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability”; Eastmond, “Byzantine Oliphants?”; Shalem, *Oliphant*. I thank Alicia Walker for bringing Eastmond’s article to my attention.

44 Shalem, *Oliphant*.

45 Ibid., 64–66, 76–77, 99–100, 104–5. See also Sarah Guérin’s article in this collection.

46 Grabar, “Shared Culture of Objects.”

47 Warren, “Noise of Roland.” I thank Carol Symes for bringing this article to my attention.

Figure 7.3a–b. Ivory horn carved with animals in vine scrolls: eleventh century, 23 x 56 x 10.3 cm. Baltimore, The Walters Art Museum (71.234). Images courtesy of The Walters Art Museum.

materiality, sound, and political engagements, with implications for the Furusiyya dagger. It captures a moment when warrior saints were increasingly becoming part of a shared vocabulary between various Christian groups and Muslim, especially Seljuk, communities.⁴⁸ Like Roland's noisy oliphant, the dagger's decoration suggests that the commonalities created through the mobility of hunting culture do not merely indicate underlying unities. They also signify political engagements and tensions, setting the stage for messages that disrupt narratives, both of transcendent values and of intractable enmity.

⁴⁸ Pancaroğlu, "Itinerant Dragon-Slayer."

Visual Contraposition and the Expression of Power

A closer examination of the Furusiyya dagger can help to clarify the ways that material culture could both register and challenge the political engagements and tensions that characterized interactions among the Christian and Muslim courts of the Mediterranean. As an instrument of status, the principal function of the dagger was to ennoble its princely owner through display during the elite pursuits of banqueting, poetry gatherings, drinking parties, and the hunt. As noted above, rulers invested in palaces, hunting lodges, parks, and banqueting halls to serve as stages for the display of their skill, wealth, ethical conduct, and sophistication.⁴⁹ Even a dagger could serve as a prop in these performances, as seen in an account furnished by the Arab chronicler Mas'udi (896–956), in which the Abbasid caliph Al-Amin (r. 809–813) vanquished a lion in hand-to-hand combat, armed only with a dagger.⁵⁰ Fighting large cats—and surviving to tell the tale—was a dramatic display of courage and strength, designed to titillate the audience with the thrill of physical violence and display the ruler's dominance over the animal world. The greatest glory accrued to those who defeated animals in close combat, armed only with hand weapons.⁵¹ In defeating the lion, Al-Amin employed a visual strategy for articulating royal power that supported existing power hierarchies by naturalizing claims in which might equals right. Through this feat, hunting culture becomes a source of inflated male self-fashioning, revealing the real and symbolic violence that underlies the maintenance of hierarchical relationships, both within and between polities.

Such power politics are also the catalyst for the Furusiyya dagger's aggressive animal motifs. In the Mediterranean, griffins, dragon-slayers, and scenes of animal combat all carried connotations of victory and dominance.⁵² The application of these motifs to a hunting accoutrement, as opposed to a casket or ceramic vessel, amplifies the force of their message, alluding to the hunt's status as a concrete symbol of sovereignty and dominion. The iconography, along with its style, exploits the way beholders transfer the properties of dress to their wearers. Rendered in dynamic poses, the animals move across the scabbard in leaping bounds or unfurl their wings in attack, attributing masculine qualities of speed, strength, and aggression to the owner.⁵³ The Arabic inscription constitutes the

⁴⁹ Anderson, *Islamic Villa*, 172–76; Normore, *Feast for the Eyes*, 67–72; Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 197, 201.

⁵⁰ Mas'udi, *Meadows of Gold*, 6:432–33 §2637.

⁵¹ Cf. Ševčenko, “Wild Animals,” 70.

⁵² Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability,” 22.

⁵³ Cf. Shalem, *Oliphant*, 97–100.

epigraphic parallel to the images, comprising supplications (*ad'īya*), royal qualities, and virtues that were typically invoked *min allāh* ("from God"). This one cites the ubiquitous good wishes, "glory" and "good fortune," cultivating a persona of power and piety for its elite owner.⁵⁴

