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The Evolution of the Jinn in Middle Eastern Culture and Literature from Pre-Islam to the Modern Age

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By

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Introduction

The legends of the jinn, romanized as *djinn* and anglicized as *genies,* have long been a part of mystical story telling tradition. The modern-day genies of Western film are lovable and comedic tricksters who grant wishes to the master that uncovers them, but this depiction is a far cry from their origin point in the Ancient Middle Eastern region known as Mesopotamia. Here they began as powerful nature spirits inspiring poets, soothsayers, and philosophers by sharing messages of the unseen world. The modern Western depiction of the jinn is devoid of cultural and historical context. The very name "jinn" is an Arabic term, derived from the triliteral root جنن (j/n/n) which can roughly be translated to "to hide, cover, conceal or veil".[1] Its cognates include مجنون (*majnūn*) translated as possessed, obsessed or insane, جَنَّة (*jannah*) which is the name of Paradise and the Garden of Eden, and جَنِين (*janīn*) an embryo or a hidden spirit.[2] The nature of the jinn has been altered considerably since their origin, as it evolved alongside the various civilizations that inhabited the region currently known as the Middle East through the centuries. How, then, did these creatures first come to light? More importantly, why have they changed so much from their original conception?

Modern academic discussions of the Middle East have largely been dominated by Western political scientists who seek to examine the patterns of violence and social upheaval in the region. After the events of September 11, 2001[3], the West shifted towards unpacking the ideology of radical Islamist movements and the necessity of military intervention. In discussions of culture, however, the academic field has gone to great lengths in recent years to correct the stereotypes perpetuated by the work of the early Orientalists and return to a more accurate

[1] A Dictionary of Modern Written Arabic (Arabic -English), 4th ed. Wehr, Hans (2001) "جنن"
[2] Hans Wehr "جنين"
[3] In which members of an Islamist Radical group, Al-Qa'eda, crashed planes into New York City's twin towers.

depiction of the peoples and cultures of the Middle East. Nonetheless, the re-centering of scholarship can only do so much when representations in the media are still dominated by problematic tropes that represent the region in an unflattering and fantastical light. Even now, as Europe struggles with an influx of immigrants fleeing conflict in the Middle East, fear based in generalizations and cultural differences, perpetuated by the media, has led to anti-immigrant violence, protests, and discrimination. These media tropes demonstrate a lack of consideration towards the history and traditions of the region. Of the many manipulations that exist, legends of the jinn are at the forefront, and serve as a placeholder for all things "Oriental". We need look no further than Disney's Genie in the 1992 and 2019 films *Aladdin* to see this representation. However, if we examine the history of the jinn and their evolution, it is possible to place them back into their appropriate context and establish that the modern genie trope is a product of the West rather than a reflection of the jinn as imagined in their root cultures of the Middle East.

The Proto-Jinn of the Early Middle East (Mesopotamia)

Mesopotamia was home to the world's most well known and earliest true civilizations. Situated between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers in a region that would become known as the "Fertile Crescent", this region was populated as early as 14,000 BCE. It would, however, be another 10,000 years before recognizable cities were formed under the rule of the Sumerian Dynasties. The ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, Babylonian, and Assyrian civilizations influenced the cultural and religious identity of the Middle Eastern region. These civilizations are the origin point of the proto-jinn (a term of my own creation used to describe the evolutionary ancestors of the jinn). The diffusion of cultural beliefs and practices through trade and warfare with neighboring societies in the Arabian Peninsula influenced the evolution of the jinn in the region as a whole. It is in these cultures that we find the first images and limited written accounts of the

jinn in their Pre-Islamic form as entities associated with the natural world. As with many cultures of the time, these societies were polytheistic with a heavy focus on nature deities and spirits due to nature's central role in human survival. While Ancient Sumeria would eventually change ruling hands, their religious practices were only subtly modified, and historians have grouped their religious practices into a larger "Mesopotamian tradition".[4] This Mesopotamian tradition can be divided into three stages in which the jinn evolve within larger religious practices.

