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From Icon to Coin: Potlatch, Piety, and Idolatry in Medieval Islam

From Christian polemicists through Arab chroniclers and Swiss Reformists to French Revolutionaries, the rallying cry "monument of vanity destroyed for utility" has been a constant in the textual, verbal and visual polemics of iconoclasm.[1] The monuments in question were not always architectural, but often also comprised artifacts fashioned from metal. The mutability of metal, and the value afforded gold and silver in particular has ensured that metal artifacts are frequently targeted during periods of social upheaval. Standard interpretations of these phenomena generally emphasize economic, political or religious motivations, ignoring the fact that so far as pre-modern ritual practice is concerned, "aesthetic, economic, and pious gestures do not inhabit entirely separate universes."[2]

As a way of interrogating the intersections between pre-modern moral and visual economies, I want to focus here on attitudes to precious metals and their fashioning in Islam. It is well known that the principle textual source for proscriptions on figuration in Islam is not the Qur'an but the *ahadith*, the Traditions of the Prophet Muhammad. The critiques of figuration that these contain are characterized by a palpable concern with the allure of materiality, its ability to enchant and seduce. Less often remarked is the fact that the proscriptions on images are mirrored by those regulating the use of silken garments and gold or silver vessels. Moreover, historical spectacles of image destruction in the Islamic world have invariably included all *three* classes of object, suggesting that the problem of figuration is in fact epiphenomenal, symptomatic of larger concerns about value that include not only facture or figuration but also materiality and social function. The notion is not unfamiliar in our age, when iconoclastic interventions

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[1] See Dario Gamboni, *The Destruction of Art: Iconoclasm and Vandalism since the French Revolution* (London and New York, 2007), 35.

[2] Anthony Cutler, "Gifts and Gift Exchange as Aspects of the Byzantine, Arab, and Related Economies," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 55 (2001): 250.

often articulate a critique of the artwork and its social status through devaluation or, more strictly, revaluation.[3] My case study lies a long way from twentieth-century Europe, however, since it concerns not valorized icons of modernism, but Hindu and Buddhist metal icons or idols looted from Afghanistan and northwest India in the ninth century, during the heyday of the 'Abbasid caliphate of Baghdad.

The linkage between gold and idolatry is common to Christian, Jewish and Islamic tradition – most obviously in the story of the golden calf, which highlights the mutability of metal as both a potential source of idolatry and a solution to it – and depictions of idolatry in Islamic art invariably show its objects as both anthropomorphic and golden. The association between India, religious images and gold was particularly well established in the Islamic world from the eighth century, when the eastward expansion of the 'Abbasid caliphate brought Muslims into direct contact with the Buddhist and Hindu populations of north India. During the ninth through eleventh centuries, select objects of Indian exotica acquired through the military exploits of eastern governors were routinely dispatched to Baghdad, linking the ideal political center of the medieval Sunni world, Baghdad, with regional centers of authority in the east (Sistan, Sind, Kabul, Ghazna), and manifesting narratives of conquest, incorporation, and Islamization.

As exotic gifts, looted Indian images entered complex redistributive networks geared towards the accumulation and circulation of symbolic capital.[4] This phenomenon reflects growing internal tensions in the Baghdad caliphate during the ninth and tenth centuries, when powerful eastern governors exercised de facto power, but depended on the 'Abbasid caliph in Baghdad to confer upon them the trappings of legitimacy, usually in the form of insignia such as robes of honor, patents of investiture, and honorific titles. In 250/864, for example, a number of idols were among the Afghan exotica (including elephants) sent from Kabul by Muhammad ibn Tahir ibn

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[3] We might bear in mind here Baudrillard's comparison between the fixed reserve of paintings in a museum that underwrites the sign exchange of paintings and the gold in a bank that facilitates the circulation of capital: Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St. Louis, 1981), 121; discussed by W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago, 1986), 203.

[4] For a full discussion see Finbarr Barry Flood, *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval "Hindu-Muslim" Encounter* (Princeton, 2009), 26-37.

