Chapter 6

A Literary Abode for the Throne

Kai and Kawus to the winds are gone:
And where is Solomon's high-splendoured throne?

Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ-i Shīrāzī, Dīwān, ghazal 101

The nostalgic yet highly rhetorical ubi sunt, evoked in Ḥāfiẓ’s dīwān, raises for the historian an interesting question: where, indeed, has the Solomonic throne gone? This could be a way of asking where the story of its wandering ends. As with any other historical phenomenon, even the concerns regarding kingship and its representation may vary through time and space and there are moments where a certain visual or ideal paradigm ceases to exert its full power and, somehow, decays, thus falling apparently into oblivion. It is then substituted with a new or different one that can better respond to the mutated historical or political circumstances. The throne of Solomon has resonated with the greatest strength roughly from the sixth through to the thirteenth centuries, and the choice to resort to such a model originally depends, as we have seen, on dynamics that were already at play during Late Antiquity. However, despite having such a relatively short timespan, it did resonate far and wide, encompassing a broad geographical area and varying cultural contexts.

At the end of this book, in fact, we are confronted with a peculiar situation: a scenario where Jewish rabbis are subjected to the fascination of Byzantine rulers, who, in turn, are in dialogue both with Christian and Muslim ambassadors, where Christian bishops are inspired by Muslim caliphs, whose courtly tales are very similar to certain Jewish legends. We cannot therefore deny a certain unity or, at least, a continuity of interest through time and space, broadly shared for several centuries in the Mediterranean world. What this analysis has shown is that, whether altered or appropriated, certain constituting elements of the throne of Solomon were never really obliterated; on the contrary, they could be found in contexts very far away from each other, an indirect sign of their vitality and persistence in medieval imagery.

The acknowledgement of such a factor, however, does not necessarily imply a political unity. It is often the clash between foreign or opposed powers that helps to create this common ground for the sharing of these traditions. In other words, a certain degree of cultural unity is achieved, during the Middle
Ages, thanks to strong political rivalries. We can therefore recognize a certain set of recurring features, despite the political disruption of its geopolitical uniformity, since, as we have seen, there seems to be an ongoing dialogue among élites interested in asserting their status in opposition to other sovereigns.

Such a migration of themes and motifs, moreover, has been made possible by a deep interchange at an oral level, deeply informing the societies that I have described during this work. An element of relevance for my discussion has in fact been the importance of storytelling, broadly meant as the interest for passing on descriptions of distant wonders, built or devised in a different milieu. Beside the world of courtly luxury, we also need to imagine a deep level of interactions occurring at the market place among artisans producing for the local cathedral, at corners of roads where people met, in the caravans travelling in the deserts, through the sermons of preachers or the tales of minstrels. It is also through the amazed words of people that it is possible to perpetuate the memory of beautiful things.

There is no single throne of Solomon in this book; there are, instead, the various reshappings of it, filtered through written, biased, interpolated, unreliable sources. And since there is no physical throne of Solomon, one could wonder what it is that we have really been looking at.

What I have attempted to reconstruct, then, as a way of methodological case-study has been the rise and decline of a cultural paradigm, particularly emblematic in my view, since the Solomonic throne has acted as a magnet for a cluster of visual elements and topoi regarding kingship – thus providing a synthesis of political motifs, often translated at a visual level – that had been in circulation for centuries in various historical phases and geographical areas: the association of the sovereign with the power to bestow fertility (that is, golden trees); the idea of flight or apotheosis and the consequent lingering among two worlds (flying or rising throne); the control over the elements of the cosmos (weather, time, jinns, etc.), paralleled and made explicit by the ability to imitate nature through technology (automata); the importance of ruling over a vast territory; of building cities; of commissioning crafted objects; and of exerting perfect justice. The medieval Solomon, particularly the one described in the first chapters, represents a knot of all these threads, a precipitate of all these elements.

It is tempting to observe in this story a sort of conservation law at play: in a closed system, such as that constituted by the koiné of rulers that I have been describing throughout this work, there is no real loss of traditions between Late Antiquity (or even before) and the Middle Ages, but only a series of successive transformations and reshaping of ancient concerns.

The vitality of such a process, I think, has appeared evident throughout the book, where, in a game of constant imitation, the description of the throne, based