# Image against Nature: Spolia as Apotropaia in Byzantium and the dār al-Islām[1]

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*Although the use of portable amulets and talismans in the pre-modern Islamic world is well documented, little is known about their monumental counterparts. Despite this neglect, references to apotropaia and talismans designed to offer protection from pests such as pigeons, snakes and scorpions are common in descriptions of medieval architecture in Arabia, Egypt, Syria and Iran. In many cases these consisted of pre-Islamic zoomorphic spolia set at entrances and gateways. The function and nature of these images find close analogies in Byzantium, where antique statuary was also ascribed a talismanic value. In both cultural spheres, this value is predicated upon the ability of the image to invert or negate the power of the imaged, a function to which antique figural spolia may have been especially well suited.*

## Introduction

The reception of the antique in the Islamic world has usually been analysed in the context of its role as a source of artistic inspiration in early Islamic art. Less attention has been paid to the way in which the

[1] This paper was originally presented in the International Colloquium on Byzantine Spolia in Islamic Monuments hosted in Berlin by the Skulpturensammlung und Museum für Byzantinische Kunst and the Museum für Islamische Kunst of the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin between 31 October and 3 November 2003. Unfortunately, due to prior publishing commitments, it was not possible to submit it in time for inclusion in the conference

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*The Medieval History Journal, 9, 1 (2006)*
*Sage Publications ♦ New Delhi, Thousand Oaks, London*
*DOI: 10.1177/097194580500900108*

medieval viewer interpreted those material instantiations of the pre-Islamic past that continued to be visible for centuries after the advent of Islam. The topic is an important one, highlighting the way in which the diachronic formation of urban landscapes through the architectural patronage of elites was imbricated with the appropriation of that landscape through the superimposition of popular practices and oral narratives upon it. Here, I would like to focus on a single aspect of this process of re-imagining the instantiated past: the ascription of apotropaic or talismanic properties to reused antique carvings and architectural elements. The phenomenon constitutes a culturally significant chapter in the reception of the antique that also illuminates the degree of overlap between the ways in which antique sculpture was re-imagined in Byzantium and the Islamic world. It is particularly well documented in Egypt and Syria, but is also attested in Iran.[2] In view of their ubiquity, the lack of scholarship on monumental apotropaia and talismans is surprising, as Josef Meri noted in a recent book on pilgrimage and its associated practices in medieval Syria.[3] Of the various classes of talismanic object that Meri identifies for future research (among them paintings, idols, and stone pillars), I am here concerned with the talismans against rodents, reptiles and insects of various sorts found on city gates, mosques, and in domestic spaces.

One likely reason for the lack of scholarly attention to practices that were clearly central to the experience of medieval Islamic cityscapes is a tendency to consign them to the realm of 'folklore', with its pejorative connotations of class and superstition. As late as 1924, the ascription of talismanic value to Constantinople's antique statuary was attributed to the mental processes of 'the simpler men who then as now formed the bulk of mankind.' Thankfully, these 'curious fancies' had been swept away by modern rationality 'with its new and saner relation to antiquity.'[4] In both Byzantium and the Islamic world, however, the distinction between 'popular' tradition and learned discourse is somewhat

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proceedings. I wish to offer my warm thanks to the organisers of the colloquium, especially Professor Arne Effenberger and Dr. Neslihan Asutay-Effenberger. The issues that are briefly sketched here will be dealt with in greater detail in my forthcoming book *Altered Images: Islam, Iconoclasm and the Mutability of Meaning* (Reaktion Books).

[2] The Palestinian geographer al-Muqaddasī (d. 334/945–46) notes: 'It is supposed that the talismans are found only in Egypt and Syria and are said to have been made by the Prophets; however, I myself saw talismans in Fars [south-western Iran] also': al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*: 211; Collins and al-Tai, *The Best Divisions*: 194.

[3] Meri, *The Cult of Saints*: 205.

[4] Dawkins, 'Ancient Statues': 247.

undermined by our dependence on medieval texts for our knowledge of the former. The very fact that the talismans dotting the landscape of pre-modern cities were considered worthy of report by medieval literati suggests that their presence was integral to the experience of the medieval city, despite the occasional skeptical aside about their efficacy. When it came to monumental apotropaia and talismans, 'popular' Islam may therefore have been a broader category than the term itself suggests.

Nonetheless, the practical difficulties of evaluating accounts of these features are numerous. They are perhaps best exemplified by a report of the ninth/fifteenth-century writer al-'Ulaymī that the Mosque of 'Umar in the Holy Sepulchre complex in Jerusalem was provided with two stone columns whose capitals carved with the image (*ṣūra*) of serpents, which constituted a talisman (*tilsam*) against these reptiles.[5] The report is third-hand and we are told that these carvings (Crusader capitals?) no longer existed in the author's day. Apart from the obvious problems presented by evaluating the veracity of a 500 year-old report about an object that had long vanished, it is difficult to determine whether the ascription of talismanic value was intrinsic to the choice of imagery, or a *post hoc* interpretation. It is worth pointing out, however, that even the latter presupposes the existence of a tradition of figural apotropaia within which to locate the image of the snake. Such a tradition is attested by the snakes and other reptiles that appear on numerous extant amulets and magic bowls, objects created *de novo* to afford their users protection against the beasts that they depict and the forces that they represent. The centrality of the image to this tradition of licit magic may have encouraged the reception of antique zoomorphic imagery as talismans, whatever its original function.[6] Moreover, the treatment of figural spolia (the manner of reworking or mode of recontextualisation) sometimes suggests a desire to exploit the power of the image, providing significant insights into the relationship between the reuse and re-imagining of pre-Islamic antiquities.