The first stage, characterized by the depiction of core nature deities in nonhuman forms, comes into existence as early as the 4th millennium BCE.[5] In this stage, the roles of the deities were loosely defined and often overlapped with each other without any hierarchical stratification. Here we find the concept of the proto-jinn as wind and fire spirits that could be angered and cause destruction in retribution.[6] These proto-jinn were largely formless, or as legend states, would hide their forms in dust devils or other destructive storms.[7] During this phase, with its lack of structured hierarchy, it is unclear if the proto-jinn were viewed as gods in their own right, or rather a less powerful spirit whose abilities were subpar to those of the nature gods. Regardless of their status, these elemental spirits inspired fear and awe among the people due to their propensity for damage and chaos.

The second phase evolved around the 3rd millennium BCE. This phase was "characterized by a visualization of the gods as human in shape and organized in a polity of a primitive democratic caste in which each deity had his or her special offices and functions, overlaid and conditioned [with] the religious forms and characteristics of the earlier stage."[8]

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[4] "Mesopotamian Religion." In *Encyclopedia Britannica*, July 26, 1999.https://www.britannica.com/topic/Mesopotamian-religion/Stages-of-religious-development.
[5] Ibid
[6] Ṣāliḥ, Ḥalīmah. "Al-Jinn fī al-Shiᶜr al-Jāhilī." ("The Jinn in Pre-Islamic Poetry.") Masters Thesis, An-Najah National University, 2005.
[7] Ibid p. 7
[8] "Mesopotamian Religion"

While the actual distinction of the proto-jinn between god and spirit are still largely undefined at this point, they begin to appear in legends as beings with animalistic features.[9]

The final phase of evolution came to a slow fruition throughout the 2nd and 1st millennia BCE. "[This age] was characterized by a growing emphasis on personal religion involving concepts of sin and forgiveness and by change of the earlier democratic divine polity into an absolute monarchical structure, dominated by the god of the national state…"[10] It is in this final phase that the most literary and iconographical references to the proto-jinn appear. Here, they take on a distinctly second-class position to deities, as they are stripped of the immortality of the gods.[11] In this era, the proto-jinn also undergo a divergence in roles and responsibility. This change is most likely a direct result of the newly evolved belief in sin and personal religion rather than collective responsibility. On one hand, proto-jinn are depicted as demonic spirts responsible for carrying out divine punishment from the gods in the form of disease and famine. The Sumerians referred to them as *Kadam,* or creatures of darkness who find their home in the dark underworld, *Kur.*[12] On the other hand, the proto-Jinn were intermediaries between the world of the gods and the world of man, often depicted with wings as a representation of their bird-like ability to "fly" between worlds. A relief recovered from the palace of King Sargon II at Dur

[9] Lebling, Robert W. *Legends of the Fire Spirits: Jinn and Genies from Arabia to Zanzibar.* I. B. Tauris, 2010, p 6-10
[10] "Mesopotamian Religion"
[11] el-Zein, Amira. *Islam, Arabs, and Intelligent World of the Jinn.* Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press. (2017).
[12] Ṣāliḥ p. 8

Sharrukin, c. 713 BCE, depicts a human man with wings who is believed to be one of these bird-like proto-jinn by modern scholars (see figure 1).[13]

Figure 1: Assyrian relief of winged jinn[14]

What is particularly intriguing about this last phase is the evolution of the proto-jinn as a direct result of the distancing of humanity from the deities. This appears to be a reflection of the innate desire of humans to find closeness and a relationship with their source of religion. In the modern age, we see a similar result in denominations of Christianity such as Catholicism, in which the saints act as intermediaries between humans and God when direct communication with the deity is either frowned upon or thought to be impossible. Once these spirts had taken on this role of intermediary between the pantheon and humans, people whose roles were believed to involve communion with the deities, such as soothsayers, philosophers, and poets, began to attribute their inspiration and continued success to the role of proto-jinn, largely boosting their importance in the eyes of mankind, despite their lessening in "god-like" attributes such as immortality.[15]

