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Sovereignty and  
the Materiality of  
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GLAIRE D. ANDERSON

THIS ESSAY FOCUSES ON TWO TENTH-CENTURY BRONZE OBJECTS, A BASIN AND A BOWL, INSCRIBED WITH AN EPIGRAPHIC BAND THAT CAN be read as the repetition of the Arabic word for sovereignty, *al-mulk*. These objects were probably made in the area that now comprises Iran and Central Asia, an artistic, intellectual, and commercial center of the Islamic lands in the ninth and tenth centuries. Bronzes like these, luxury commodities that would have appeared gold when new, are rarely found outside Iran and Central Asia (Allan; Baer). Yet those I discuss here were discovered far from their likely region of origin—indeed, at opposite ends of the Islamic territories of Eurasia. The large bronze basin was discovered in Inner Mongolia, while the small bronze bowl was unearthed in Córdoba, in southern Spain. These inscribed objects hint at a transhemispheric cultural-political history that has implications for reigning narratives of modernity, including for those that relate to medieval studies.

The bronzes were probably made in one of the cities controlled by the Samanid dynasty (r. 819–1005), a regional power whose cities, such as Samarkand and Bukhara, were major nodes along the international north-south and east-west trade routes.<sup>1</sup> Inner Mongolia in the tenth century was part of China's Liao Empire (907–1125), while Córdoba was the capital of the Umayyad dynasty (r. 756–1031) and the intellectual, political, and economic center of the Islamic west. The bronze basin was a prominent part of the funerary assemblage in the tomb of a royal woman, a princess of the Liao dynasty (Shen 360 [fig. 1]).<sup>2</sup> Archaeologists discovered the bronze bowl in the ruins of the palace city, Madīnat al-Zahrā', which the Cordoban Umayyads founded just a few kilometers from the capital around 936, shortly after laying claim to the caliphal title in 929 (Anderson 144–49 [fig. 2]). In their transfer to places and contexts far from where they were manufactured, the basin and bowl hint at the mobility of objects and people and the materiality of cross-cultural interactions during the early medieval period, topics that Finbarr Flood has examined in the context of Muslim and Hindu encounters in South

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Asia. Moreover, the bronzes' decoration with the word *al-mulk* suggests that art was shaped by and actively shaped intellectual, cultural, political, and religious conditions and dynamics. The movement of these objects to the edges of Afro-Eurasian empires attests to the reach of early medieval economic and political networks, which makes the bronzes useful in rethinking postcolonial studies and global studies in the longer *durée*. Furthermore, their synthesis of art and text invites rethinking of long-standing narratives of visuality

and meaning, modernity and empire, and relations between East and West.

### Sovereignty amid Fragmentation

In contrast to the seventh and eighth centuries, when a single ruler, or caliph, claimed religious and secular authority over the worldwide Muslim community, the ninth and tenth centuries were marked by religious and political fragmentation and competition among three imperial powers, or caliphates, each of which asserted its dominion in the lands of Islam (Yücesoy in this cluster; Hodgson). By 930 the caliphate was divided among three rival dynasties: the Abbassids of Baghdad (r. 750–1258), the Umayyads of Córdoba (r. 756–1031) and the Fatimids of Cairo (r. 909–1162 [Hodgson; Bennisson; Kennedy]). Each dynasty laid claim to universal authority in the lands of Islam, each constructed capital cities that were among the most celebrated metropolises of the medieval world, and each was supported by allies and vassals who controlled the vast regional territories beyond the immediate vicinities of the caliphal courts, such as Iberia, North Africa, and Central Asia (Bennisson 94–157).

In this period ceramics and metalware bearing the Arabic epigraph *al-mulk* appeared across the Islamic lands. Their epigraphic decoration in itself is not unusual; the intersection of writing and art is present in the first monument of Islamic art, the Dome of the Rock (c. 691), and ubiquitous in Islamic architecture and material culture ever after (Grabar et al.; Blair). Yet why would this particular word find such wide circulation dur-



ing the ninth and tenth centuries? To answer this question we should consider the potential meanings of *al-mulk*. The Arabic root means “to possess, to rule, or to reign.” Usually translated as “sovereignty,” it could also be translated as “kingship” or “the kingdom.” Often part of a longer phrase, the word is commonly found on other works of art and architecture of the ninth and tenth centuries in the Islamic lands (Blair; Philon; Baer). It is used several times in the Qur’an in reference to God’s sovereignty, as in the following verses:

