Written in Silver: Protective Medallions from Inner Oman

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CHAPTER 10

Written in Silver: Protective Medallions from Inner Oman

James Redman

The souqs and tourist markets of Oman are today filled with remnants from the days not long past when the country used to be home to a highly skilled and thriving silversmithing industry. Now, the domestic market is gone and the artifacts that have been left behind—the jewelry, daggers, and other assorted accouterments—are all hawked in shops sold by weight as souvenirs and collectibles. It is among this hodgepodge of metallic curios that silver discs about the size of an adult’s hand with texts etched into them are to be found. These inscribed medallions are known locally as kirsh kitab and they were made in the Omani towns of Nizwa, Bahla, and Rustaq until the closing decades of the twentieth century. Originally crafted to be worn around a woman’s neck or placed near a bed, these pieces were thought to provide their owners with protective benefits by bearing words from the hallowed scriptural authority of the Qur’ān (fig. 10.1).

However, the kirsh kitab must be separated from the kinds of generic charms meant to defend against a wide array of metaphysical onslaughts because they were explicitly created to combat the ravages of a specific jinniya, Umm al Subyan, the “Mother of Boys,” so named for “her capacity of causing the death of infants.” For parents and children, Umm al Subyan has a frightening reputation that reaches beyond Oman and stretches across the Arabian Peninsula to North Africa and through the Indian Ocean to Zanzibar. To give some impression of this “child-witch,” a portion of “The Seven Covenants of Solomon” taken from a Cairene amulet provides a harrowing portrait of the jinniya in all her dreadful glory:

“[I]t is related of the prophet of God, Solomon, son of David, (peace upon both) that he saw an old woman with hoary hair, blue eyes, joined eyebrows, with scrawny limbs, disheveled hair, a gaping mouth from which flames issued. She cleaved the air with her claws and broke trees with her loud voice. The prophet Solomon said to her, “Art thou of the jinn or human? I have never seen worse than you.” She said, “O prophet of God, I am the mother of children (Um-es-Subyan). I have dominion upon the sons of Adam and daughters of Eve, and upon their possessions. I enter houses and gobble like turkeys and bark like dogs, and low like cows, and make a noise like camels, and neigh like horses, and bray like donkeys, and hiss like serpents, and represent everything. I make wombs barren and destroy children. I come to women and close their wombs and leave them, and they will not conceive, and then people say they are barren.”

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1 A silver dealer interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, December 1, 2016.
2 Ibrahim, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, September 2, 2017.
6 Westermarck, Ritual and Belief, i: 400.
I come to a woman in pregnancy and destroy her offspring. It is I, O prophet of God, who come to the woman engaged and tie the tails of her garments, and announce woes and disasters. It is I, O prophet of God, who come to men and make them impotent... It is I, O prophet of God, who come to men and oppose their selling and buying. If they trade, they do not gain, and if they plow they will not reap. It is I, O prophet of God, who cause all these.”

This is the titanic incarnation of calamities that women in inner Oman had to safeguard themselves against: a wicked presence whose cruelty could only be checked by a kirsh kitab silver medallion (fig. 10.2).

Flat, circular metal, though, was not the remedy for deflecting the havoc brought on by Umm al Subyan, even if it was the vessel. To work and to become a kirsh kitab, it needed the divine language of the Qur’ān, oftentimes accompanied by a scrawled image of a tied and bound Umm al Subyan herself, to actually incapacitate the jinniya and prevent her from filling her ghastly desires. This reliance on words recognizably makes the texts on the kirsh kitab a focal point and a vehicle for grasping how these pieces were “enmeshed in circumstance, time, place and society” when the lens of a Christian missionary. For further discussion, see Eleanor Abdella Doumato, Getting God’s Ear: Women, Islam, and Healing in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 43–58.


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9 Samuel M. Zwemer, The Influence of Animism on Islam: An Account of Popular Superstitions (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 193–94. It is important to approach Zwemer’s first-hand accounts about popular Islamic practices from a century ago with caution. Though a voracious collector of data, he also approached Islam and its adherents through

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10 The Influence of Animism on Islam: An Account of Popular Superstitions (New York: Macmillan, 1920), 193–94. It is important to approach Zwemer’s first-hand accounts about popular Islamic practices from a century ago with caution. Though a voracious collector of data, he also approached Islam and its adherents through...
writings were surrogates for their makers’ textual knowledge. This chapter examines what these texts say about the utility of that knowledge, especially for protection, when it is conveyed in a very imperfect form through incomplete and inexact scripts. Still, these texts are inseparable from the legacy of Oman’s silver trade, and understanding this market is indispensable for building a framework for the words that were scored within its quarters.