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[13] Webb, Jeffrey B. *American Myths, Legends, and Tall Tales: An encyclopedia of American folklore*. (29 August 2016). p. 527.
[14] Brooklyn Museum. *Apkallu-figure Wearing Fancy Bracelets*. 2021. Relief. *Brooklyn Museum of Art*, January 11, 2021.
[15] el-Zein p. 34

Pre-Islamic Arabia

To accurately understand the context of the jinn in this last era, it is important to examine Mesopotamian neighbors in the Arabian Peninsula. These neighboring societies remained polytheistic with an emphasis on nature deities and spirits. Connected with other large polytheistic civilizations in the region through trade or combat, these societies shared ideas and mythologies with their neighbors. While none of these civilizations originally had the exact same pantheon, over time, their pantheons mingled, and their mythologies became incorporated with each other. Their reverence for nature spirts and deities was not eliminated with this intermingling, rather it evolved, influencing the narrative of the proto-jinn that would dominate the cultural sphere until the arrival of monotheism.

Though few written records exist from the Arabian Peninsula prior to the arrival of Islam, c. 630 CE, archeological records and accounts written by sources outside the region have provided an outline of the prominent civilizations in the region at the time. A far cry from the clean political boundaries that exist in the modern day, Pre-Islamic Arabia was an ever-shifting conglomeration of tribal territories and early cities based largely on blood ties and trade alliances. "Among the most prominent civilizations were Thamud, which arose around 3000 BCE and lasted to about 300 CE, and Dilmun, which arose around the end of the fourth millennium and lasted to about 600 CE. From the beginning of the first millennium BCE, Southern Arabia was home to a number of kingdoms such as the Sabaean kingdom…"[16] Additionally, tribes of nomadic-pastoralist Bedouins dominated regions of the Peninsula that were not under the direct control of the aforementioned Kingdoms. These civilizations interacted

[16] Boundless. "World Civilizations I (HIS101) – Biel." Pre-Islamic Arabia | World Civilizations I (HIS101) – Biel. Accessed April 8, 2023. https://courses.lumenlearning.com/suny-fmcc-boundless-worldhistory/chapter/pre-islamic-arabia/.

intimately with their Mesopotamian neighbors, and as such, provide important historical context to the discussion of the proto-jinn.

The Spread of Monotheism and Jinn in the Middle East

The rise of larger civilizations in the Middle East gave birth to a new evolution of religion in the form of Monotheism. The predominant monotheistic religions that arose in the region were those groups that form the Abrahamic Faith triumvirate; Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, and while these religions spread slowly, they grew to become the foremost religions in the modern Middle East. Though their practices are viewed in the modern day as disparate, they are the same in their core belief of the one God, whose prophet was Abraham, and their origin points can be tracked linearly, branching from each other. In their spread, all three religions adapted the beliefs of converts in the region and incorporated them into their own doctrine. Like most religions, adaptation and a level of cultural appeal was critical to their long-term survival.

The first of the Abrahamic faiths to originate in the region was Judaism, whose cannon patriarch, the prophet Abraham, received a message from God to leave his homeland and settle in the land of Canaan, or modern day Israel and Palestine. According to the Torah, the core Jewish text, Abraham's sons, Issac and Ishmael, carried on the promise to God by remaining in the land and taking actions to establish it as the homeland of the new Jewish faith.[17] Abraham was said to have taught the merits of God during his time in Canaan and therefore is credited as the founder of the religion. While no concrete evidence of Abraham's existence has been discovered, the religion's origin has, nonetheless, been attributed to the region of Canaan.[18] The codification of Judaism is attributed to the Israelite Prophet Moses, to whom God revealed his

[17] Ska, Jean-Louis. *The Exegesis of the Pentateuch: Exegetical Studies and Basic Questions*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009.
[18] Dever, William G. *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?: What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel.* Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Pub. Co., 2002, p. 91

commandments after he led the exodus of the Israelites out of enslavement in Egypt. From there, the Israelites returned to their promised land, and Judaism spread through the region.