This message of power and prestige is further underscored by the lustrous material and exquisite craftsmanship of the dagger. In the premodern era, elites demonstrated status by adhering to the codes of behaviour, rules of external appearance, standards of refinement, and cultural values that were deemed appropriate to aristocrats. Nizam al-Mulk (1018/1019–1092), advisor to the Seljuks, pointed to the importance of luxury accoutrements in crafting international messages of status. He encouraged rulers to keep weapons of "incomparable magnificence" made of gold and silver, studded with jewels and ornaments to impress visiting dignitaries with their "exalted position and lofty ambition."⁵⁵ The passage alludes to a cultural milieu that valorized the display of wealth over discretion and locates the Furusiyya dagger within complex sartorial codes in which material value and refinement of accoutrements indicated rank and status.⁵⁶ Dazzlingly beautiful and unique, the Furusiyya dagger captures the quality of incomparability Nizam al-Mulk describes. It spells out power and prestige, manifesting the innate qualities of manliness, nobility, piety, and glory that were believed to be externalized in the hunt.⁵⁷

By depicting a warrior saint, moreover, the Furusiyya dagger inflects this generalized message of power with religious connotations. In the eastern Mediterranean, devotion to the warrior saints was practised from late antiquity onward, sustained and transformed through the constantly evolving networks of medieval period. From the eleventh through the fourteenth centuries, warrior saints became state symbols through processes of competitive borrowings and adaptations in the rival Christian courts of the eastern Mediterranean. During this period, Byzantium adopted representations of saints subduing dragons as state symbols, engraving them on coins and emblazoning them on battle standards.⁵⁸ The images symbolized victory and strategically evoked miracle accounts in which the warrior saints fought alongside the living to defend the empire's borders against enemy incursions. By

⁵⁴ Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions*, 102–5, 199–203.

⁵⁵ Nizam al-Mulk, *Book of Government*, trans. Darke, 94, 97. On "incomparability" as an imperial aesthetic, see Walker, *Emperor and the World*, 144–64.

⁵⁶ On the notion of display versus discretion, see Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism*, vol. 2, 49.

⁵⁷ Participation in the hunt was, itself, thought to be ennobling.

⁵⁸ Walter, *Warrior Saints in Byzantine Art*, 46. See also Walker's article in this collection.

the thirteenth century, their images had become symbols of militarized piety and Christian sovereignty common to the Crusader polities,⁵⁹ the Byzantine successor states,⁶⁰ and Eastern Christian communities.⁶¹ Their new importance was fuelled by a potent mix of imperial aspirations, militarized piety, and binary ideologies of religious difference. Among the Crusaders, for instance, they gained traction as victors over Islamic, often Ayyubid, armies. Applied to the dagger, the warrior saint articulates Christian authority in a violent and hierarchical idiom.

In its contraposition of animal and military motifs, the Furusiyya dagger also highlights conceptual links between hunting, warfare, and sovereignty, which were common themes of royal and imperial rhetoric. Byzantine imperial encomia provide a telling example, conflating triumph in war with triumph in the hunt, using both to express the conquest of imperial adversaries.⁶² Texts that praise the emperor as a hunter and military hero circulated alongside imagery that compared him to the warrior saints, casting the ruler as the defender of Greek Orthodox territories.⁶³ The emperors of Trebizond took these overlapping metaphors to their logical conclusion. From the thirteenth through fifteenth centuries, the Trapezuntine Empire was a Byzantine successor state whose rulers fashioned themselves as emperors in exile. Styling themselves as dragon-slayers, they drew parallels between victory over the ferocious beast and over their Turkic adversaries, presenting both triumphs as divinely sanctioned.⁶⁴ These rhetorical strategies were pervasive, facilitated by the channels of exchange I described earlier, and can also be seen in Islamicate, especially Seljuk, visual culture.⁶⁵ They underlie the decoration of the Furusiyya dagger. In its synthesis of sacred and secular iconography, the dagger constitutes a powerful assertion of Christian conquest and dominion, reinforced by the function of the dagger as an instrument of the hunt.

The dagger's employment of Christian and courtly imagery reinforces its message of dominance. In the monuments of the Mediterranean, the contraposition of visual forms was an efficacious visual strategy for articulating power, as seen in the twelfth-century Norman royal chapel, the Cappella Palatina, in Palermo. To herald their status as a political power within the Mediterranean, the Sicilian Normans

⁵⁹ Folda, "Warrior Saints," 87–108.

⁶⁰ Eastmond, *Art and Identity*, 146; Schrade, "Byzantium," at 171–77.

⁶¹ Immerzeel, "Holy Horsemen," 29–60; Snelders and Jeudy, "Guarding the Entrances," 105–42.

⁶² These metaphors are visualized in elite objects, as Alicia Walker has shown; *Emperor and the World*, 67–69.

⁶³ Kazhdan and Epstein, *Change in Byzantine Culture*, 111–19.