1 A Brief Overview of the Silver Craft Industry in Oman

The story of Oman’s silver craft industry is vital for any appraisal of the kirsh kitab for several reasons, but foremost because these protective medallions had to first be fabricated from silver before anything else could be done with them. In the Omani interior towns where these pieces come from, the silver discs, hangers, and chains, not to mention any trimmings like gold leaf or red beads, would each have to be crafted and then assembled by a sa‘īq (pl. suwāqā‎), a silversmith, who would give every kirsh kitab its form. Thereafter, the amulets would be sold in a silversmith’s workshop alongside necklaces, bracelets, rings, and other silver wares.\(^{11}\) Plainly, from manufacture to market, the kirsh kitab have for some time been a regular part of the Omani silver trade.

While shrouded in speculation, the appearance of silversmithing in Oman is variously dated to the late eighteenth\(^{12}\) and the mid-nineteenth\(^{13}\) centuries, although the conclusion that it “has been going on for as long as anyone can remember”\(^{14}\) is likely just as accurate. Certainly, there is some data that might allow for guesswork, like the arrival in Muscat of Jewish silversmiths from Iraq in the 1830s, or a Western visitor to Oman in 1845 noting

\textbf{FIGURE 10.2}

The horrid likeness of Umm al Subyan etched into the surface of a kirsh kitab. In this image, the desired effect of the kirsh kitab upon the jinniya is clear: her legs are depicted as being bound to signify that she is powerless against the owner of the kirsh kitab. This kirsh kitab variation also represents a double indemnity against Umm al Subyan’s torments since she is visibly surrounded, or trapped, by the words of “Aya al Kursi.”

\(^{11}\) Daud, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, December 1, 2016.


the “dollars pendant” worn by the women. The surviving silver jewelry and accessories of Sayyida Salme bint Sa‘id, the daughter of Sayyid Sa‘id bin Sultan, Imam of Muscat and Sultan of Zanzibar (r. 1804–1856), also provide a solitary glimpse into what royal regalia looked like on Oman’s distant East African shores in the 1860s. But, as these samples show, the information is simply too erratic and anecdotal to allow for a satisfying chronological sketch of Oman’s silver heritage to be formulated.

With this degree of uncertainty about when Omani silverwork started being produced, a similar lack of clarity can be expected for its stylistic and design roots. Given coastal Oman’s extensive history of long distance trade that stretches back over a thousand years, spanning from China and India through the Arabian Gulf and all the way to Africa, it is difficult to imagine that the craftsmanship of Omani silver artisans would remain immune to the influences of such a regional emporium. Indicative of one direction of this flow is Jehan Rajab’s observation that, when Oman ruled Zanzibar, “Zanzibari jewellery was almost indistinguishable from that found in Oman and no doubt many silversmiths must have gone with their families to East Africa and remained there.”

Unfortunately, what is missing from this statement is an acknowledgement of the interactions between Omani and African aesthetics in Zanzibar, or the very real possibility that inspirations from East Africa streamed back to Oman. When the island’s Indian silver merchants are added to this mix, even the labels of Omani or Zanzibari jewelry are probably too restrictive. Turning to Oman proper, the land served not only as a point for cargoes along the trade routes but also as a stopover for populations on the move, with this traffic amplified on the coasts and reduced considerably in the interior. So, in addition to the aforementioned Iraqi Jewish silversmiths in Muscat by the 1830s, it is also presumed that Yemeni Jewish silversmiths helped shape Omani jewellery patterns along with Pakistani Baluchis. Of course, this international milieu of circulating goods and peoples is a woefully incomplete portrayal of Omani silver design; local choices, tastes, and sensibilities about what is desirable and fashionable must also be taken into account. The key is to recognize that these local preferences have long coexisted with the same cycles of geographic mobility and mercantile networks that have defined the Omani experience over the past centuries.