[5] Al-'Ulaymī, *Al-Uns al-jalīl*, vol. 1: 126; Sauvaire, *Histoire de Jérusalem*: 31. For similar examples see Meri, *The Cult of Saints*: 206.

[6] The identification of the famous serpent column, the triple-headed serpent tripod of Delphi, in the Hippodrome of Constantinople as a talisman against lizards, snakes, and scorpions offers what is perhaps the best-studied example of this phenomenon: Dawkins, 'Ancient Statues': 235. The serpent column seems to have assumed this role only after 1204, when a bronze eagle and serpent statue that stood nearby was melted down by the Crusaders: Madden, 'The Serpent Column'.

In general, art historians have not dealt well with the reuse of architectural material, and the privileging of an original (or originary) moment in the 'biography' of such material is manifest across a range of scholarship. The emerging field of what might be termed 'spolia studies' promises to broaden the terms of analysis, but even here there is a tendency to emphasise synchronic aspects of the phenomenon, to privilege the moment of reuse in the biography of the fragment. This emphasis is related to a linkage between questions of intention and interpretation at the disciplinary level. In a key article that has defined the terrain for those concerned with architectural reuse in pre-modern Europe, and served as a model for those of us whose interests lie further to the East, Dale Kinney has argued that 'to be perceived as such, spolia must be seen as products of at least two artistic moments, and of two different intentions.'[7] There may be cases of reuse in which chronology and psychology are not coincident, however. These include instances of antique zoomorphic carvings being re-cut to fit secondary or tertiary contexts (and hence potentially identifiable as the product of two different artistic moments), in order to fulfil an apotropaic function that those reusing them assumed to be their original raison d'être.[8]

Intention, as Michael Baxandall reminds us 'is not a reconstituted historical state of mind ... but a relation between the object and its circumstances.'[9] Recent anthropological and sociological approaches to objects have sought to emphasise that they are 'infinitely malleable to the shifting and contested meanings constructed *for them* through human agency.'[10] When it comes to the question of reuse, the ontological and physical malleability of the artifact means that the circumstances to which Baxandall refers are not restricted to the conditions of production, but also encompass cultural consumption (itself a particular mode of production), or 'ways of using that cannot be limited to the intentions of those who produce.'[11] Seen in this light, 'popular' beliefs concerning the urban landscape are neither superfluous grafts upon static artifacts nor necessarily the pre-eminent motivation for their (re)deployment, but represent specific engagements with cultural artifacts that generate meanings in a dynamic relationship to them. To paraphrase Richard Krautheimer's observation on symbolic form in medieval European architecture, these

[7] Kinney, 'Rape or Restitution?': 57.

[8] For an example, see the discussion of Uthmān Kathkudā's mosque in Cairo ahead.

[9] Baxandall, *Patterns of Intention*: 42.

[10] Steiner, 'Rights of Passage': 210.

[11] Chartier, 'Culture as Appropriation': 234–35.

meanings do not have to be either starting points or *post festum* interpretations.[12] Instead, they can be integral to a process of reception in which certain potential meanings resonated more or less strongly with individuals within the 'interpretive communities' that set the parameters of that meaning according to their engagement with contemporary discourses on images and magic.[13] In this sense, whether coincident or not, the perceptions of those who engaged with medieval figural spolia are neither more nor less significant than the (generally inaccessible) intentions of those who set them in place in primary or secondary contexts. There are of course chronological distinctions to be made, and tracing the points at which the meaning of cultural artifacts shifted is an essential counterbalance to the dangers of analytical ahistoricism. However, my own intention in this article is neither to construct chronologies nor taxonomies, but merely to draw attention to a phenomenon that was intrinsic to many medieval viewers' experience of the pre-modern city, and to offer some preliminary observations about its significance for the history of the image.

## Apotropaia and Talismans in the Medieval Islamic World

In Byzantium, the phenomenon by which the classical statuary and late antique monuments that dotted the urban landscape came to be seen as providing protection against both natural disasters (storms, earthquakes, inundations) and the predations of wild beasts and pests has long been a subject of scholarly interest. The apotropaiac and talismanic statues of Constantinople were mentioned in Arabic texts as early as the tenth century, and traditions concerning them and their ability to repel undesirable fauna survived the Ottoman conquest.[14]

Pre-Islamic public monuments, including statuary, also remained visible in many of the cities of the Islamic world well into the Middle Ages. These were often subsumed into the category of *'ajā'ib* (wonders) in medieval writings that deal with them, a category broadly congruent with that of *mirabilia*, into which the classical statuary of Constantinople

[12] Krautheimer, 'Introduction': 9.