⁶⁴ Olenqvist, "Pilgrimage," 199–200, 208–9.

⁶⁵ Pancaroğlu, "Itinerant Dragon-Slayer," 156–61.

deliberately appropriated cultural forms associated with Fatimid, Byzantine, and Roman court culture. The Capella Palatina accordingly combines Byzantine church mosaics, a Fatimid muqarnas ceiling decorated with images from the Islamic princely cycle, and trilingual inscriptions (Arabic, Latin, and Greek) to create a unified royal program.⁶⁶ As Jeremy Johns argues, this contraposition of linguistic and visual forms is “no attempt to reconcile Christianity and Islam, but rather a masterful act of appropriation intended to enhance the image of the king.”⁶⁷ It is significant that all the motifs on the Furusiyya dagger can be found on the muqarnas ceiling, since the chapel was designed as a space for the display of royal rhetoric to diverse audiences. The similarities suggest that the dagger presupposes a similarly diverse audience, and perhaps a similarly intercultural architectural space. In such settings, the dagger and its owner would have conformed to the prevalent practices of the physical and social space where it was used. The Capella Palatina provides a model for interpreting the dagger as message of Christian power over its foreign adversaries and, perhaps, over an internally diverse population.

Visual Mirroring and Cultural Difference

With its depiction of a haloed saint receiving a blessing from God and bearing a cross-emblazoned shield, the warrior saint presents a clear message of Christian power. Nevertheless, its combination of iconography and aesthetic forms distracts from any assertion of absolute difference, pointing to cultural histories that its visual rhetoric seems designed to disguise. A focus on the warrior saint, in particular, reveals longstanding histories of contact and exchange in the eastern Mediterranean, shaped by successive and layered histories of conquest and coexistence. The militarized saint is essential to the Furusiyya dagger’s performance of power and masculinity, locating it within an elite culture that cultivated the imitation of heroic exemplars as a means of enhancing personal charisma.⁶⁸ From its prominent position near the mouth of the scabbard, it draws a parallel between the human hunter pursuing his prey and the divine saint subduing the world’s most ferocious beast. It is important to note that the warrior saints were depicted according to a variety of iconographic types, including standing portraits, bust portraits, equestrians, and riders rescuing captives.⁶⁹ These types are all attested in the eastern Mediterranean, indicating a deliberate choice to depict the saint as a

⁶⁶ Tronzo, *Cultures of His Kingdom*.

⁶⁷ Johns, “Arabic Inscriptions,” 130.

⁶⁸ On charisma, see Jaeger, *Enchantment*, 22–27.

⁶⁹ Haubrichs, *Georgslied*, 214–14, n. 24.

dragon-slayer. On one level, the visual formula suits the function of the dagger as a hunting accoutrement, reinforcing themes of human–animal combat. On another level, it points to an awareness of other cultural and religious groups in the region, and to their cultivation of parallel dragon-slayer traditions.

Dragon-slayers are so common in the medieval Christian and Islamic worlds that scholars have only begun to track their movements and transformations. From the eleventh century on, tales of dragon-slayings proliferated in the eastern Mediterranean, becoming the mark of the greatest heroes.⁷⁰ Numerous epic, historic, and saintly figures accrued dragon-slaying miracles, forging links among otherwise unconnected heroic and sacred figures. The heroic feat of St. George slaying a dragon to rescue a princess is a case in point. It first appears in an eleventh-century manuscript from Georgia, suggesting a familiarity with the heroes of Persian epics, who routinely saved maidens from the sinuous serpents that terrorized the land.⁷¹ St. George the dragon-slayer resonated with the heroes of epics and romances, engaging the chivalric imagination of western Europe and propelling him to universal fame.⁷² The resonance of values across Christian and Muslim boundaries can also be seen in epic cycles from the opposing sides of the Byzantine–Muslim frontier in Anatolia. In the Byzantine epic *Digenis Akritis*, the eponymous hero defeats a three-headed dragon to rescue his wife, a feat echoed and transformed in the Turkish epic *Battalname*, whose hero, Malik Danishmend, slays a dragon menacing a monastery.⁷³ In each case, the dragon-slayer is reissued, adapted to local circumstances, generic forms, and cultural values. Yet these exemplars (holy, mythic, historic) all provide moral instruction for warriors and models for legitimacy, dramatizing an ethos of resistance to outside forces.