In sharp contrast to the knowledge void that clouds our current understanding about the origins of Oman’s silver heritage, there are better insights into what this jewelry has meant for its owners. As Richardson and Dorr summarize, “[s]ilver jewellery is traditionally given to a woman in the form of a dowry at the time of her marriage, and is deemed her personal property, to be exchanged at her discretion for goods and currency in times of...
need. Jewellery represents security and portable wealth and as such...is ultimately viewed as a liquid asset. But silver jewelry was not just a liquid asset; it was literally a plastic asset that could easily be transformed into capital by shaving away its pieces, melting it down partially or entirely, or fabricating it into a different thing altogether. On the other hand, the benefits of liquidity and plasticity may have been slightly offset by the fact that silver jewelry was not an economically productive asset; it was a form of insurance reserved for tough times.

Then again, the economic value of silver objects should not overshadow their significance as personal adornments and their ability to act as visual indicators of their wearers’ social and marital standing, or as markers of their regional and tribal identities. Another part of the metal’s allure, which could be aided by being worked into something wearable, was its supposed curative and protective merits that were thought to be capable of both healing physical ailments and providing amuletic safety against unseen malevolence. Some authors have assigned this penchant for silver to the Prophet Muhammad’s dislike of gold jewelry.

However, Sayyida Salme bint Sa’id’s memoirs of Omani life in nineteenth-century Zanzibar make this assertion debatable, since she witnessed that, for their own protection, “the higher classes take sayings from the Koran engraved on gold or silver medals, suspended from the neck by a chain.” For most Omanis, gold was prohibitively expensive and local custom held that it was only silver, and not gold, that had the inherent ability to defend its wearers against bad luck and unearthly tribulations.

By the last quarter of the twentieth century, the heydays of Omani silverwork had passed and Omani silversmithing was on the verge of extinction due to a confluence of pressures, some of which were symptomatic of the challenges faced by all Omani craft industries during this period and others that were particular to the silver industry itself. Primarily, the bulk of this marketplace collapse should be viewed as part of the broader changes that were already shaking Oman: the 1970 coup d’etat and the new government’s policies of “awakening” the country with massive infrastructural, economic, and bureaucratic developments. For handicraft producers, this had many consequences. For instance, the state’s investments in the private and public sectors created salaried jobs that siphoned off the potential next generation of craftsmen, and the advent of a national education system undoubtedly weakened the father-to-son informal apprenticeships of many crafts. The burgeoning economy also increased the import of products that could compete with and replace locally manufactured items, meaning that outside competition was growing at precisely the same moment that domestic artisans were being steered to new higher paying occupations. Not surprisingly, almost overnight many handicraft industries were suddenly obsolete.

Oman’s silversmithing trade was battered by these trends and confronted with its own challenges as local tastes, funded by the growth in spending power, gradually replaced silver with

28 Ibid.
32 Qtd. in Emily Ruete, Memoirs of an Arabian Princess, trans. Lionel Strachey (New York: Doubleday, Page, 1907), 68.
33 Rajab, Silver Jewellery, 34.
35 Richardson and Dorr, The Craft Heritage of Oman, 2518.
36 Limbert, In the Time of Oil, 86.
37 Richardson and Dorr, The Craft Heritage of Oman, 2519.
gold. According to Mongiatti, Suleman, and Meeks, what began merely as a way to enhance silver by adding gold to it eventually turned into a full-blown desire for gold jewelry once it could be afforded:

“[T]he demand for the silversmith’s craft has declined in recent years ... The addition of small elements of gilded decoration on Omani silver jewellery gained popularity from the 1960s onwards, during a time when earnings increased and vast quantities of gold were readily available from Saudi Arabia and Dubai ... Over time, however, Omani’s [sic] women’s fondness for small gilded embellishments developed into a demand for pieces made entirely of gold. Indian goldsmiths have largely met this demand, having established a thriving trade in Oman and neighboring Dubai and, interestingly, traditional designs of Omani silver are sometimes reworked as entire gold pieces or smaller, lighter versions in gold.”

The effect of this swing in precious metal choices was already noticeable by 1975, only five years into the regime’s rapid modernization plans, when Ruth Hawley found that, in the southern Dhofar region, “[w]ith the exception of the atingeel (a hair ornament) silver does not seem to be made up into jewellery any more, as gold has almost entirely replaced it.” Thus, it comes as little wonder that silversmithing “all but died” after several decades of its workforce shrinking and demand for its products dwindling. Today, many Omani silver dealers contract expatriate craftsmen, such as Pakistanis, to fill any orders they get for brand new “traditional” silver jewelry.