Unto Allah belongeth the Sovereignty  
(*wa-li-llāhi mulku*) of the heavens and  
the earth

Wa-li-llāhi mulku s-samāwāti wa-l-’arḍi  
wa-llāhu ‘alā kulli shay’in qadīrun  
(*Koran* 3.189)

Say: O Allah! Owner of Sovereignty! Thou  
givest sovereignty unto whom Thou  
wilt, and Thou withdrawest sovereignty  
from whom Thou wilt

Quli llāhumma mālika l-mulki tu’ṭī l-mulka  
man tashā’u.” (3.26)

Knowest thou not that it is Allah unto  
Whom belongeth the Sovereignty of the  
heavens and the earth

’A-lam ta’lam ’anna llāha lahū mulku  
s-samāwāti wa-l-’arḍi. (2.107)

In the Qur’an *al-mulk* refers not only to God’s authority but also to the earthly authority that God bestows on notable men. For instance, *al-mulk* is used to designate Abraham’s authority: “Bethink thee of him who had an argument with Abraham about his Lord, because Allah had given him the kingdom” (*’a-lam tara ’ilā lladhī ḥājja ’ibrāhīma fī rabbihī ’an ’ātāhu llāhu l-mulka* [2.258]). Likewise, *al-mulk* refers to the kingdom or the rule of

King Solomon (*mulki sulaymāna* [2.102]) and to King David’s sovereignty: “and David slew Goliath; and Allah gave him the kingdom and wisdom” (*wa-qatala dāwūdu jālūta wa-’ātāhu llāhu l-mulka* [2.251]). During the reign of the Syrian Umayyads (650–750), the first caliph dynasty of the early Islamic Empire, *al-mulk* came to signify not simply any earthly kingship but the institution of the caliphate.

### Implications

It is worth researching these two bronze objects further to ascertain their Central Asian provenance and to unpack their possible meanings. If it turns out that the Cordoban bronze was a local creation, for example, this would reveal a host of new connections between artisans, patrons, and the social and economic contexts in which such an object was embedded (Cooke 5–7).<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, at this point I can make three provisional observations by juxtaposing these two objects: on sovereignty as a flexible intellectual discourse, on material culture and inter-imperial dynamics, and on premodern sovereignty as a potential corrective to Eurocentric historical narratives.

### Sovereignty as Flexible Discourse

While pan-Islamic factors make a term such as *Islamic art* possible and intellectually defensible, there is also much to be learned by

FIG. 1

Bronze basin with inscriptions in Arabic, tenth century. Research Inst. of Cultural Relics and Archaeology of Inner Mongolia. Photos: Cultural Bureau of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region (*Gilded Splendor: Treasures of China’s Liao Empire* (907–1125); New York: Asia Soc., 2006; print).

FIG. 2

Metalware bowl (probably high-tin bronze) with *al-mulk* epigraphy, circa tenth century. Museo Arqueológico de Córdoba. Photo: Claire Anderson.



exploring the simultaneous, overlapping, even conflicting meanings that depend on viewer, user, and context. The word *al-mulk* could conjure a variety of potential associations and meanings for different communities and individuals in the medieval Islamic territories. Art historians, interpreting the ubiquity of the *al-mulk* epigraph on ceramics as a pious shorthand reference to the Qur'anic usage, have seen little reason to consider the meaning of the epigraph any further. Yet an object whose epigraphic decoration resonates with the Qur'anic emphasis on the exclusivity of God's sovereignty might simultaneously resonate with associations of earthly kingship. Both associations were possible in territories that shared religious, political, and civilizational mores shaped by Islam and its cultural and intellectual products but contained competing polities and a diverse plurality of peoples and cultural traditions.