The mobility of this narrative, in combination with its capacity to cross religious and cultural boundaries, suggests that it afforded instrumentalities of many kinds. Its political utility is readily apparent in the state symbols of medieval Anatolia, where rulers strategically melded epic and historic time, and kingly and heroic figures. A lithograph of a lost fresco from the church of Hagia Sophia, Trebizond, shows the Trapezuntine emperor Manuel I Megas Komnenos (r. 1238–1263) in state robes, wearing a fur-trimmed cloak, embroidered with medallions containing eagles and a band of pseudo-Arabic or arabesque decoration at chest level (**Figure 7.4**). The under-robe features a large central medallion which depicts

⁷⁰ Allsen, *Royal Hunt*, 180.

⁷¹ On Persian dragon-slayers, see Kuehn, *Dragon*, 91.

⁷² On the reinventions of St. George, see Riches, *St. George*, 28–68.

⁷³ *Digenis Akritis*, trans. Elizabeth Jeffreys, 155–56; Mélikoff, *La Geste de Melik Dānişmend*, 1:206–62, 2:75–77. See also Pancaroğlu, “Itinerant Dragon-Slayer,” 157.

Figure 7.4. State robes of Manuel I Grand Komnenos (r. 1238–1263), from a (now lost) wall painting in Hagia Sophia, Trebizond. Engraving by Grigorii Grigorevich, *Freska tserkvi sv. Sofii v Trapezunde. Manuil III, Imperator Trebizonskii* (St. Petersburg, 1897–1903). Photo: New York Public Library.

St. Eugenios, the patron of Trebizond, on horseback, twisting back to thrust his spear into the gaping maws of a serpent. The robes synthesize features of Byzantine and Islamic (particularly Seljuk), visual languages, creating an imperial image that spoke to local perceptions of power.⁷⁴ St. Eugenios was a local martyr, transformed into an imperial symbol in the thirteenth century following his miraculous defence of Trebizond against invading Turkish armies.⁷⁵ Placed on the chest of the ruler, the medallion fosters an identification between the divine warrior and human ruler, presenting the saint as patron, model, and equal in glory. In foregrounding a warrior saint, the robes depart significantly from conventional Byzantine images of imperial power, which draw links between Christ and the emperor. In so doing, they project an image of Manuel I as the earthly counterpart to the divine, charismatic champion of the faith.

In all likelihood, this expression of power was strategically designed to resonate with those of local Muslim rulers. As Oya Pancaroğlu has shown, minor Muslim rulers in Anatolia and the Caucasus fostered identifications between themselves and an array of historic, epic, and hagiographic dragon-slayers. For instance, Nasir al-Din Muhammad, the last Danismendid ruler of Malatya (r. 1162–1170 and 1175–1178), placed an image of a dragon-slayer on his coinage, a medium emblematic of sovereignty.⁷⁶ Its iconographic ambiguity fosters identifications between the living ruler, his ancestor, and other heroes; it also evokes the ghazi warriors who waged jihad at the Anatolian frontier. When viewed together, the Christian and Islamic heroes constitute resonant visions of the ruler as defender of the faith, formed through processes of co-adaptation and borrowing like those already seen in hunting culture. But the similarities in images should not be taken as a sign of inter-faith harmony. On one level, the image of St. Eugenios helped mobilize sentiments of Christian superiority in support of military expeditions against Turkic armies. On another level, it employed a shared language of heroism to convey threatening messages to Trapezuntine's rivals. The image of St. Eugenios is meant to bridge cultural, linguistic, and religious differences on the one hand, and, on the other, to reaffirm and reinscribe them.

Ambiguous Images and Converging Beliefs

On the Furusiyya dagger, the depiction of the warrior saint dramatizes resistance to outside threats, whether of a military, supernatural, or religious kind. Yet, at the

⁷⁴ Eastmond, *Art and Identity*, 146.

⁷⁵ Olenqvist, "Pilgrimage," 199–200, 208–9.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 156–57.

same time, the dagger employs talismanic devices that illustrate the convergence of practices and beliefs across diverse Christian and Muslim communities. The Furusiyya dagger provided personal defence not only through its material properties, but also through its apotropaic efficacy, which derived from the combined powers invested in inscriptions, materials, and iconography. These potent devices underscore the message of the dagger, signalling the superior prowess and authority of the man who wields it. Designed to engage a plural audience, talismans and apotropaia belong to what Antony Eastmond has described as a “world of popular, semi-official beliefs and ideas that lay outside the mainstream religious practices of the Christian and Islamic worlds.”⁷⁷