[13] I am indebted here to Richard Davis' discussion of reader-response theory in his *Lives of Indian Images*: 8–10.

[14] Von Hammer, *Narrative of Travels*: 16–20; Wiet, *Les Atours Précieux*: 142; Izzedin, 'Un Prisonnier Arabe': 60.

was similarly placed in post-antique writings. As in Constantinople, the ascription of talismanic value to these traces of the past was common; the evidence from Syria is particularly rich in this regard. In medieval Damascus, for example, a number of classical or Byzantine monuments (generally ascribed to 'the Greeks', *al-yūnāniyyīn*) assumed a talismanic value by the eleventh or twelfth centuries, if not earlier. Among these was a stone column supporting a sphere that stood near the Umayyad Mosque until 563/1168–69, to which was attributed the somewhat bizarre ability to make any horse or donkey that circumambulated it three times urinate.[15] The presence of an identical talisman is reported in Aleppo.[16]

This process of re-inventing or re-imagining the material traces of the past is also witnessed in other Syrian cities. Writing in the eleventh century, the Persian traveller Nāṣir-i Khusrau reports that a column inscribed in a script other than Arabic (presumably Greek, Hebrew or Syriac) was placed at the city gate of Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān, where it functioned as a talisman against scorpions;[17] stones inscribed in scripts other than Arabic were also invested with talismanic properties in nearby Aleppo.[18] The identification of the column as a talisman locates it within a much wider cultural context, for while a minority of Islamic cities was possessed of inherent talismanic qualities that prevented the entry of snakes and scorpions, most were endowed with apotropaia and talismans against venomous pests. In Byzantium, classical statuary and bronze images of animals came to serve as apotropaia against a wide range of pests (from fleas, flies, mice, rats and snakes to turtles and even unruly horses).[19] In the Islamic world the range of animals against which protection was invoked was more limited, characterised by a consistent emphasis on snakes, scorpions, and birds (most often pigeons). By the twelfth century apotropaia and talismans were considered a sufficiently significant part of urban topography and sacred geography to merit a specific chapter in

[15] Sauvaire, 'Description de Damas': 202; Sauvaget, 'Le plan antique de Damas': 352n.; Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*: 46–47; al-Harawī, *Kitāb al-ishārāt*: 56; Sourdel-Thomine, *Guide des lieux de pèlerinage*: 36–37.

[16] Sauvaget, *Les Trésors d'or*: 1; Sauvaget, *Perles choisies*: 136; Gonnella, *Islamische Heiligenverehrung*: 128.

[17] Thackston, *Book of Travels*, 11.

[18] Sauvaget, *Les Trésors d'or*: 2–4; Sauvaget, *Perles choisies*: 137; Gonnella, *Islamische Heiligenverehrung*: 128.

[19] Mango, 'Antique Statuary': 61; Dulière, 'Protection Permanente': 253–54, 258–59; Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*: 40.

histories of major cities such as Damascus and Aleppo, and key public monuments within them.[20]

Visibility was important to the efficacy of these monumental apotropaia, as was their location. Those said to operate at the urban level were usually set on city gates, the threshold of urban space and a metonym for it. Whether deployed at the urban level or within individual monuments, the Arabic and Persian sources indicate that such devices were consistently (although not exclusively) placed at entrances. Their location here reflects the sensitivity of the threshold as both a synecdoche for the whole that it protects and a liminal zone within which the passage from exterior to interior was negotiated; in the pre-Islamic Near East the threshold was often singled out for protective imagery.[21] The repeated use of iron on city gates, and for the manufacture of some of the talismans that I mentioned earlier, may well reflect traditions concerning the ability of the metal to avert the jinn.[22] Typical in this regard is the description of the gates of the Yemeni city of Ṣan'ā' by the fourth/tenth-century historian al-Rāzī:

> Ṣan'ā' is surrounded with talismans against vipers and snakes, so that vipers and snakes can hardly harm anyone, and a person stung who has died from that has never been heard of ... One of these talismans is of iron and the other of brass (*ṣufr*) and they were hung on the gate of Ṣan'ā' town, the first, in the place known as al-Qaṣabah, was a thing made in the Jāhiliyyah (the pre-Islamic age), and one of them, it being of iron, is on the Bāb al-Miṣra'...[23]

The case of Ṣan'ā' is by no means unusual; on the contrary, most major cities in the Islamic world appear to have been provided with these features, whose efficacy was directly correlated with the health and well-being of the cities they protected. In the tenth century, the western Iranian city of Nihāvand was provided with the images of a bull and fish, which were said to prevent the entry of unwanted pests.[24] Similarly, the city gate of nearby Hamadhān bore the image (*ṣūra*) of a lion that functioned as a talisman to temper the extreme winter conditions that the city often

[20] Ibn 'Asākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*: 45–48; Elisséeff, *La Description de Damas*: 67–73; Sauvaget, *Les trésors d'or*: 1–5; Sauvaget, *Perles choisies*: 135–38.

[21] Kitzinger, 'Threshold of the Holy Shrine'; Spieser, 'Doors, Boundaries and the Use of Space'.

