Much has been written about the presence of Far Eastern porcelain at the Ottoman court and in Safavid Iran, as well as its impact in European palaces and houses from the seventeenth century onwards. Virtually nothing, however, has been published about the existence of Japanese and Chinese porcelain in Morocco. In particular, Imari ware was—and continues to be—highly prized, both as decoration in the furnishing of houses and palaces, and for the presentation of food, including rituals involving food and drink. Although there is no Far Eastern porcelain in the national museums of Morocco, examples can still be found in private collections. Of particular interest are family collections with items acquired in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, prior to the modern collecting of porcelain as antiques. Through these private collections we can gain a rare insight into the pre-modern taste for and usage of Far Eastern porcelain in a Muslim country.

It is well known that Chinese porcelain was in great demand and had a significant impact on Islamic ceramics manufacture from the Abbasid era onwards. Chinese porcelain was highly regarded by rulers and the wealthy across most regions of the Muslim world, and was included in trousseaus and presentation gifts.1 Not only has Chinese porcelain been found at various locations in the Middle East, including Hormuz and Siraf on the Persian Gulf, Samarra in Iraq, and Fustat (old Cairo), but Ibn Battuta, who was born in Tangier in 1304 and reached China in 1345, indicated that Chinese porcelain was known in the Maghrib.2 As for earlier centuries in the Maghrib, the presence of Chinese porcelain is less clear. No porcelain, for example, has been found at al-Hasa in northern Morocco, which flourished between the ninth and eleventh centuries.3

The use of porcelain in Muslim lands for serving food was probably encouraged by the condemnation in the hadith about eating from vessels made of precious metals. It is known, for example, that in Yemen the Rasulid sultan al-Malik al-Ashraf (r. 1377–1401) displayed many dishes of Chinese porcelain for his son’s circumcision feast; in Edirne, sherbets and sweets were served in porcelain bowls at the circumcision feast held in 1457 for Bayezid and Mustafa, the sons of the Ottoman sultan Mehmed the Conqueror. The Ottoman sultans subsequently amassed a vast collection of Chinese porcelain at the Topkapı Palace in Istanbul, along with various Japanese and European pieces. Most of this porcelain was used for serving food or other purposes; it thus contrasted with the Ardebil Shrine collection in Iran, which was not used.4

The Chinese porcelain items in the present-day collection of the Topkapı Palace Museum number over ten thousand. According to the inventory completed in 1936, the Topkapı Palace Museum also had 721 Japanese pieces. There is no specific mention, however, of Japanese porcelain in the archives of the Topkapı Palace. One can only assume that the earlier cataloguers, like their European contemporaries, were incapable of distinguishing Japanese from Chinese items. Furthermore, the Ottoman court’s method of acquiring Far Eastern porcelain was haphazard. There is only limited evidence to suggest that the Ottomans made special orders. Some porcelain was received as gifts from foreign rulers, especially from Iran. Other items were obtained as booty, and by unclaimed inheritance or confiscation (Ott. muhallefat), the latter being prominent in the eighteenth century. Purchases were rare, although there was a porcelain market in Istanbul, and the court disposed of objects there. By the eighteenth century, it was the practice for Ottoman officials to be given presents when they took up a new post, and they often received porcelain.5
Historical sources also point to the use of porcelain in the Mamluk era (1250–1517), and Far Eastern porcelain was sold in the Khan Khalili in Cairo in 1615–16. Cairo seems to have acted as a point of dispersal, and porcelain was also disseminated at Mecca. The Hajj pilgrimage was a means by which Moroccan officials, merchants, and scholars immersed themselves in the culture of the Ottomans. In this respect, however, it should be noted that by 1722 the British had set up a trading mission in Jidda, and, by the late eighteenth century, Europeans were challenging the Suez–Jidda monopoly of the Egyptians.

In the late sixteenth century, the Moroccan ambassador to the Sublime Porte, al-Tamgruti, described a royal reception at the Badi Palace in Marrakesh, where food was served on “…gilt dishes from Malaga and Valencia [probably Mudejar-style lusterware plates], and on admirable dishes from Turkey [presumably Iznik ware] and from India [presumably Far Eastern]....” Might it have been the case that Far Eastern porcelain began to replace Spanish lusterware and even Iznik pottery in Morocco as these wares ceased to be available? Neither Spanish lusterware nor Iznik pieces have been preserved in Moroccan museums or family collections. Iznik tiles were, however, in use in Morocco by the early seventeenth century, as seen, for example, on the mihrab of the Zawiya of Mawlay Idris in Fez, which was rebuilt by Sultan Zaydan (r. 1603–27). There was a regular exchange of ambassadors and lavish goods between the Sa’dian (1511–1659) and Alawi (1631–) dynasties in Fez and Marrakesh and the Ottoman court in Istanbul. Indeed, in Moroccan Arabic, a common word for a dish or plate is tabsil, which is probably derived from the Turkish tepsi. This implies a transfer of Ottoman ceramic fashions (and culinary traditions).

Yet the geographical location of Morocco also exposed the country to the expansion of European maritime trade, which from the sixteenth century brought Far Eastern goods around the Cape of Good Hope. Portugal occupied most of the Moroccan ports in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, and Chinese porcelain seems to have reached the country through them. Several decades ago, archaeological investigations at Qsar es-Seghir, the enclave in northern Morocco held by the Portuguese from 1458 to 1550, revealed the presence of Chinese porcelain in the uppermost levels of the Portuguese occupation debris, which can be dated to the first half of the sixteenth century. Beginning with the capture of Sebta (Ceuta) in 1415, the Portuguese were the first of the European seafaring nations to establish trading forts or “factories” (Port. feitoria) on the shores of Africa and Asia. The first Portuguese trade contacts with China occurred between 1516 and 1521, and in 1543 the Portuguese reached Japan. By this time, they had established themselves as a mercantile power in Asia. Chinese porcelain was among the many commodities that they traded, and a market developed for it in Lisbon.

The taste for Imari porcelain in Morocco, however, was a later phenomenon, made possible by the growth of large-scale Dutch and British maritime trade. The Dutch began to trade in Asia in the seventeenth century and soon displaced the Portuguese. The first contact between Holland and Japan was made in 1600, and the Dutch East India Company (Vereenigde Oostindische Compagnie) was founded two years later. Thereafter, the Dutch opened a trading facility at Hirado in Japan in 1609, moving to Deshima at Nagasaki in 1641. From 1639 to 1854, the Dutch were the only European traders allowed in Japan. Headquartered in Asia at Batavia (Jakarta) on the island of Java from 1622, the Dutch East India Company initially purchased Chinese porcelain in quantity, having become aware that there was a great market for it in Europe and elsewhere. More than three million pieces of Chinese porcelain were shipped to Holland in Dutch East Indiamen between 1602 and 1657 alone. Much of it was then reexported to other European countries or conducted by seaborne trade to the Mediterranean. The latter region was thoroughly exploited by both the Dutch and the British, and helped make their early fortunes. By the 1640s, the Dutch were also shipping hundreds of thousands of pieces of Chinese porcelain to ports in Japan, Southeast Asia, India, Iran, and Arabia. At first, the Dutch shipped kraak-porcelein (carrack-porcelain), the name applied to Ming dynasty (1368–1644) blue-and-white, but then expanded to other varieties. From the late seventeenth century, Europeans were ordering porcelain with shapes and decoration quite different from the usual Chinese repertoire.

When political unrest in China accompanying the fall of the Ming dynasty disrupted the Chinese porcelain trade for several decades, the Dutch East India Com-