While the meaning of sovereignty in early Islamic contexts has been the subject of discussion and debate, by the tenth century medieval intellectuals generally understood the caliphate in terms of earthly kingship and royal authority (Yücesoy, "Justification" 10–12 and *Tatawwur* 131–33; Yatiban; Qazi; Nainar). The Samanids, a Persian dynasty (819–1005) that controlled territories in Iran and Central Asia, were not passive recipients and promoters of Abbasid trends or religious doctrines. Though they paid allegiance to the Abbasid dynasty, they operated virtually independently of them. Their choice to use this epigraph was a meaningful act of translation in the Persianate Samanid milieu. In ornamenting the bronze objects with the Arabic word for sovereignty, the Samanids, as Hayrettin Yücesoy writes in this cluster, chose "a discourse to fashion and project an image of rule capable of competing with rival claims in Afro-Eurasia." The Samanids, Yücesoy points out, used language—Persian as well as Arabic, Turkic, and Mongolic—to articulate their political,

cultural, and ideological aspirations. The bronzes are the material manifestation of this process: the complex religious, intellectual, and political nuances of the Arabic epigraph were applied to a commodity that embodied pre-Islamic Sasanian luxury and cultural capital. The bowl illustrates the material results of this choice particularly well, synthesizing two kinds of cultural information that show how this luxury object resonated with (at least) two sets of meanings and associations. The form and profile of the object and the material from which it was crafted (high-tin bronze) evoked the luxury and splendor of the ancient Sasanian courts of Iran. The Samanid craftsman was continuing and invoking a pre-Islamic tradition with an enduring high cultural value in the caliphal milieu.

Lydia H. Liu reminds us in her essay for this cluster that writing is closely related to visuality and that this has implications for understanding the way writing functioned geopolitically. Significantly, the full phrase *al-mulk li-llāhi* ("to God alone belongs sovereignty"), which was ubiquitous in architectural decoration of the time, does not appear on these bronze epigraphic wares. Instead the artists use only one word, *al-mulk*. They further emphasize the word by repeating it rather than including the longer Qur'anic phrase. In contrast, other celebrated Samanid epigraphic wares of the same period are inscribed with entire proverbs (Pancaroglu 69–75). Likewise, caliphal coinage from across the Islamic lands, emblematic of the conjunction of materiality and sovereignty, incorporates a great deal of text—including Qur'anic phrases—along with the name of the mint supervisor, the date, and the place of production, despite the minute surface area available to the artisan. We should consider that the choice of text, and the visual treatment of texts chosen to ornament objects such as the bronze basin and bowl, was deliberate. Neither wholly secular nor completely religious, the epigraphic wares

point to sovereignty as a flexible religious, political, and intellectual source of meaning for patrons, merchants, artisans, and audiences. Given these groups' diversity, objects such as the *al-mulk* wares would have communicated different messages to different viewers.

#### *Material Culture and Inter-imperial Dynamics*

Close attention to the meanings of *al-mulk* in each context may help us think through their resonance with the political tensions or engagements between states and between individuals and other groups across the pre-modern globe. Goods that circulated in and across states, perhaps especially those that bore writing, suggest that material culture shaped, and was shaped by, political dynamics. The bronzes' decoration with the epigraph *al-mulk* underscores the role of language in empire building and Afro-Eurasian inter-imperial competition, which Yücesoy explores in his essay here. Wares bearing this epigraph were made and consumed by different, often competing, courts across Eurasia. Yücesoy's argument that language played a key role in inter-imperial competition between the courts of the Islamic commonwealth at this time invites us therefore to consider the potential for multiple readings and interpretations of the epigraph, depending on place, context, and individual. The addition of the inscription would have evoked contemporary, Abbasid-era culture rather than the Sasanian past, through the use of a calligraphic style (Kufic) intimately associated with Islam and caliphal empires. Kufic was the calligraphy that had been favored for Qur'an manuscripts and official inscriptions on architecture and state objects such as mile markers and coinage since the inception of the caliphal period in the eighth century.

Both the Samanids and the Cordoban Umayyads deliberately appropriated cultural forms first associated with Abbasid court culture. In doing so these "peripheral" courts

created a universalism in which deliberate imitation of cultural forms in the creation of syncretic local wares was a way to appropriate and, simultaneously, resist Abbasid hegemony. Laura Doyle's concept of inter-imperial positionality, discussed in her contribution to this issue, is useful here. It offers a way to explore the dialectical processes that could help us understand the transperipheral relations between different Islamic territories and the multiple meanings and positions inherent in the artistic, political, and commercial interactions that produced these epigraphic wares.