'Abdallah, the governor of eastern Iran, who received in return an embassy bringing formal insignia of caliphal investiture.[5]

Of particular interest is the way in which Indian icons were deployed during the same period by the brothers Yaq'ub ibn Layth and 'Amr ibn Layth al-Saffar, parvenus who came to governor Sistan in southern-Afghanistan. During their heyday between roughly 867 and 901, the Saffarids extended their control over much of the eastern Islamic lands, even going so far as to pose a significant threat to the Baghdad caliphate itself. The brothers regularly sent gifts of Indian booty, including Buddhist and Hindu statues, to Baghdad. Accounts of those sent to the caliph in 283/896 by 'Amr ibn Layth provide a rare insight into the peregrinations of looted images, and a sense of the interest that their display aroused. The earliest account of these images is contained in a tenth-century Arabic text, but the most detailed description of their reception is preserved in a slightly later source, *The Book of Gifts and Rarities*, an eleventh-century Egyptian compendium of royal gift exchanges:

> In the year 283 [896] 'Amr ibn Layth sent [the caliph] a gift including a brass idol representing a woman with four arms wearing two sashes studded with precious stones, together with small idols, on whose faces were gemstones. The companions of 'Amr had seized them in one of the seaports and they sent them to [the caliph] after having publicly displayed them in Basra. In Baghdad [the idols] were displayed for days at the police headquarters so that people could see them. They were called 'the distraction' (*shugl*) because people became so engrossed in looking at them.

The gifts arrived at the southern Iraqi port of Basra by the maritime route from India. Upon their arrival in the capital, the gifts were first taken to the caliphal palace, then to the prefecture of police in the east of the city, a choice of location that reflects the fact that their donor was the former police chief of Baghdad. Here they were put on show for three days. The intense public interest that the idol aroused is indicated by the nickname that it acquired on account of the crowds that it drew: *shugl* (Distraction).[6]

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[5] George Saliba, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 35: *The Crisis of the 'Abbasid Caliphate* (Albany, 1985), 27.

[6] Ghada al-Hijjawi al-Qaddumi, *Book of Gifts and Rarities, Kitāb al-Hadāyā wa al-Tuḥaf* (Cambridge, Ma., 1996), 88. For the Arabic text see Ahmad ibn al-Rasid ibn al-Zubayr, *Kitāb al-dhakā'ir wa'l-tuḥaf* (Kuwait, 1959), 44-5. For earlier accounts see 'Ali Abu'l-Hasan al-Mas'udi, *Murūj al-dhahab wa mada'adin al-jawhar*. 9 volumes, ed. and trans.

The protracted multi-stage travels of the idol as it traveled from southern Afghanistan to Basra and thence to Baghdad, where it oscillated between immurement in the palace of the caliph and ritualized display in the locus of the donor's authority provides a graphic illustration of the manner in which Indian loot negotiated the often fraught relationships between centre and periphery. In this case, the endeavor was successful, for one year later, in 284/897, the caliph reciprocated 'Amr ibn Layth's gift with robes of honor and a patent of investiture.[7] The exchange offers an example of what Pierre Bourdieu has termed the "alchemy of symbolic exchanges," the interconvertibility of economic and symbolic capital that characterizes a gift economy.[8]

In many cases, the circulation of looted icons not only mediated the disjunction between different (and competing) centers of political authority, but also their geographical dislocation from Mekka, the spiritual center of the Islamic world. In the spring of 257/871, for example, fifty gold and silver idols (*but*) looted from the Kabul region were dispatched from Kirman in eastern Iran to Samarra, the 'Abbasid capital in central Iraq, as gifts to the new caliph al-Mu'tamid from the Saffarid amir Ya'qub ibn Layth, brother of 'Amr.[9] In this case, however, the donor exploited the malleability andmutability of precious metals, requesting that the precious metal icons be forwarded from Samarra to Mekka, where they were to be melted down and distributed for the welfare of its people, despite their association with the unbelievers.[10]

The destruction and distribution of the material image can be understood as a type of potlatch that, like all potlatch ceremonies, accumulated symbolic capital for the donor by 'liberating' accumulated wealth formerly occluded

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C. Barbier de Meynard and Pavet de Courteille (Paris, 1861-1877), vol. 4: 148-9; David Waines, *The History of al-Tabari*, vol. 36: *The Revolt of the Zanj* (Albany, 1992), 265.

7 Abu Sa'id 'Abd al-Hayy ibn al-Dahhak ibn Mahmud Gardizi, *Kitāb Zāyn al-Akhbār*, ed. Muhammad Nazim (London, 1928), 17.

