

AN ISLAMIC AMULET FROM KHIRBAT EL-NI'ANA

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A bronze amulet was found at Khirbat el-Ni'ana (Fig. 1; Area 101D, L24, B1171; see Sion, this volume). It is rectangular in shape (20 × 25 mm), incised on both sides. The amulet was originally a pendant topped by three prongs, now broken.¹

The obverse of the amulet (Fig. 1:a) depicts a pointed arch, from which hangs a mosque-lamp holding a candle. The arch is supported by two pillars, each bearing a triangular capital on a rounded knob, mirrored at the base of the pillars by a knob surmounting a triangular base. Above each capital is a hexagon.

The artistic motif of an arch supported by two pillars and enclosing a sacred or special object was widespread in antiquity. A similar motif, but with a central seven-branched menorah, occurs in Jewish art, e.g., on a lead coffin from Bet She'arim (Friedenberg 1987:81). Another

example also appears on a Christian amulet from 'En Boqe' (Gichon 1993: Pl. 60:19a, b). The motif's earliest attestation in Islamic art is displayed on an Umayyad mosaic floor at Ramla, depicting a Koranic verse inserted between two columns supporting an arch, representing a *mihrab* (Rosen-Ayalon 1976:119, Pl. 23:C). A mosque with lamps is illustrated among depictions of arcaded buildings in a Koran, which was found concealed with other old scripts in a room annexed to the mosque at Šan'aa (Graf von Botmer 1987:6–7).

Representations of a lamp hanging from the center of an arch, symbolizing a *mihrab*, are known in the Islamic world since the twelfth century, carved on stones or drawn on tiles. The combination of an arch and a mosque-lamp then became a symbol of religious devotion (Khoury 1992:11).

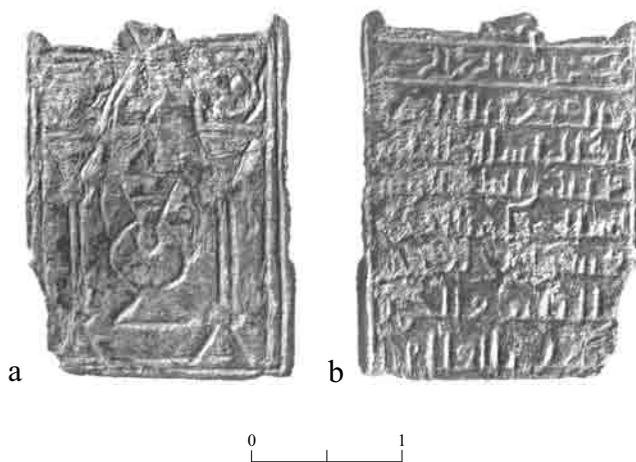


Fig. 1.

The reverse of the amulet (Fig. 1:b) contains an eight-line, pseudo-Arabic inscription along horizontal lines, known as *Koufique linéaire*; several letters are in retrograde. Most of the letters do not connect to one another and are

meaningless. From the second line onward pairs of vertical strokes or the Arabic numeral '1' rhythmically separate the text. There are no epigraphic grounds for dating the amulet, nor is there an exact parallel.

NOTE

¹ An eleventh-century rectangular amulet made of silver was discovered at Caesarea (Brosh 1987:

Pl. 10). Amulets bearing similar features were also found in Spain (Ibrāhīm 1987: Nos. 6 and 10).

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