To some extent, it can be anticipated that the fates of Oman’s kirsh kitab rose and fell with its silver fortunes given that the former was, literally, part of the stock and trade of the latter. Like with silver craft industry overall, the circumstances surrounding the appearance of these amulets in inner Oman are probably lost to posterity, aside from vague notions that they are “ancient,” which in the parlance of the souqs can mean from roughly one hundred years ago. Also, it seems that the production of kirsh kitab trailed off almost in conjunction with the loss of Oman’s silver markets, with manufacturing ending in the 1980s or 1990s. Some Omani say that the kirsh kitab stopped being made because, as with silver goods in general, Omani leanings shifted to gold and away from the heavy, bulky silver medallions that could weigh over a quarter of a kilogram. Other Omani, departing from this materialistic and market-centered approach and thinking in terms of religiosity, insist that the kirsh kitab fell from favor because they date from the days of the “old beliefs that were not right” and that sales dried up after “people learned how to believe correctly.”

The more probable scenario is that all of these explanations contain some validity depending on the circumstances. Now, it is rumored that there are workshops in Oman where Pakistanis are using electric engravers to churn out any kirsh kitab that might be needed by retailers.

2 The Texts in the Silver

Without question, there are multiple layers of meaning wrapped around the kirsh kitab

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42 Forster, Disappearing Treasures of Oman, 25.
43 Daud, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, December 1, 2016.
44 Muhammad, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, May 10, 2018.
45 Khaled, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, May 10, 2018.
47 A silver dealer interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, December 1, 2016.
49 Muhammad, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, December 1, 2016.
50 Daud, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, December 1, 2016.
individually and collectively. At any given moment, these medallions can variously be seen as commodities, personal adornments, transportable wealth, family mementoes, tourist souvenirs, and so forth. This incomplete list can also serve as a basis for studying most other pieces of old Omani silver jewelry, but the kirsh kitab have additional features that set them apart. Namely, they were believed to be endowed with the capacity to shield their owners from the misfortunes wrought by an otherworldly force, a capacity that largely depended on the application of Qur’anic texts. For this reason, the kirsh kitab probably communicate as much or more as documents, as textual products, than they do as anything else and it is this probability that is underpinning the present discussion.

Quite literally, a kirsh kitab does not exist without texts. Even the name kirsh kitab, or “coin writing,” designates that it is the appliance of written text that makes a kirsh kitab what it is. Without text, it is not a kirsh kitab; it is either unfinished raw material or, if embellished on one side with gold leaf shaped in a sunburst design, a necklace known as a sumpt. Conversely, though, when a sumpt has texts engraved into its plain side, i.e., the side of the silver disc without gold decoration, it ceases to be called a sumpt and, instead, it is a kirsh kitab or kirsh kitab with gold (ma dhihab). Yet, a kirsh kitab is more than a silver slate used for the recording of texts and writing; as already mentioned, for it to have any protective potential, a kirsh kitab must have had words from the Qur’ān engraved into its surface. Almost exclusively, these words came from the “Aya al Kursi” (“The Throne Verse”) of Surat al Baqarah (The Chapter of the Cow). This attribute, in and of itself, does not make the kirsh kitab unique as there are many little silver “Aya al Kursi” pendants and lockets that are widely available nearly everywhere today. As textual products and as texts, the kirsh kitab bear little resemblance to the contemporary “Aya al Kursi” medals, but the distinctions between the two are useful for illustrative purposes. So, whereas the new stocks might fall into a category of products that are viewed as “the growing mass commoditization of the Islamic tradition,” the kirsh kitab were very much a local handicraft tradition, and this difference likely accounts for the disparities found in each of their texts. With the mass-marketed necklaces, the perfection and tiny text of the mechanized engraving of the “Aya al Kursi” is something akin to Walter Ong’s commentary about printing books: “Printed texts look machine-made, as they are.... Typographic control typically impresses more by its tidiness and inevitability: the lines perfectly regular, all justified on the right side, everything coming out even visually, and without the aid of guidelines or ruled borders that often occur in manuscripts.... By and large, printed texts are far easier to read than manuscript texts.” If today’s “Aya al Kursi” pendant is analogous to the printed words described by Ong, then the kirsh kitab must surely embody his thoughts about manuscripts.