8 Pierre Bourdieu, "Marginalia: Some Additional Notes on the Gift," in *The Logic of the Gift: Toward an Ethic of Generosity*, ed. A. D. Schriftpp. (New York, 1997), 235.

9 Clifford Edmund Bosworth, *The History of the Saffarids of Sistan and the Maliks of Nimruz (247/861 to 949/1542-3)* (New York and Costa Mesa, 1994), 101, 105-6, 216. Bamiyan had also been raided in the same year: Gardizi, *Kitāb Zāyn al-Akhbār*, 11.

10 Anonymous, *Tārīkh-i Sistān*, ed. Malik al-Shu'ara Taqi Bahar (Tehran, 1955 [1314]), 216; Milton Gold, *The Tārīkh-e Sistān* (Rome, 1976), 171-2. Ibn al-Nadim states categorically that these were from Bamiyan: Bayard Dodge, trans., *The Fihrist of al-Nadīm: A Tenth-century Survey of Muslim Culture*, 2 vols. (New York, 1970), vol. 2, 829.

from circulation.[11] Here, however, the generation of symbolic capital is intrinsically linked to the 'liberation' of accumulated metal for utilitarian purposes according to a quite specific understanding of the moral and social function of precious metals.

Like silken garments, gold and silver are subject to sumptuary taboos in Islam. These are only partially related to a rejection of luxury. Used in ways that inhibit their natural function, gold and silver are themselves capable of assuming the status of idols whether fashioned into potentially animate forms or not. The Persian philosopher al-Ghazali (d. 505/1111) expresses a common view among the jurists when he explains that gold and silver are inherently worthless stones, whose value derives from their ability to mediate exchange, to facilitate dynamic social interactions rather than static accumulation.[12] Value is not therefore located in the metals themselves, rather they function as a sign of value, "a hypostatized abstraction" comparable to the paper notes of a modern monetized economy.[13] To accumulate or hoard gold and silver is to confuse the sign of value with value *per se*, a category mistake that displaces value from the mediating function (the use value) on to the medium itself. This displacement constitutes what, in modern terms, is an act of fetishism.

In his discussion of wealth in general and gold in particular, al-Ghazali makes the point by invoking the figure of Abraham, the Ur-monotheist and an implacable opponent of his people's idolatrous ways:

> The Prophet Abraham prayed; 'O God, save me and my successors from idol worship' [Qur'an 14:35]. By this he meant the worship of gold and silver, as gold and silver are deities of people. ... The Prophet said: 'The

[11] Georges Bataille. *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, vol. 1: *Consumption*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York, 1988), 68-9, 71, 75-6; Thomas Crow, *The Intelligence of Art* (Chapel Hill, N.C., 1999), 41-50.

[12] Muhammad ibn Muhammad al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm-ud-Din (The Revival of Religious Learnings)*, trans. al-Haj Maulana Fazal-ul-Karim (Lahore, n. d.), Book 3: The Book of Destructive Evils, 95-6. For similar ideas in early modern Europe see Rebecca Zorach, *Blood, Milk, Ink, Gold: Abundance and Excess in the French Renaissance* (Chicago and London, 2005), 90-1.

[13] Jean-Joseph Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud* (Ithaca, 1990), 49-50; Webb Keane, "Money is no Object: Materiality, Desire, and Modernity in an Indonesian Society," in *The Empire of Things: Regimes of Value and Material Culture*, ed. Fred R. Myers (Santa Fe, 2001), 65-90, 79.

> owners of gold are ruined and the owners of silver are ruined'. So it appears that he who loves gold and silver, worships stones and idols.[14]

Casting gold and silver into object form, hoarding, and thesaurization are modes of fetishism that frustrate their natural function as media of exchange and thus constitute them as objects of idolatry. The author of the *Baḥr al-Favā'id* (*Sea of Precious Virtues*), a Persian example of the 'Mirrors for Princes' genre of literature that flourished during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, explains that:

> Kings who use golden censers, vessels, and cups wrong both themselves and their subjects; they bring perdition on themselves and cause a scarcity of gold among the people. The trade of one who makes these (vessels) is unlawful. This has been made unlawful because gold and silver were created to serve as the prices of things and in payment for property. When people make them into vessels, imprison them and put them in treasuries, how can they determine fines and fix prices?[15]