Though Judaism does not mention jinn outright, there are references in the Talmud to *mazzikin*, which are invisible spirits who cause harm and illness. These *mazzikin* were believed to be under the command of God and carried out his divine punishment on earth [19], much like the Sumerian *kadam*. However, angels, or *mal'akh*, do feature prominently in Jewish literature. These *mal'akh* act as messengers from God to his defenders on Earth, reinforcing the pre-Abrahamic visualization of a spirit that acts as an intermediary between the divine and mankind. Additionally, as the proto-jinn were said to provide inspiration for poets, soothsayers, and philosophers, *mal'akh* were said to have helped interpret prophetic visions for those who received them.[20] This, of course, is not a carbon copy translation of the proto-jinn to the modern jinn. However, it is indicative of trends from the Pre-Abrahamic civilizations making their way into the structured Abrahamic faiths.

Christianity evolved from Judaism through the teachings of Jesus, who Christians believe to be the son of God and the long awaited Messiah from the Jewish Torah. According to the Bible, the core text of Christianity, Jesus argued with the Jewish scholars against their practices, believing they had strayed from the ideals of God. He was eventually arrested by Jewish authorities and transferred to the hands of the Roman Empire, who executed him c. 33 CE[21]. Biblically, Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into heaven. Those who believed in his ascension and continued to teach his resurrection from the dead formed the early Christian church. Christianity spread more readily than its predecessor, Judaism, largely due to the actions

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[19] Lindblade, Frank. *Demons and Demonology*. Lindblade Press, 1948.
[20] Karin Shöpflin, *"God's Interpreter" in Angels: The Concept Of Celestial Beings*, ed. Friedrich V Reiterer, Tobias Nicklas, and Karin Schopflin (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2007), p 198
[21]Sanders, E. P. *The Historical Figure of Jesus.*. New York: Penguin Books, 1996, p. 11

of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great. Emperor Constantine first decriminalized Christianity in the Empire under the Edict of Milan in 313 CE.[22] He, himself, later converted, and adopted Christianity as the official religion of Rome in 380 CE.[23] Additionally, Judaism does not actively seek converts, and generally limits conversion to intermarriage.

Christianity, like Judaism, has no direct mention of the jinn in its core text. The Christian Bible, however, holds copious mention of angels as intermediaries between God and humans. Additionally, the iconography associated with both the biblical description of cherubim and the four evangelists have their roots in pre-Abrahamic pagan iconography frequently associated with the proto-jinn. The most obvious of these are icons of Matthew the Evangelist, depicting him as a winged man, that are reminiscent of the winged human attributed to being a jinn in Mesopotamian sculptures mentioned previously. Two common depictions of protective and beneficial proto-jinn from the Mesopotamian era were the forms of a winged lion and bull called *Lamassu* and are similarly depicted in the images of the Evangelists, Mark and Luke (see figures 2 – 5 for comparison).[24] Lastly, John the Evangelist's symbol, the eagle, is prominently featured in Mesopotamian creation myths as a nature spirit (figures 6 and 7).

[22] Frend, W. H. C.. *The Early Church*. SPCK, 1967, p. 137.
[23] R. Gerberding and J. H. Moran Cruz, *Medieval Worlds* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004) pp. 55–56.
[24] El-Zein p. 90

Figure 2: Lion bodied *Lamassu*[25]

Figure 3: Venetian statue of Mark the Evangelist[26]

Figure 4: Bull bodied *Lamassu*[27]

Figure 5: Medieval lectern statuette of Luke the Evangelist[28]

[25] The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Human-Headed Winged Lion (Lamassu) | Assyrian | Neo-Assyrian | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," n.d. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322609.
[26] Arte2000. "The Lion of Saint Mark in Venice: Symbol of Magnificence and Power," April 16, 2021. https://www.arte2000.it/en/blog-en/the-lion-of-saint-mark-in-venice-symbol-of-magnificence-and-power/.
[27] The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Human-Headed Winged Bull (Lamassu) | Assyrian | Neo-Assyrian | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," n.d. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322608.
[28] Online Collection of the Walters Art Museum. "Statuette of the Evangelist Symbol of Luke from a Lectern," August 1, 2022. https://art.thewalters.org/detail/37166/statuette-of-the-evangelist-symbol-of-luke-from-a-lectern/.