In the Iberian context, ceramics and other objects inscribed with *al-mulk* would have evoked a web of associations with the Syrian Umayyads (r. 650–750), who were the ancestors of the Cordoban rulers and thus the basis of Córdoba's legitimate claim to caliphal authority. *Al-mulk* in Córdoba after the 929 declaration of the Cordoban caliphate would have held associations not only with God's sovereignty but also with the divinely sanctioned authority that had been bestowed on the Cordoban Umayyad rulers' forebears and that the rival Abbasids had wrested away in the violent revolution that led to the transfer of the Umayyad dynasty to Iberian soil after 750. In this context divine sovereignty was only one concept that such wares would have evoked for those who commissioned, used, and viewed them. In Madīnat al-Zahrā', which was the concrete expression of sovereignty made visible on the landscape itself, the Cordoban challenge to Abbasid hegemony was at least as likely to have been in the minds of those who made, commissioned, or viewed wares inscribed with *al-mulk*. The Córdoba bowl shares its epigraphic decoration with ceramics that have been unearthed in large quantities at Madīnat al-Zahrā'. Cordoban artisans who produced the epigraphic ceramics, as well as patrons and users, were (like the Samanid artisans) responding to an international idiom and pan-Islamic tastes and

cultural values in producing *al-mulk* wares. However, the change in time, place, and contexts underscores nuances in the meanings evoked by the epigraphic *al-mulk* ceramics; in the Iberian case such objects were part of a larger project to consciously underscore a message of Cordoban Umayyad sovereignty (Anderson 144–49). The bowl's Cordoban context reinforces the impression conveyed by the Iberian ceramic *al-mulk* wares of a conscious and pervasive message of Umayyad sovereignty borne by objects of court feasting, even as it points to the international connections that linked Iberia to Samanid territories along vast commercial and political routes and complicates the potential meanings of *al-mulk* for medieval viewers and patrons.

As the presence of the basin in the Liao tomb suggests, the object in this context creates a dialectic in which the same type of epigraphic ware in a different religious, cultural, and political context produces a different set of associations and meanings, though it remains connected to royal identity and the relation between the earthly and divine realms. The economic and political networks that linked far-flung regions and political entities in and beyond the ninth- and tenth-century Islamic lands have been overshadowed by later periods of globalization (Flood 2). Yet war, invasion, diplomacy, and commerce on the global scales of the Silk and Fur Routes led to the far-ranging movements of people and things in the premodern eras generally. This is certainly true of the tenth century, as the international archaeological record of the period attests (Michailidis), which we can use to speculate how our bronze objects were carried to their new contexts and by whom. We can conceptualize the bronze basin as one object of many that constituted a flow of exotic wares, including Central Asia's "golden peaches of Samarkand," into China during the T'ang dynasty (618–907 [Schafer]). Medieval texts offer numerous examples of objects, animals, and people—diplomats, soldiers, scholars, mer-

chants, slaves—moving across Afro-Eurasia for various geopolitical and economic reasons. The best known such text from the caliphal period is probably the *Kitāb al-hadāyā wa al-tuḥaf* (*Book of Gifts and Rarities*), which contains extensive descriptions of medieval diplomatic gifts exchanged between rulers in and beyond the Islamic lands (Ibn al-Zubayr). Among these is a letter that the queen of the Franks purportedly sent in the ninth century to an Abbasid caliph (via a North African envoy). It enumerates the extensive categories of objects, animals, and people that accompanied the missive, as gifts from the Frankish queen to the caliph (Ibn al-Zubayr; Christys). Similarly, a Chinese chronicle alludes to what was likely a Samanid embassy to the Liao court around the year 924, an embassy with political and economic rationales, which may help us understand how and why the Samanid basin would have been carried into Mongolian territory and eventually into a place of distinction among burial objects entombed with a princess of the Liao Empire (Tuotuo 173).