[22] Lane, *An Account of the Manners and Customs*: 223.

[23] Serjeant and Lewcock, *Ṣan'ā*: 487.

[24] Minorsky, *Abū-Dulaf Mis'ar ibn Muhalil's Travels*: 49.

faced, perhaps by the evoking the constellation of Leo, the home of the sun. This metrological talisman was flanked by talismans against snakes and scorpions.[25] The combination of lion, scorpion and/or snake is mentioned in al-Būnī's widely circulated thirteenth-century writings on magic and is also found on surviving amulets, seals and magic bowls from Egypt, the Levant and Iran from the tenth century onwards.[26]

All three Hamadhān talismans are ascribed to the artistry of Balīnūs (Apollonius of Tyana), whose status as the doyen of monumental talismans in the medieval Islamic world as well as in Byzantium is reflected in his designation as the 'lord of talismans' (*ṣāḥib al-tilasmāt*).[27] This interesting attribution not only extends the reported range of Apollonius' activities beyond the cities of Constantinople and Antioch with which Greek tradition associates him, but also even beyond the former territories of the Byzantine Empire and into neighbouring Iran.[28]

In addition to their placement at city gates, apotropaia might also be found at the thresholds of mosques and other public monuments. Among the *'ajā'ib* of Ḥimṣ in Syria, a bronze scorpion set on a cupola near the market in the city centre protected the entire city from scorpions; this was reported to be so efficacious that not only did snakes and scorpions never enter the city, but clothes washed in Ḥimṣ water acquired the ability to repel snakes and scorpions.[29] The bronze scorpion was reinforced by a second talisman that stood at the entrance to the Great Mosque, although some sources conflate the two. The latter reportedly consisted of a white stone bearing the image (*ṣūra*) of a man and scorpion or a man with a scorpion's tail; dissolved in water and consumed, clay with the impression of this image cured scorpion bites.[30] Here the architectural/urban talisman and the personal/portable amulet intersect, for

[25] Yaqūt, *Mu'jam al-Buldān*, vol. 5: 476, 479.

[26] Canaan, 'Arabic Magic Bowls': 101–105; Ittig, 'A Talismanic Bowl': 85–91; Savage-Smith, 'Amulets and Related Talismanic Objects': No. 80; Soucek, 'Early Islamic Seals': 250–52; and Porter, 'Islamic Seals': 185. A twelfth or thirteenth-century magic bowl with images of a lion, serpent, scorpion and dragon virtually identical to that published by Ittig recently appeared on the art market: Christie's, *Islamic Art, Indian Miniatures, Rugs and Carpets*, London, Tuesday, 25 April 1995: Lot No. 220.

[27] Ruska et al., 'Tilsam': 500; Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, vol. 1: 292–97; Dagron, *Constantinople imaginaire*: 107–15; Dulière, 'Protection permanente'.

[28] See also Kraus, *Jābir ibn Ḥayyān*, vol. 1: 295.

[29] Ibn Hawqal, *Kitāb Ṣūrat al-arḍ*, 176; Le Strange, *Palestine under the Moslems*: 357.

[30] Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm*: 186; Miquel, *Aḥsan at-Taqāsīm*: 231–32; Ibn al-Faqīh, *Kitāb al-Buldān*: 112; Massé, *Abrégé du Livre des Pays*: 136; Sourdel-Thomine, *Guide des Lieux*: 21; Canova, 'Serpenti e Scorpioni': 224.

al-Qalqashandī (d. 821/1418) reports that clay impressed with the image of this scorpion-man protected the house against the reptile; worn, it protected the wearer.[31]

While most apotropaia seem to have guarded the entrances to mosques, others were located within, close to areas in which pests might take up residence. These might better be described as talismans, since it is uncertain that they were intended to be visible, as was clearly the place with their counterparts at the entrances to cities and mosques.[32] The Great Mosque of Damascus had talismans against reptiles, pigeons, spiders and other creatures placed on or suspended from its ceiling, which some authors ascribe to Greek workmanship.[33] The following account occurs in Ibn ʻAsākir's history of Damascus, written before 571/1176:

> On the ceiling of the Great Mosque there are talismans that the wise have fixed there, at the intersection with the south wall, against swallows in order to prevent their entering, nesting and dirtying the mosque, and so that no crow enters; there is also a talisman against snakes, rats and scorpions. No beasts are seen in the mosque except rats, but perhaps the talismans have been altered. There is also a talisman against spiders so that they do not make their webs in the corners of the mosque and do not fill it with dust and dirt.[34]

Some of these were set in place to replace others destroyed in a disastrous fire in 461/1069, which is said to have heralded a proliferation of pests.[35] Such talismans were evidently considered effective, for the absence of birds, spiders and lizards from the mosque is frequently signalled by medieval visitors.[36] The same is noted of the Great Mosque of Aleppo, which was also provided with talismans designed to ward off birds.[37] Arabic sources note the existence of similar talismans in the

[31] Gaudefroy-Demombynes, *La Syrie*: 2–3.

[32] The boundaries between these categories are rather fluid, but see Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*: 4.