In fact, the manufacture of kirsh kitab can be aligned quite neatly with manuscript culture. To begin with, every piece is the antithesis of print-capitalism with its faculty for “infinite reproduction” stripped of “individualizing ... habits.” Rather, what is seen with each kirsh kitab through its handwritten content is the epitome of

The four remaining kirsh kitab were each made up of a different patchwork of ayat from the Qur’ān and one of these also included a duʿā (prayer).

51 Khalid, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, May 10, 2018.
52 The author documented 116 kirsh kitab samples in Oman. Of this number, 106 (91%) used words from the “Aya al Kursi” exclusively, and three combined words from the “Aya al Kursi” with those from another verse. In total, 109 (94%) examples contained words from “Aya al Kursi.” One kirsh kitab was engraved with words from Surat Ya Sin (Chapter Ya Sin) and two others with words from Surat al Fatiha (The Opening Chapter).
54 Walter J. Ong, Orality and Literacy: The Technologizing of the Word (New York: Routledge, 2002), 120.
personalized predilections, as extra phrases, numbers, and symbols are blended with ayat (Qurʾān verses; sing. aya) that might also have missing, misspelled, or broken words.\(^{56}\) Granted, while this may appear to be an unpardonable level of ineptitude or an exhibit of charm writing by way of the occult scriptural sciences,\(^{57}\) and it is within the realm of possibilities that both or either of these prospects might be the case, it is also in line with the errors that typify manuscripts.\(^{58}\) Moreover, even in the medieval Arabic manuscript industry, with its highly trained copyists and rigorous proofing protocols, authors sometimes concluded their original tomes with apologies in anticipation of the inevitable mistakes that they expected to be introduced by others in later renditions.\(^{59}\) This begs the question that, if these inaccuracies were the norm for scribes and copyists who used conventional writing materials, should there be any expectation that the use of silversmithing tools on a resistant surface will yield higher levels of textual accuracy? Probably not, although it does make the irregular and inconsistent texts on the kirsh kitab even more understandable and emblematic of manuscript traditions.

Obviously, texts cannot create themselves and the kirsh kitab are no exception. Here, again, the manuscript model provides a guide to follow, this time for gathering insights into what it meant to produce the kirsh kitab as texts. Like with manuscripts, the kirsh kitab are “producer-oriented” texts in the sense that every single copy corresponds directly to an individual maker’s time and effort, unlike the automated reproduction of innumerable copies from a single prototype.\(^{60}\) However, the producers of the kirsh kitab texts were not from the same mold as the manuscript copyists, scribes, notaries, or other document writers,\(^{61}\) who were known for their competencies with texts and writing, nor were they drawn from the ranks of the shuyukh or any other learned “carriers of the Quran,”\(^{62}\) who were commonly tasked with duplicating the scriptures for the laities. Instead, the kirsh kitab authors were silversmiths; the very same suwwag who crafted the silver discs and affixed them to chains also wrote the Qurʾānic words by scratching them into being.\(^{63}\)

To write a kirsh kitab, it is presumed that a saʿīg had to have a skill somewhat related to what Dale Eickelman identified as “mnemonic domination” or “mnemonic possession.”\(^{64}\) But in a more diluted guise, since neither the Qurʾān nor any other religious treatises were to be memorized in their entirety.\(^{65}\) What an adept craftsman who could make a kirsh kitab was thought to mnemonically hold, it turns out, was flawless, pristine memorization of the “Aya al Kursi,”\(^{66}\) coupled with the ability to write it. The use of patterns, templates, or even the Qurʾān as a guide to copy from was expressly ruled out; for the sacred texts on a kirsh kitab to have any effectiveness, they had to come straight from the

\(^{56}\) There are 1,258 total irregularities in the 116 kirsh kitab recorded by the author. These irregularities include words missing from the ayat, misspelled words, broken words, as well as added words, numbers, and symbols.


\(^{60}\) Ong, *Orality and Literacy*, 120.


\(^{63}\) Salim, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, November 4, 2017.


\(^{66}\) Ahmed, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, May 10, 2018.
memory of the sa’iq who wrote it. It is not immediately clear why the memorization of the words was necessary. The Qur’ān, it must be remembered, is a “recitation-text” which, at its foundation, “denies its writteness while foregrounding its recitational quality,” and this might have fostered a popular, idealized conviction that its revered words were formerly produced solely from memorization and not by any other method. Furthermore, studies in other Muslim communities have found creeds that maintain that Qur’ānic words have to be “internalized ... in the head” before their strength and force can be fully realized, and it is plausible that this doctrine or something like it may have applied to inner Oman whenever the protective powers of texts were needed. But whether or not these are the reasons behind the importance of memorized texts for making the kirsh kitab is not as crucial as seeing that it was a sa’iq’s encapsulation of the words he wanted to write that gave those words their intended efficacy.