Figure 6: Mesopotamian eagle headed deity[29]

Figure 7: Italian carving of John the Evangelist[30]

Our greatest source of written explanation of jinn comes from Islam, whose traditions codify their presence as a creation of God and formally name them "jinn". Islam originated in Hira, near Mecca, when the Prophet Muhammad received his first revelation from an angel of God in 610 CE.[31] He began teaching these revelations three years later, with strong encouragement from his wife Khadījah bint Khuwaylid (خديجة), later to be known as *Umm al-Mu'minīn* (Mother of the Believers). The Prophet died in Mecca shortly thereafter, however, by

[29] The Metropolitan Museum of Art. "Relief Panel | Assyrian | Neo-Assyrian | The Metropolitan Museum of Art," n.d. https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/322614.
[30] Museum, Victoria and Albert. "Symbol of St. John the Evangelist | Unknown | V&A Explore The Collections." Victoria and Albert Museum: Explore the Collections, n.d. https://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O73092/symbol-of-st-john-the-panel-unknown/.
[31] It is worth noting that Muhammad's revelations are not dissimilar in description from poets receiving inspiration from jinn. There is conflict in the Islamic tradition surrounding artistic poetry due, in part, to this very issue. The poetry of the Qur'an is said to be divinely inspired whereas artistic poetry focused on base desires is considered by some to be demonically inspired as it was a favored story telling medium in the pagan cultures to which Islam was opposed.

the time of his death in 632 CE, he had united the tribes and Islam had taken hold of the majority of the Arabian Peninsula.

The success of the spread of Islam was heavily dependent on its appeal to the people. As such, it was incredibly important that the formal religion incorporated preexisting beliefs. Additionally, the founders of Islam, the prophet Muhammad and his family, had lived most of their lives before the revelations were given to Muhammad and therefore shared existing cultural ideas with their fellow people. One of the main beliefs that was absorbed and restructured by Islam was the existence of the jinn. Prior to Islam, the jinn were wild nature spirits with the power to carry out the divine punishment of the gods. Islam took these entities and redefined them as a race created by God to coexist beside humankind. The jinn in Islam were different from humans of course, but their newly defined core attribute was the ability to choose the path of Islam or not, and the will to act in a way that was good in order to receive the eternal blessings of those deemed good by God, or to choose evil, and be punished for eternity for their choice. While the jinn remained separate from humanity, in their own plane of existence, they were suddenly held to the same level of personal responsibility as humankind as well as demoted from a status of divinity.

While the depths of Islamic philosophy on the structure of the universe are beyond the scope of this paper, in order to understand the actions of the jinn there must be a brief and simplified discussion of the idea. There is a fundamental belief in Islam of *al-ghayb* (best translated as “the unseen and the unknown”) which pertains to everything from the understanding of the Universe to God himself. Within this unseen and unknown, there are multiple worlds or realms outside of the human one, the belief in which is codified during the daily prayers of practitioners of Islam who recite, “Praise belongs to God, the Lord of the

worlds." In her book *Islam, Arabs, and the Intelligent World of the Jinn*, author Amira El-Zein suggests that there are three such realms we encounter on a daily basis; the material, the celestial, and the imaginal.[32] This *imaginal* plane is home to the jinn, the material is home to humans, and the celestial to God and his angels. These realms are not separate with slight overlapping points as a Venn diagram might look, but more like three very thin pieces of fabric laying on each other so that the movement in one realm might cause impacts in the realm to either side of it. In this way, the jinn can interact or even slip into the material plane to appear to humans in the form of animals. Therefore, while they predominantly remain unseen, they can cause impact in the human realm. One critical difference between humans and jinn is that jinn can see and choose to interact with humans at will, while humans remain ignorant of the jinn's true form.[33]