[33] Quatremère, *Histoire des Sultans:* 273–74; Ibn Ṣaṣrā, *Chronicle of Damascus*: Arabic text 120; English text 161.

[34] Ibn ʻAsākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*: 48; Elisséeff, *La Description de Damas*: 72–73. The proximity to the junction of wall and ceiling may reflect a belief, attested in other folk traditions, that this was a part of the building particularly susceptible to supernatural forces: Lauterbach, 'The Ceremony of Breaking a Glass': 357.

[35] Sauvaire, 'Description de Damas': 208; Ibn ʻAsākir, *Tārīkh Madīnat Dimashq*: 47.

[36] Dimashqī, *Nukhbat al-dahr*: 275.

[37] Sauvaget, *Les Trésors d'Or*: 27.

medieval churches of the Levant and Mesopotamia as an integral part of their component furnishings.[38]

The presence of these objects was not occasioned by the desire for physical prophylaxis alone, but also to obviate a threat of spiritual pollution predicated on a close relationship between zoology and demonology. Just as snakes and scorpions could symbolise evil in the Christian tradition of Byzantium,[39] in the *dār al-Islām* both chthonic creatures and those of the air were identified as potential avatars of certain classes of demons or jinn; numerous stories bear witness to the close affinities between jinn, reptiles, and even birds.[40] According to a tradition of the Prophet cited by Al-Damīrī (d. 808/1405) in his well-known bestiary, there are three categories of jinn: chthonic creatures such as snakes, scorpions and reptiles; those that resemble the wind; those that can assume human form. In another tradition cited by al-Qalyūbī (d. 988/1580), and often repeated by later authors, the jinn are said to fall into three classes, based on their physical appearance and characteristics: the first category of jinn resembles snakes, the second scorpions or black beetles, the third are those jinn who are similar to the winds.[41]

Medieval amulets, magic bowls and talismans underline the association between zoology and demonology, for they often function not just to ward off dangerous reptiles or other menaces, but to also avert illness (which was believed to render the body susceptible to the jinn) and the gaze of the evil eye.[42] The inclusion of snakes and scorpions in graphic depictions of the torments of hell, most notably those in the 840/1436 *Mirāj-Nāma* from Herat, is predicated not just on their ability to inflict physical pain through their bite and venom, but also on their demonic associations.[43] Because of these associations, snakes and serpents were believed to be ritually impure creatures, further charged with the ability

[38] Bosworth, *Book of Curious and Entertaining Information*: 119.

[39] Maguire, 'Cage of Crosses': 171; Saradi, 'Use of Ancient Spolia': 412.

[40] Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, vol. 1: 203–209; Fahd, 'Génies, Anges et Démons': 194–95; Fahd, 'Le Merveilleux': 125; Jayakar, *Ad-Damīrī's Ḥayāt al-Ḥayawān,* vol. 1: 449; Khawam, *Le Fantastique*: 81; Canova, 'Serpenti e Scorpioni': 199; Henninger, 'Spirits': 11.

[41] Khawam, *Le Fantastique*: 81.

[42] Combe et al., *Repertoire:* Nos. 3393–94; Farès, *Le Livre de la thériaque*: 32–33; Elgood, 'Tibb-ul-Nabi': 153; Ittig, 'A Talismanic Bowl': 83; Canova, 'Serpenti e Scorpioni': 224, figs. 6–7.

[43] Séguy, *The Miraculous Journey*: pl. 58. Cures for snake and scorpion bites often resemble a type of exorcism: Canova, 'Serpenti e scorpioni': 204. On the identity of snakes and scorpions see *ibid*.: 195–96.

to disrupt or interrupt prayer.[44] In addition to the obvious physical annoyance and potential dangers that birds, snakes, and scorpions might cause, prevention of their entry into a mosque was therefore doubly desirable, obviating the threat of both physical danger and spiritual pollution.

The physical appearance of the talismans deployed within medieval mosques is rarely dealt with in detail in the texts that mention them, but where specifics are available, they appear to have consisted of either texts or images, or combinations of the two. As in Byzantium, the ability of the image to protect against the imaged was often predicated on the principle that like repels like. The principle underlies the representation of snakes, scorpions and even birds on small-scale personal amulets and talismans from at least the tenth century onwards.[45] The power of images seems to have been exploited already in the early Islamic period: the house of one of the sons of Ziyād ibn Abīhi (d. 680), the Umayyad governor of Iraq, had menacing images of a ram, a dog and a lion painted at its entrance.[46]

A Latin version of Thābit ibn Qurra's third/ninth-century book on talismans informs the reader that in order to banish any animal, he should create a metal image of it at an astrologically appropriate time, then bury it or, for enhanced protection, bury one at each corner of the space that he sought to protect.[47] Analogous recipes for talismans against wild beasts are found among the Cairo Geniza:

> If you wish to expel from the city every dangerous wild animal, whether lion, or wolf, or bear, or leopard ... make a bronze image in the likeness of the one [which you desire to expel] and then make an iron *lamella* and write upon it, on the obverse and reverse, the names of the angels [of the seventh step] and bind it upon [the image] and bury it at the entrance of the city and let its face be facing north.[48]

[44] Canova, 'Serpenti e scorpioni': 195; Al-Damīrī, *Ḥayāt al-ḥayawān*, vol. 1: 257. It has been noted that in late antiquity demons and the demonic were integral to the maintenance of a system of boundaries and limits: Smith, 'Towards Interpreting Demonic Powers': 429.