The following kirsh kitab examples draw these themes together. Each text was produced by a different sa’iq, but each text was etched with the aim of replicating the “Aya al Kursi” to fend off Umm al Subyan, thereby making textual conformity a probable outcome. This is not the case here. The imprecisions of the manuscript art, any faults of mnemonic control, and the limitations of pre-1970s education in inner Oman, when the available maktab or kuttab (Qur’ān-based primary school) literacy could denote some Qur’ānic reading and memorization without the ability to write, are all liable for the textual variations that appear across kirsh kitab samples. Before looking at the words written by the suwwag, the complete “Aya al Kursi” is given for comparison since it is the archetypical text:

“Aya al Kursi”

Allah, there is no god but He
The Living, the Eternal, He cannot be taken by slumber nor sleep,
His are all things in the heavens and on earth.
Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He permits?
He knows what is
Before or behind them,
Nor shall they compass aught of His knowledge except as He wills it.
His Throne extends over the heavens and the earth,
And He feels no fatigue in preserving them
And He is the Most High, the Supreme.

69 Ibid., 28.
71 Limbert, In the Time of Oil, 5 and 86, respectively.
72 Said, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, March 16, 2018.
The next three texts are from *kirsh kitab* and are offered, line by line, exactly as they have been carved into the silver. With the original Arabic text, misspelled words are provided in green but spelled as they were written, words missing from a line are marked with an ellipsis in parenthesis, broken words are indicated with a hyphen where the split occurs, and added words are written in red. The English translations are notated the same except for misspelled words. If a word from “Aya al Kursi” is misspelled, but it is still an actual word, the resulting translation is green; if the misspelled word is not a word, but it is identifiable as part of “Aya al Kursi,” then what is assumed to be the intended translation is green and placed in brackets.

**Text 1**

Allah, there is no *Allah* but He
The Living, the Eternal, [He cannot be taken by]
Slumber nor sleep, His are all things in
The heavens and on earth.
Who is (...) [intercede in] Hi – – s

**Text 2**

Allah, there is no god but He
Living, the Eternal, He cannot be taken by slumber
Nor sleep, His are all things in *heavens* and on ear – – th. Who is there that can intercede in His presence except as He per – – mits? He knows what is before or [be – – hind them], nor shall they compass aught of His know – – ledge except as He wills it. Extends His Throne

**Text 3**

Allah, there is no god but (...) the Living,
The Eternal, He cannot be taken by [slumber]
Nor sleep, His are all things in [the heavens] and On earth. Who [is there that can] intercede in His presence
Except as He permits? He knows what is before or Behind them, nor shall they compass aught Of His knowledge except as He wills it. His Throne extends over [The heavens] and the earth, and He does not like Preserving them and He is the Most High, The Supreme. *There is no compulsion in religion*
The truth stands out
The omissions and lapses shown in the *kirsh kitab* texts above are not outliers; of the more than one hundred *kirsh kitab* texts that were examined, there was hardly a single one that could pass as an impeccable reproduction of “Aya al Kursi.” The factors that are likely at the root of these errors have already been presented. What remains to discover is why such flagrant textual flaws were passable.

3 Mnemonic Alchemy and the Logic of Textual Imperfection

At first, it might seem barely conceivable that any of the hallowed words from the Qur’ān could become as mangled as they were, as texts one through three show, and yet still be sought as a deterrent against a *jinniya* as horrific and devastating as Umm al Subyan.\(^{79}\) Naturally, the thought occurs that it cannot be too out of the ordinary that, when unlettered men engraved texts for unlettered women,\(^{80}\) some inaccuracies were bound to happen. Besides, there is also plenty of data compiled from other settings that demonstrate the weight that written words carry, especially holy words, among those who cannot read well. This is apparent in the research of Mercedes García-Arenal about written Arabic for Moriscos in Spain: “The