#### *Premodern Sovereignty and Eurocentric Narratives*

Once we begin to situate the political meanings of inscriptions and objects in the competitive states and world system of this period, we also help reconfigure Eurocentric narratives of history and geopolitics and issues such as sovereignty, globalism, and modernity that Abu-Lughod's exploration of the thirteenth-century world system broached. We might consider, for instance, whether the vocabulary of sovereignty inscribed on the bronzes and other objects provides a backdrop to the reigning narrative of sovereignty as a European concept and international principle. John Hobson has critiqued the discourse that has ascribed the origin and rise of sovereignty as a political concept to early modern Protestant Europe, specifically to the Westphalian Settlement, from whence, according to this

view, it was exported to the rest of the globe by imperialism. Hobson argues that we should instead acknowledge eastern and global factors that informed the rise of sovereignty in Europe (671–73). How medieval Islamic notions of sovereignty as a political and social construct may relate to or compare with the notion of sovereignty that arose in early modern Europe is a topic that lies outside my expertise, but it suggests what other constructs, besides world-system formations, might have preceded and informed Europe's rise. In any case, these luxury objects, literally inscribed with Islamic sovereignty, begin to complicate the narrative that presents sovereignty as an endogenous European development.

### Conclusions

In these bronze objects cultural hegemony wrestles with adaptation, religion with secularism—and tradition with modernity, especially if we keep in mind that this was a period of transhemispheric modernization, as shown by recent world historiography. We can begin to move beyond a monolithic, essentializing view of Islamic art and its meanings by considering these wares within the numerous cultural and material encounters, territories, and political circumstances in which they circulated, as well as by better appreciating the multiple actors involved in their creation, consumption, and circulation. The many readings provoked by these two bronzes attest to Islamic art as a vital intellectual framework for constructing social and political meanings across and between competing polities. Scholars sensitive to these possibilities have produced exciting new work in the field of Islamic art (Carey and Graves). For example, Avinoam Shalem reminds us about the importance of so-called decorative or minor arts in the Islamic traditions and about the artificial dichotomy of sacred and secular as an imposed classificatory system in Islamic art history (7–9). Wendy Shaw's impassioned

argument in favor of acknowledging Islam as a flexible intellectual discourse capable of generating complex religious, secular, political, and cultural meanings undermines essentialist, monolithic interpretation of Islamic art. And, as mentioned above, Flood's exploration of material culture and medieval elites in the region comprising present-day Afghanistan, Pakistan, and north India has shown a way forward, by considering the role of material culture in mediating encounter and remapping cultural boundaries through careful consideration of modes of circulation by which objects and people traveled and as a result shaped transcultural identities. Beyond the field of Islamic art, scholars of medieval Europe, Asia, and Africa are questioning and crossing the disciplinary boundaries that have impeded our understanding of cultural flows across the globe (Caskey, Cohen, and Safran; Wong and Heldt).

The epigraphic bronzes point to movements of goods and people across vast geographic distances and alert us to the potential meanings that such translations from one end of the globe to the other, west to east and north to south, engendered. In this respect the epigraphic wares find a parallel, to give but one example, in a small bronze Buddha figurine from the Swat Valley in present-day Pakistan that made its way to Sweden, likely along medieval transperipheral trade routes (Ramírez-Weaver). The transfer of the bronzes to their new geographic, social, political, and religious contexts through economic and political networks that linked the Samanids to other regions added new spatial, social, political, and religious layers to the initial act of translation.

The circulation of these epigraphic wares within and beyond the Islamic lands is symptomatic of the languages and the religious, political, and intellectual discourses in which primacy throughout the caliphal lands was articulated. The objects' adaptation and use in widely differing contexts in Córdoba and



Liao Mongolia triggered new meanings for the epigraph during a period of political fragmentation and economic change spanning the early medieval globe. The bronze basin and bowl thus invite more-nuanced thinking about the meaning of writing and materiality and about the multiplicity of meanings that arise from acts of material and intellectual translation, the movements and engagements between states, individuals, and other groups across the “premodern” globe. The production and circulation of the epigraphic wares throughout the empire, and the different readings made possible by considering the objects against a backdrop of politics and exchange, highlight the mobility of such inter-imperially positioned goods, the expansive networks through which they made their way around the globe, and their contingency as meaningful creations in the complex Islamic Empire and the early medieval world system.

## NOTES

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1. I am indebted to Melanie Michailidis for first suggesting a Samanid provenance for the bowl excavated in Córdoba.

2. I would like to thank Qi Lu for bringing the Liao basin to my attention. Qi's research on Samanid-Liao diplomatic connections, conducted in my 2012 Islamic Art graduate seminar at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, greatly informed the arguments made in this essay.

3. My thanks go to Miranda Elston for this reference.

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