[45] Kriss and Kriss-Heinrich, *Volksglaube im Bereich des Islam*, vol. 2: figs. 18–22. Images of snakes are still drawn upon the houses of Ṣana'ā' as talismans against snakes: Serjeant and Lewcock, *Ṣan'ā'*: 487.

[46] Wensinck-[Fahd], 'Ṣūra': 891. For analogies in the Hellenic world see Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*: 39.

[47] Burnett, 'Talismans: Magic as Science?': 13.

[48] Faraone, *Talismans and Trojan Horses*: 39–40.

Similarly, the talismans of Constantinople generally consisted of bronze images of the creatures that they repelled. Writing in the early thirteenth century, Niketas Choniates explains how the image of a bronze eagle with a snake in its claws that stood in the Hippodrome (one of the works attributed to Apollonius of Tyana) protected the city from snakes: 'It was said that the very sight of the snake uncoiled and incapable of delivering a deadly bite frightened away, by its example, the remaining serpents in Byzantion, convincing them to curl up and fill their holes'.[49] Medieval Arabic texts explain that the apotropaic power of the image derives from its ability to turn the fearsome qualities against which protection is invoked back upon the beast that possesses them. According to such explanations, the reciprocal gaze of image and imaged has two possible outcomes: first, the beast may flee in terror from its own representation; second, it may become so fixated by it that it is frozen into an immobility eventually resulting in death.[50]

The principle of *similia similibus curantur* that also underlies modern homoeopathic medicine underlay both prophylaxis and cure. This has a Biblical precedent: in *Numbers* 21: 4–9 beholding the image of the brazen serpent effects a cure for snake venom.[51] Just as medieval Arabic theriacs prescribed preparations of snake venom for the treatment of snakebite, images of snakes and scorpions in medieval magic cups contributed to their efficacy in counteracting the venom of these beasts.[52] This is not quite a case of like repelling like, for in all these cases the efficacy of the representation depends upon the elision of signifier and signified so that the inanimate image deters the animate beast that it represents, or neutralises its pernicious effects after exposure. In certain cases the image is even imbued with the power to transmit its protective qualities to objects that possess an indexical relationship to it. In his description of the Ḥimṣ

[49] Maguire, 'Profane Icons': 27; Dulière, 'Protection Permanente': 263. By the same token, representational talismans could be used to attract desirable creatures such as fish and birds to Constantinople: Dawkins, 'Antique Statues': 233.

[50] Wiet, *L'Égypte de Murtadi*: 72. See also Henninger, 'Spirits': 35.

[51] Joines, 'Bronze Serpent': 253.

[52] Farès, *Le Livre de la thériaque*; Ittig, 'Talismanic Bowl': 91, pl. 2: Lippincott and Pingree, 'Ibn al-Ḥātim and the Talismans': 64. The serpent column in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, which assumed the power of a talisman after the demise of the neighbouring bronze image of an eagle and serpent in the Crusader sack of 1204, was said to have both protective and curative powers, with snake venom sealed within it so that both image and poison worked in tandem: Madden, 'Serpent Column': 122–23. According to some earlier Byzantine sources, the talismanic properties of the images were activated by the insertion of inscriptions or specific substances: Mango, 'Antique Statuary': 61.

talisman, for example, the geographer al-Muqaddasī is at pains to emphasise that it is the impression (*ṭabʿ*) of the scorpion's image impressed upon the clay that is effective, not the clay itself.[53] The phenomenon points to a bodily engagement with the image that is also reported at other sites.

## Antiquity and Efficacy

Although both pre-Islamic inscriptions and plaques bearing Arabic texts were deployed for their talismanic value against snakes and scorpions,[54] the apotropaia and talismans that I have been discussing often consisted of reused pre-Islamic artifacts and images. According to al-Rāzī's description of the metal talismans against snakes on the gates of Ṣanʿāʾ, one of the two antedated Islam. The bronze scorpion talisman of Ḥimṣ may also represent a pre-Islamic survival, for during Byzantine control of the region a similar charm (a column bearing a bronze scorpion and mosquito) had stood in the centre of Antioch, another of the talismanic works ascribed to Apollonius of Tyana.[55] Descriptions of the hybrid man-scorpion at the entrance to the Great Mosque of the same city suggest that this carving too was a survival from the pre-Islamic period.[56]

Egypt provides the best documented examples of the phenomenon, for pharaonic material frequently survives at the thresholds of Mamluk and Ottoman monuments in Cairo, where it may have been intended to facilitate a performative iconoclasm by those entering the mosques.[57] Most of the spolia are found in religious buildings (mosques, madrasas, and *khanqahs*) rather than secular monuments, and their deployment may be related to the popularity of Hermetic traditions in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Cairo.[58] Some of pharaonic spolia reused in Alexandria and Cairo were also invested with apotropaic or talismanic properties, however, for according to medieval commentators the hieroglyphs of animals, birds and reptiles (including snakes and scorpions) carved upon

[53] Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-Taqāsīm*: 186.