For instance, the inscription on the Furusiyya dagger resonates with diverse traditions regarding the capacity of texts to channel power. When applied to portable objects, Arabic texts had an amuletic quality that derived from the status of the language as the medium of divine revelation.⁷⁸ The *duʿā* placed at the mouth of the scabbard has formal and epigraphic analogues with those on thirteenth-century belt plaques, weapons, and horse trappings, as well as textiles like the mantle of Roger II.⁷⁹ These articles of dress have innate protective properties, which may have been enhanced by the prayers of praise proclaimed by the inscriptions.⁸⁰ Given the diverse society of Greater Syria, it is worth noting that Arabic-speaking Christians could likely ascertain the meanings of the texts. Those who could not may still have regarded it as apotropaic, based on a tradition that illegible texts had magical potency.⁸¹

The dragon-head quillons exhibit a similar tendency towards intercultural resonance. Across the medieval world, dragons were seen as forces of chaos that lurked at the physical and symbolic thresholds between order and disorder, good and evil. In the eastern Mediterranean, Christian and Muslim rulers employed dragon talismans to bolster civic defences, based on the common belief that certain iconographic forms could imbue sculptures with the power to attract favourable celestial influences.⁸² The quillons’ shape and symmetrical arrangement evoke the talismans on city gates and church exteriors, and also on portable objects of

⁷⁷ Eastmond, “Other Encounters,” 184.

⁷⁸ Ettinghausen, “Arabic Epigraphy,” 307; Porter, “Islamic Seals,” 138–40.

⁷⁹ Mohamed, *Arts of the Muslim Knight*, cat. nos. 9, 77, 91, 117, 133, 143, 234. For a general discussion of inscriptions on weapons, with bibliography, see Blair, *Islamic Inscriptions*, 199–203.

⁸⁰ Hoffman, “Pathways of Portability,” 33; Johns, “Arabic Inscriptions,” 135.

⁸¹ Ettinghausen, “Kufesque,” 43–45; Nagel, “Pseudoscript,” 235.

⁸² For the meanings of dragons in this region, see Kuehn, *Dragon*.

Figure 7.5. Gateway to the caravansaray of Badr al-Din Lu'lu' (detail), west of Mosul (Iraq). In the upper right-hand corner, a hero is slaying a dragon. Image courtesy of the Gertrude Bell Archive, Newcastle University (R_070).

protection. In particular, they elicit comparison with the dragon swords favoured by Muslim warriors, so-called because of their amuletic dragon-shaped hand-guards.⁸³ They position the warrior as a hero who subdues dragons and unleashes their power against the adversary. In the hands of a Christian elite, the Furusiyya dagger might be seen to appropriate aspects of the rival's defences, broadening the scope of its apotropaic resonances.

The warrior saint achieves a similar effect through iconographic ambiguities. Employed on weapons, amulets, and church walls, sacred images had apotropaic properties derived from their links to divine beings. Mounted saints slaying enemies appear as exterior relief sculptures on Armenian, Syrian Orthodox, Byzantine, and Georgian churches.⁸⁴ These images have iconographic and formal analogues in the Islamic world, as can be seen from the imagery in the entryway of the caravansaray of the Atabeg Badr al-Din Lu'lu' (1211–1259), located west of Mosul (Figure 7.5). Positioned above the entrance, a haloed hero thrusts his spear into the open jaws of a sinuous dragon. As Persis Berlekamp has shown, the image draws on cosmological powers and cultural expectations of symmetry (in which threat is met with

⁸³ Alexander, *Islamic Arms and Armor*, 150–51.

⁸⁴ Kuehn, *Dragon*.

counter-threat).⁸⁵ The knotted dragon also has astrological associations, believed to make the enemy's way difficult instead of straightforward and easy.⁸⁶ Though the Furusiyya dagger's warrior saint is an equestrian, it shares formal qualities such as the omission of an identifying inscription and use of a knotted dragon to enhance its potency. The dagger's image combines aspects of sacred and talismanic images, inviting recognition of its efficacious power by religiously diverse viewers.

The Syrian Orthodox monastery of Mar Behnam/Deir al-Khidr, located south-east of Mosul, makes the links between iconographic ambiguities and intercultural resonance explicit. In the main church, the sanctuary entrance employs a combination of apotropaia, including Syriac inscriptions, crosses, knotted serpents breathing fire, lions, and cavalier saints slaying a demon and a dragon (**Figures 7.6a–b**).⁸⁷ While the saints lack inscriptions, scholars generally identify them as the titular saint of the monastery, Mar Behnam, and St. George. The dragon-slayer is remarkably similar to the image on the Furusiyya dagger, which shares its knotted, open-mouthed dragon and leaping steed. Located at the entrance to the church, it signals potent defence and forms part of a regional message of Christian power.

