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FOUNTAINS OF LIGHT:
THE MEANING OF MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC ROCK CRYSTAL LAMPS

The type of *tamthil* which reveals a similarity between an abstract idea and a concrete object is based on a similarity comprehended, or revealed, by the intellect, and resulting from analogies between correlations of the attributes rather than the attributes themselves.

al-Jurjani, *Asrār al-Balāgha* (11th century)

Two rock-crystal vessels, the first from St. Petersburg (Hermitage Museum, EG 938) and the second from Venice (S. Marco, Tesoro no. 99), are the two remaining medieval Islamic rock crystals which, presumably, were originally used as lamps. The boat-shaped Fatimid rock crystal from St. Petersburg is 22 cm long and is adorned with delicate carving of vine scrolls and half-palmette leaves (fig. 1). In the fifteenth century it was mounted with gilded silver and enamel, probably in an Italian workshop, in order to serve as a goblet. The cylindrical tenth-century Iraqi (?) rock crystal from Venice, which is about 35 cm long (with mounting 49 cm) and 17 cm in diameter, is decorated on its upper part with a carved Kufic inscription invoking good wishes for the owner and on its lower part with a carved decorative band (fig. 2). A bulge at the bottom of the lamp was recarved in the second half of the thirteenth century and was concealed by a gilded silver filigree mounting, as the lamp was intended to serve as a vase in that church.

The two lamps have a form very different from the common Islamic globular vase-like lamp. This unusual shape can be explained in part by the material from which they were made: the high price of rock crystal and the proficiency required of the carver meant that the manufacture of these precious objects was only patronized by royalty or nobility. Thus these artifacts were probably designed to individual taste, independent of the constraints which normally dictated the form of lamps in other materials. The lamp from St. Petersburg recalls the boat-shaped early Christian metal lamps with the curved handle, the Islamic name of which is *sirāj* (سراج). This kind of lamp might be placed on a ring foot which was usually supported by a stem or a sturdy

Fig. 1. Lamp, possibly Fatimid Egypt. Carved rock crystal. St. Petersburg, Hermitage, EG 938. (Photo: Courtesy, Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg)
Fig. 2. Lamp, Iraq? 10th century. Carved rock crystal. Venice, San Marco. (Photo: Der Schatz von San Marco in Venedig)

disk from below or even hung on chains (fig. 3). The lamp from S. Marco was probably suspended with the help of chains and a metal ring, fixed around the upper rim of the cylindrical body (fig. 4). This kind of lamp seldom appears in medieval Islamic manuscript illustrations.6

The aim of this paper is to investigate the meanings attached to rock-crystal lamps in the medieval Islamic world. The shortage of medieval Islamic rock-crystal lamps which survive to our own day governs the direction this research takes, mainly to medieval documents and to the plentiful surviving glass lamps, which to some extent make good this deficiency. From them it is possible to fill the vacuum with a hypothetical sketch of what they looked like and to get an idea of what the medieval Islamic attitude towards these precious objects was.

The earliest rock crystal lamp to be mentioned is probably the famous Qulaila which used to hang in the mihrab of the Umayyad Great Mosque of Damascus. Al-Ghuzuli (d. 1412), who drew from earlier authors in his composition, Matäli al-budur fi manäzil al-surūr, informs us that “in the mihrab of the Companions of the Prophet was a stone of crystal — and there are those who say that it was a precious stone or pearl (؟ِدُرْر, durra, meaning big precious stone‘) — and its name was Qulaila (قليلة), and when the lamps [of the mosque] were extinguished this lamp was brightening for you with its own light.”8 According to him the lamp was brought by stealth to Baghdad during the reign of al-Amin (809–13), the son of Harun al-Rashid, who was a rock-crystal collector, and a glass lamp was sent to Damascus as a replacement.8 Al-‘Umari (d. 1348) provides us with quite similar information on Qulaila.10 He adds, quoting Bedouins who prayed in this mosque, that the Qulaila was sent back to Damascus by al-Ma’mun. At some later stage it was broken and replaced by a glass lamp, and as the latter suffered the same fate no further efforts were made to find a substitute.11

Ibn Jubayr, who traveled to the east between the years 1183 and 1185, gives us the following detailed account of Islamic holy places and their interior decoration. In the south aisle, in front of the right-hand corner of the maqṣūra of the Great Mosque of Damascus was to be found the head of Yahya ibn Zaqaqiya (John the Baptist). Above it, he goes on, “is a wooden chest that stands out from the column, and on which is a lamp that seemed to be of hol-