[54] Collins and al-Tai, *The Best Divisions*: 169; Gonnella, *Islamische Heiligenverehrung*: 128–29.

[55] Dulière, 'Protection Permanente': 254, 258.

[56] Ibn al-Faqīh, *Kitāb al-Buldān*: 112; Sobernheim, 'Die inschriften': 238.

[57] Creswell, *Muslim Architecture of Egypt*, vol. 2: 101. For examples of reuse at thresholds see Meinecke-Berg, 'Spolien': pl. 12.

[58] Jakeman, *Abstract Art and Communication*: 115–55.

these stones imbued them with the ability to ward off these creatures.[59] In tenth-century Giza, a stone carved with the images of crocodiles was said to fulfill an apotropaic function, for example, banishing these reptiles from its vicinity.[60] Similarly, an early thirteenth-century Armenian writer, Abū Saliḥ, tells us that a fragment of black granite, 'upon which were figures carved and painted in the style of those ancient temples' was placed at the threshold of the church of St. Onuphrius in Cairo to prevent the entry of birds; the presence of similar spolia at the entrance to the Mosque of Khayrbak (927/1520–1; see Figures 1 and 2) is ascribed to their ability to prevent the entry of flies and insects.[61] The same source tells of a pharaonic temple at Aswan on which the image of a serpent was carved; on certain days, children who touched the image became living talismans, capable of protecting their family from scorpion bite.[62] The ability to transmit the power of the image through the possession of an indexical relationship to it recalls the celebrated scorpion talisman of Ḥimṣ in Syria.[63]

**Figure 1**
***Mosque of Khayrbak, Cairo, Black Granite Threshold Slab***

[59] Wiet, *Les Atours Précieux*: 132–33; Parker et al., *Islamic Monuments in Cairo*: 96; Heiden, 'Pharaonische Baumaterialien': 61.

[60] Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*: 211; Wiet, *Les Atours précieux*: 81; Wiet, *L'Égypte de Murtadi*: 74; Collins and al-Tai, *The Best Divisions*: 193.

[61] Evetts, *The Churches and Monasteries of Egypt*: 111–12; Parker et al., *Islamic Monuments in Egypt*: 96.

[62] Evetts, *The Churches and Monasteries* of Egypt: 275; Becker, 'Assuan': 492.

[63] Al-Muqaddasī, *Aḥsan al-taqāsīm*: 186; Collins and al-Tai, *The Best Divisions*: 169.

**Figure 2**
***Mosque of Khayrbak, Cairo, Detail of Threshold Slab with Hieroglyphics***

Although proscriptions on figuration in Islam were often observed more in the breach than the observance, mosques in most part of the Islamic world were devoid of anthropomorphic and zoomorphic imagery; stone elements bearing such images were therefore restricted to exterior locations.[64] Nevertheless, there are exceptions. The historian al-Maqrīzī (d. 1442) relates that al-Azhar Mosque (360/970 onwards) had three capitals carved with the images of birds, which acted as a talisman to prevent pigeons and other birds nesting in the mosque. A number of reused Byzantine capitals bearing the images of eagles are still to be seen in al-Azhar (now decapitated in accord with the prescriptions for rendering images acceptable), but it is difficult to know whether they were set in place as talismans or were identified as such after their installation.[65] In certain cases, however, the manner of reuse and the existence of an established tradition of pharaonic talismans within which to locate it suggest that the ascription of talismanic value was central to the act of reuse. In the Mosque of Uthmān Kathkudā in Cairo (1147/1734) a pharaonic sarcophagus has been re-carved so that the image of a snake that it bore now precisely fills the lintel above the entrance.[66] The location, the care taken to rework the image, and the abundant evidence for the investment of pharaonic material reused in earlier Cairene monuments with apotropaic or talismanic value all point to an attempt to harness the power of image.

In light of this widespread tendency to attribute apotropaic properties to reused antique figural reliefs, one might consider the possibility that at least some of the reused zoomorphic spolia that survive around the window- or door-openings of medieval mosques even outside of Egypt functioned as talismans or apotropaia similar to those mentioned in medieval texts. Among the many examples one might cite is a defaced Byzantine marble slab once carved with peacocks and eight other birds set above a window on the eastern façade of the Great Mosque of Sfax in Tunisia, a pendant to the foundation text that gives a date of 378/988 in a corresponding position in the adjoining window.[67] Comparable examples may be found as far afield as the Great Mosque of Ṣan‘ā’ in Yemen, whose exterior walls seem to date from the eighth century.

[64] For exceptions see Flood, ‘Between Cult and Culture’: 644.

[65] Barrucand, ‘Les Chapiteaux’: 50. For the prescriptions on figuration see Flood, ‘Between Cult and Culture’: 644.

[66] Heiden, ‘Die symbolische Verwendung’.

[67] Marçais and Golvin, *Le grande Mosquée de Sfax*: 36–39, fig. 18.