Islamic polemics on idolatry and images are thus located within a broader theory of value characterized by a general valorization of consumption and circulation over accumulation, and a specific emphasis on the need for gold and silver to circulate in order to fulfill their natural function as instruments for the regulation of value.[16]

Some authorities go so far as to proscribe the embellishment of mosques and gilding of the Qur'an, the text of which specifically forbids the hoarding of gold and silver and its expenditure in ways that do not advance the cause of righteousness. Similarly, the jurist Ibn Qudama (d. 1223) insists that gold and silver lamps donated to a mosque must be smashed, and their value used in its upkeep and repair.[17] This resonates with the treatment of other

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[14] Al-Ghazali, *Iḥyā' al-'Ulūm-ud-Din*, Book 3, 216.

[15] Julie Scott Meisami, *The Sea of Precious Virtues (Baḥr al-Favā'id): A Medieval Islamic Mirror for Princes* (Salt Lake City, 1991), 143.

[16] See Flood, *Objects of Translation*, 34-36 and idem., *Islam and Image; Aniconism, Iconoclasm, and the Representational Economy* (London, forthcoming).

[17] G. H. A. Juynboll, "The Attitude towards Gold and Silver in Early Islam," in *Pots and Pans: A Colloquium on Precious Metals and Ceramics in the Muslim, Chinese and Graeco-Roman Worlds*, ed. Michael Vickers, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art 3 (Oxford, 1985), 113. The malleability of precious metals implied in this prescription was routinely exploited in the medieval Islamic world. For example, some of the golden ornaments of the Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem (72/692), themselves originally derived from melted gold coins, were remonetized following an earthquake in 141/758-9 when funds were required to restore the adjacent Aqsa Mosque: Amikam Elad, "Why

'idolatrous' objects - including Yaq'ub ibn Layth's stipulation in 871 that the looted Afghan idols 'gifted' to the caliph should be rematerialized and distributed to the poor of Mekka. The phenomenon also obviates any clear distinction between the objects of Hindu and Muslim 'idolatry'.

The quantity of gold amassed by pagan rulers is, however, a topos of medieval Arabic and Persian texts, in which India is figured as an economic vortex drawing western gold out of circulation and into royal and temple treasuries, which represent the massed accumulation of unproductive capital.[18] The investment of precious metals in the fashioning of idols represents a specifically egregious instance of an Indian fondness for accumulation, one which is doubly idolatrous: instancing both the sin of hylotheism, the confusion of a transcendental God with matter, and a fetishization of materiality that displaces value from the mediating function of precious metals onto the materials themselves. Within this view, idol worship in general and Indian iconolatry in particular are manifestations of a phenomenon that is not confined to form, figuration, or even materiality but also encompasses intention, practice and use.

Since precious metals are not intrinsically corrupt, however, but become so as the result of improper usage, they are susceptible of rehabilitation and recuperation. Just as display and recontextualization of looted Hindu and Buddhist images effects a demystification of the sacred – revealing to public view what was previously sacrosanct – the act of putting the precious metals back into circulation inverts the sacralization of wealth by its immurement in temple treasuries. Similarly, the distribution of 'imprisoned' capital for investment in the foundational materials of the faith establishes effects the ultimate 'translation' of the alien idols – their transmutation into mosques and Muslims, the very materials of the self.

The consumption of the gold and silver 'imprisoned' in Indian idols in the service of Islam (ether by distributing the metals among the Muslim poor

did 'Abd al-Malik Build the Dome of the Rock?," in *Bayt Al-Maqdis: 'Abd al-Malik's Jerusalem*, ed. J. Raby and J. Johns, Oxford Studies in Islamic Art, vol. 9, part 1 (Oxford, 1992), 37. Similarly, in 251/865, some of the gold with which the sanctuary of Mekka was embellished was stripped and coined to help finance the suppression of a rebellion: Ahmad ibn Abi Ya'qub al-Ya'qubi, *Ta'rīkh*, ed. T. Houtsma, 2 vols. (Leiden, 1969 [1883]), vol. 2, 544.