75 Catalog number 13 M—02.17.2018, author’s database.
76 Catalog number 4 N—04.20.2018, author’s database.
77 Catalog number 17 N—03.16.2018, author’s database.
78 These additional words are from the first line of the *aya* that follows “Aya al Kursi.”
79 Even now, many Omanis insist that the *kirsh kitab* are faithful renderings of the “Aya al Kursi” and that any mistakes with the words were due to the inexperience of novice craftsmen. Unless every piece currently available for purchase was made by a trainee, then what this position really suggests is that Omanis today find it implausible that these silver texts with their divine contents could be so contorted.
80 There is no shortage of data about the dearth of literacy and educational facilities in premodern inner Oman. For a good description, see Rabi, *The Emergence of States*, 49–52, 155–58, and 208.
select purpose of protecting its wearer, without other thoughts of money or profit or anything else, the resulting *kirsh kitab* could be expected to perform as planned. All that was left for customers was to know how to gauge a silversmith’s intent, and this relied heavily on a *sa‘īg*’s reputation for religious piety and practice, with elements like prayer and alms-giving being part of this equation.\(^3\)

\(^3\) Salim, interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, November 4, 2017.
Finally, nearly all kirsh kitab display a tied-up likeness of Umm al Subyan, the feared jinniya whose wrath should be disabled by the presence of the partial holy texts, engraved into their surfaces. As an “iconographic symbol” that made the target and desired effect of the scriptures unmistakable, even to the completely unlettered for whom a written aya was no more than a collection of lines with curves and dots, the graphic depiction of Umm al Subyan was a recognizable affirmation of a sa’iq’s talents and a literal representation of the words on the kirsh kitab that would render the jinniya harmless. In the recollections of one elderly sa’iq renowned for his silver writing who used to write on occasion for less gifted suwwag, the image of the jinniya as it appeared on a disc had to come from within the maker; it had to come from his heart. Only then, by drawing into silver what he saw inside himself, could the sa’iq display Umm al Subyan as being neutralized by the words around her.

4 Conclusion: The Good Judge’s Memory

It is difficult to contemplate the roles of mnemonic authority in the fabrication of imperfect texts and their reinforcing graphics without recalling some of the age-old questions about the very nature of memory and writing. Jacques Derrida explored Plato’s arguments about the association between the two when he wrote of writing as having “no essence or value of its own... It is in its type the mime of memory, of knowledge, of truth, etc.” This distillation of the ancient orator’s take on texts “the best of them really serve only to remind us of what we know” actually might encompass some of the logic of coin writing in that the silver texts were ultimately mnemonic products whose effectiveness seems to have rested more on a sa’iq’s memory than on exact textual reproduction.

Taking Derrida’s inquiry into Plato’s contents further is even more revealing because it goes past the postulation that memory and texts are somehow inimical to each other. Turning to Laws, xii: 957–58, Derrida brings attention to Plato’s insistence that texts and their memorization are the cornerstones of the “good judge.” In Plato’s phrasing, “of all such speeches, the writings of the lawgiver will serve as a test; and inasmuch as he possesses these within himself, as a talisman against other speeches, the good judge will guide both himself and the State aright.” Here, little licence is required to make the transference from the good judge to the sa’iq, from the texts of the lawgiver to the divine Scripture by Allah, or to see that the talismanic shelter created by internalizing these writings can equally apply to magistrate and silversmith so that each might better tend his State or clientele.

The texts on the silver discs that were churned out of workshops in inner Oman complicate perceptions about writing, texts, and memory, and not just because Derrida and Plato can intermittently cloud things with contradictions. This confusion arises because the suwwag’s writings were taken from a sacred source that is at once textual and mnemonic, scriptural and recitational, and thus resists placement into binary categories that are one or the other. At the same time, all the

84 Only 18 of 116 documented kirsh kitab are without a jinniya image.
85 Ong, Orality and Literacy, 74.
86 Grehan, Twilight of the Saints, 153.
87 A sa’iq interviewed by the author, Nizwa, Oman, May 11, 2018.
protective inscriptions made by craftsmen to keep Umm al Subyan at bay were ancillary to the ups and downs of the Omani silver market. A *sa‘īg* was a writer of memorized texts that gave people safety, but his scribal services were needed only as long as local silver prices remained buoyant; when people stopped buying silver, they also stopped buying his texts and, by extension, the amuletic properties of his memory. The lot of the wretched *jinniyya*, now that Oman's silver era and its *kirsh kitab* has ended, curiously remains unsure.