Although pre-Islamic spolia was used in the mosque's construction, the only figural spolia are set around the exterior of the *qibla* entrances, the oldest of the mosque's entrances. These include two images of paired pigeons or doves (perhaps reused from the destroyed Christian cathedral of the city, and now decapitated: see Figures 3 and 4), as well as paired pre-Islamic bas-reliefs of bulls and birds that flank the main *qibla* gate.[68] It has been noted that 'their symbolism is difficult to explain', but they may well have been intended as apotropaia. In addition to the birds, which are identified as apotropaia in other contexts, the deployment of a bull image to deter unwanted pests from entering the city of Nihavānd in Iran increases this likelihood. Further detailed research on a regional basis could no doubt extend the number and range of surviving examples, but as far west as al-Andalus antique figural reliefs and statuary associated with the pre-Islamic past were often invested with apotropaic or talismanic value.[69]

**Figure 3**
***Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā', One Pair of Reliefs Flanking Gate seen in Figure 4 (courtesy Ellen Kenney)***

[68] Serjeant and Lewcock, *Ṣan'ā'*: 340, 342–43, figs. 18.52 and 18.54.
[69] Basset, 'Hercule et Mahomet'. See also Pancaroğlu, 'Signs in the Horizons'.

**Figure 4**
***Great Mosque of Ṣan'ā', a General View of Gate in Northern Wall***
***(courtesy Ellen Kenney)***

The frequency with which this occurred suggests that the perceived antiquity of these images may have enhanced their efficacy. Just as in Constantinople, there are reasons for thinking that, for those with sufficient wisdom or knowledge, the potentially dangerous powers of antique images and reliefs or the demons/jinn associated with them could be pressed into service to avert the evil/harm associated with the creatures that they represented. In the case of images of snakes and scorpions, and perhaps even birds, the demonic associations of the represented beasts, might have been enhanced by their role as mysterious fragments of a remote antiquity imbued with supernatural powers. This 'antiquity effect' is palpable in the ascription of talismanic value to the antique statuary in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, as Sarah Bassett has noted:

> While statues of gods and goddesses were understood as patrons of racers and races, images of wild animals such as the hyena and mythical creatures such as the sphinx were employed for their more general apotropaic value. Such creatures were believed to be evil in and of themselves. Captured and

> harnessed in a civilized setting such as the Hippodrome, their own nefarious powers were turned loose against the very forces which had spawned them.[70]

Henry Maguire has detected a similar phenomenon in the redeployment of antique reliefs on the façade of the 'Little Metropolis' Church in Athens in the late twelfth/early thirteenth century. In his reading of the decorative scheme, Maguire sees the placing of reused images of wild beasts among crosses inscribed in circles not only as an attempt to neutralise the destructive force of the represented beasts and their associated demons, but as advertising the Christian ability 'to harness potentially destructive forces and to use them to destroy evil.'[71] Maguire traces this exploitation of the image and its properties to the post-Iconoclastic period in Byzantium, when allegorical representations of the divinity were discouraged and zoomorphic representations assumed the role of 'profane icons' transmitting the power of the prototype in a manner comparable to the operation of religious images:

> Depictions of fierce creatures had ceased to be merely metonymic signs of the terrestrial world or metaphorical symbols of the deity, but became, in effect, profane icons, capable of projecting the natural forces that they both evoked and invoked ... like the holy icons, the images of beasts and raptors were 'alive' with the presences that they summoned.[72]

For the most part, contact with religious icons was not a part of the experience of images in medieval Islamic cities, however. Yet, there are striking parallels with the transformation of classical and late antique sculptures into apotropaia and talismans in the cities of the Islamic eastern Mediterranean and in medieval Byzantium. These include the nature of the zoomorphic spolia involved, and a belief in their ability to negate the very things they signified. In many cases, their effective powers appear to have derived from (or been enhanced by) their previous status as representations within an earlier system of signification, located in a dim and somewhat mysterious pagan antiquity. The process of turning the antique inanimate signifier against the living signified figures a kind of conceptual iconoclasm. In this sense, it has something in common with the revolutionary notion of *détournement* championed by Guy Debord and

[70] Bassett, 'The Antiquities in the Hippodrome': 89.
[71] Maguire, 'Cage of Crosses': 172. See also Saradi, 'Use of Ancient Spolia': 409–11.
[72] Maguire, 'Profane Icons': 30–32.

the Situationists in 1960s France. *Détournement* is the process by which images (for Debord, particularly authoritative or hegemonic images) were re-presented through a process of physical manipulation in a manner that subverted the authority of the sign, and ultimately the relationship between signifier and signified itself.[73] Like the pre-modern treatment of spolia discussed earlier, *détournement* was often achieved by deploying fragments and quotations appropriated from larger antecedent works. Despite the radically different cultural contexts in which they arose, both endeavours can be seen as attempts to order the world of images and signs: in one case to impose an order on potentially threatening vestiges of the past, in another to reorder politically problematic instantiations of the present. Both undertakings provide a final reminder that neither the function nor meanings of images are fixed, but dynamically constructed and susceptible to change.

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[73] Debord, 'Methods of Détournement'.

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