[18] J.F. Richards, "Outflows of Precious Metals from Early Islamic India," in *Precious Metals in the Later Medieval and early Medieval World*, ed. J. F. Richards (Durham, 1983), 183-4, 189; Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, *Perso-Arabic Sources of Information on the Life and Conditions in the Sultanate of Delhi* (New Delhi, 1992), 135.

or using them to build mosques) can be understood as a practical critique of idolatry that exploited the iconicity, indexicality and the materiality of its objects. In this sense, the practice has much in common with the 'economy of piety' that Lee Wandel has noted in her study of religious practice in sixteenth-century Zurich.[19] For the reformists of that city, even non-representational objects could be identified as idols by virtue of their relationship to a Christian economy in which raw materials were to circulate "for the maintenance of the human community and not the stone and wooden, the inanimate and artificial, cold and fixed images in the churches." In sixteenth-century Zurich, church lamps ("the idols that eat oil") were a particular target not only for their inherent materiality but for their ability to consume church monies.[20] Within the economy of piety, idolatry was not characterized by facture or figuration alone, but also by the privileging of static accumulation over circulation, the use of material resources for the embellishment of inert icons rather than the sustenance of living believers.

This linkage between pre-modern economies, moralities, and polities does not, however, account for the extraordinarily enthusiastic reception afforded the four-armed Afghan idol by the populaces of Basra and Baghdad in 283/896. In a recent discussion of idolatry and the fetish W. J. T. Mitchell observed that

> bad objects ... are not simply bad in some straightforward moral sense. They are objects of ambivalence and anxiety that can be associated with fascination as easily as with aversion.[21]

The reception of looted Indian idols as they circulated between different regimes of value underlines this ambivalence. 'Distraction' (Ar. *shugl*), the nickname afforded the four-armed idol sent to Baghdad from Sistan in 283/896, resonates with contemporary discourses of idolatry, in which the ability of precious metals to deceive and distract is consistently related to their glittering surface appearance.[22] Indeed, their ability to distract the

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[19] Lee Palmer Wandel, *Voracious Idols and Violent Hands: Iconoclasm in Reformation Zurich, Strasbourg, and Basel* (Cambridge, 1994), 97-98, 100.

[20] Ibidem, 70. See also David Freedberg, "The structure of Byzantine and European iconoclasm," in *Iconoclasm. Papers given at the Ninth Spring Symposium of Byzantine Studies, University of Birmingham, March 1975*, ed. Anthony Bryer and Judith Herrin (Birmingham, 1977), 168.

[21] W.J.T. Mitchell, *What do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago, 2005), 158.

[22] Goux, *Symbolic Economies: After Marx and Freud* (Ithaca, 1990), 28.

worshiper from prayer is among the reasons given for stripping golden lamps and gilded décor from mosques during the eighth through tenth centuries.[23]

To read reports of the statue's reception in this light alone is, however, to privilege the proscriptive discourses of the '*ulamā*', the religious classes, over the gaze of the Baghdad citizenry and its embodied response to what was clearly regarded as a marvel. Accounting for the slippage between categories revealed by the icon's reception, Stephen Greenblatt's distinction between *resonance* - the ability of the displayed object to reach out to the viewer and represent larger cultural forces and spaces "from which it has emerged and for which it may be taken by a viewer to stand" – and *wonder* – "the power of the displayed object to stop the viewer in his or her tracks" - are equally relevant.[24] In this sense, *shugl* not only denotes the distraction from the routines of daily life afforded by this ritualized display of Afghan icons/idols, but also connotes the rapt attention that they evoked in the citizens of Baghdad. The reception of these images thus opens up a space between the figurative and literal reduction of idolatry and its objects, pointing to more ambivalent and expansive practices of response to religious images. These practices complicate the idea of the golden idol as a sign of fundamental incommensurability, lurching between adoration and denigration as it circulated from east to west.

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[23] Finbarr B. Flood, *The Great Mosque of Damascus: Studies on the Makings of an Umayyad Visual Culture* (Leiden, 2001), 242. For a detailed discussion of the underlying debates on ornament and materiality see Finbarr Barry Flood, *Islam and Image: Aniconism, Iconoclasm, and the Economy of Representation* (London, forthcoming).

[24] Stephen Greenblatt, "Resonance and Wonder," in *Exhibiting Cultures: the Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*, ed. Ivan Kapr and Steven D. Lavine (London and Washington, 1991), 42-56, 42; Richard H. Davis, *Lives of Indian Images* (Princeton, 1997), 9.

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