Yet, the history of the site points to multicultural and religious connections that complicate this message. From the medieval era on, Mar Behnam had ties to the Islamic holy man al-Khidr, making it a renowned site of healing and veneration for both Christians and Muslims.⁸⁸ Muslim artisans adapted the visual formula employed for warrior saints to represent al-Khidr as a mounted dragon-slayer, pointing to layered syncretistic practices. Writing about Seville, Tom Nickson has noted “the capacity of charismatic sites and objects to generate and attract meanings that transcend social, political, and religious circumstances.”⁸⁹ His observation is relevant to Mar Behnam, where joint Christian and Muslim devotions continued well past the Middle Ages, generating a range of syncretic beliefs. Given the diversity of viewers at the site, the images of the riders might have been regarded as sacred icons or talismans, nameless riders or some combination of Mar Behnam, St. George, and al-Khidr. At Mar Behnam, the Christian saint and Islamic holy man became interchangeable, to some extent undermining the assertions of absolute religious difference made by this iconographic form in other contexts—such as the Furusiyya dagger.

⁸⁵ Berlekamp, “Symmetry.”

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁸⁷ Gierlichs, *Mittelalterliche Tierreliefs*, plate 59, figs. 1–3.

⁸⁸ Snelders, *Identity*, 552–62; Wolper, “Changing Frontiers,” 139–43.

⁸⁹ Nickson, “Text, Ornament, and Magic,” 856.

Figure 7.6a–b. Entrance to the sanctuary (“Royal Gate”) of the Syrian Orthodox monastery of Mar Behnam/Deir al-Khidr, southeast of Mosul (Iraq), with detail showing a dragon-slaying warrior-saint. Photo: Yasser Tabbaa, 1979, reproduced courtesy of Aga Khan Documentation Center at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston.

As Elizabeth Key Fowden has shown in relation to the early Islamic period, sites of shared devotion led to the dynamic blurring of some boundaries and the reassertion of others.⁹⁰ Her work suggests that the distinctly Christian warrior saint on the Furusiyya dagger might be conceptualized as an attempt to reassert and maintain difference in the face of extreme religious fluidity. Nevertheless, its owner likely profited from multicultural syncretisms that enabled diverse elite viewers to recognize the dagger's efficacy. Employing a common language of power and protection, the dagger displays mastery over cosmological and heavenly powers, projecting an efficacious image of the man who wields it as powerful hero and hunter.

Conclusion

By investigating the intercultural resonances of the Furusiyya dagger, this study has shown how global approaches to medieval art can help to decentre persistent and misleading narratives, particularly those that divide the medieval globe into East and West, Islamic and Christian. In its synthesis of Christian and Islamic visual languages, the dagger challenges popular and scholarly conceptions of the medieval period as an era of clashing religions, revealing instead a period of sustained engagements, catalyzed by military, religious, and political encounters. Even convenient categories like "Christianity" and "Islam" appear inadequate to the task of describing the religious and cultural communities of the eastern Mediterranean, masking their considerable internal diversities. The dagger's message of Christian power and preeminence only gains traction against a background of overlapping and competing traditions. By fostering intercultural resonance, the dagger underlines how mobility in the premodern globe could disrupt messages, both of mutual aspirations and of absolute difference. In doing so, it invites us to develop new narratives of exchange—ones that can account for contradictory messages, ambivalent practices, and cultural tensions.

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⁹⁰ Fowden, "Sharing Holy Places."

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Abstract Among the holdings of the Furusiyya Art Foundation in Vaduz, Liechtenstein, a dagger datable to the twelfth or thirteenth century combines motifs from the Islamic princely cycle with an icon of a Christian warrior saint. It can be located within the thriving luxury industries of the eastern Mediterranean, where numerous objects combined styles, inscriptions, and iconography from the Christian and Islamic worlds. Despite much recent work on these cross-cultural objects, the Furusiyya dagger remains largely unstudied; this paper accordingly considers the dagger in relation to elite, transcultural practices of hunting, feasting, and self-presentation. It suggests that such mixed imagery was designed to convey messages of power and personal protection in a Christian idiom legible to diverse audiences.

Keywords medieval weapons, jihad, Crusade, saints, warriors, dragon-slayers, hunting, feasting, apotropaia, multiculturalism