In the Islamic tradition, jinn are similar to humans, despite the separation in their relative locations. El-Zein says, "Jinn and humans have mental faculties that allow them to access knowledge, perceive the truth, and distinguish themselves from all other living beings in the universe."[34] Moreover, she points out, "These two intelligent species are described as discerning the Word of God through reasoning, while the rest of Creation grasps it instinctively."[35] This description provides both jinn and humans with the innate responsibility of knowledge: choice. Like humans, jinn have the ability to choose the right path or accept the punishment for not doing so. Another similarity between humankind and the jinn in the Islamic tradition is their social structure. Both jinn and humans exist in tribes and *umam* (nations) that can be sedentary or nomadic with their own monarchs and chiefs.[36] The religious tradition of these groups of jinn

[32] El-Zein p. 6
[33] Ibid p.23
[34] Ibid p.13
[35] Ibid p.13
[36] Ibid p.16

parallels that of humans. Prior to the advent of the Abrahamic faiths, they followed pantheistic belief systems. In the Abrahamic Era, the jinn, like their human counterparts, received the word of God and were provided the opportunity to convert. Lastly, unlike the angels and demons of Islam, the Qur'an states that "On that day [of judgement] none shall be questioned about his sin, neither man nor jinn."[37]

This ability of the jinn to convert to Islam by choice and interact with humans at will created an interesting dynamic in the human world. Followers of Islam did not fear their fellow jinn, but they did fear those who chose not to convert to Islam and began to associate them with things that they viewed to be harmful, sacrilegious, or in violation of free will and bodily autonomy. Many Muslims in the medieval age believed that jinn could "enter their houses, run in the streets, and even make their way into food and drink. They claimed to have felt their presence; that is why some Muslims searched for ways to neutralize them through magic."[38] Similarly, it came to be believed that these heretic jinn would possess humans and cause illness within them. The Prophet Muhammad himself was said to have been possessed when he ate dates from a nearby well and began to hallucinate. God healed him, but the well was filled with earth to avoid anyone suffering a similar fate. While the Qur'an does not attribute the possession to a jinn directly, the symptoms of the possession were similar to other possessions in which jinn were said to be the perpetrators.

This change in the characteristics of the jinn reflects the social change that came about in the Middle East with the spread of Islam. Personal responsibility and free will became increasingly important, though the root of this change can be seen even earlier in the third phase of the Mesopotamian era, in which personal responsibility became prominent. Also instituted

[37] Qur'an 55:39 (Translation Amira El-Zein)
[38] Ibid p. 75

was a growing discontent with those individuals and societies that had not chosen the path of Islam or another path of the book (the Abrahamic faiths). This discontent is reflected in belief that the jinn who have not chosen to follow Islam will inflict harm on believers for spite. Perhaps most importantly the belief in *al-ghayb,* the expansive unknown, is established in this era. This idea has been subjected to the theorizing of Islamic scholars for generations.

The Great Split

The spread of Islam through the world gave rise to a split in the jinn as they had previously been understood. After the Prophet's death, the new Islamic territories began to divide into *khilafah,* or caliphates which were political bodies led by those considered to be successors to the Prophet by familial relation or religious legitimacy. The caliphates rapidly expanded their regions of influence, converting their newly conquered peoples and territories to Islam. The most notable of the *khilafah* arose in the Medieval period. The first, the *Rashidun* Caliphate, became the most powerful economic, cultural, and military force in West Asia. Originally led by Abu Bakr, the Rashidun Caliphate conquered the entirety of the Arabian Peninsula. His successor, Umar, conquered large sections of the Byzantine and Sassanian Empires. After Umar's assassination in 644 CE, Uthman was elected caliph, and subsequently conquered Persia and continued expanding further into the Byzantine empire. His successor, Ali, failed in further expansion due to a series of civil wars within the *Khalifah* and was eventually overthrown by the new leader of the Umayyad Caliphate in 661 CE. This transfer of power solidified the divide between Shiite and Sunni Islam that continues into the modern day.

Under the Umayyad Caliphate, Islam spread to Transoxiana, Sindh, the Maghreb, and Al-Andalus. At their height of power, the Umayyads controlled one of the geographically largest empires in history. Their governing system did not force conversion to Islam, however, their

adapted tax structure benefited Muslims and Muslim converts by exempting them from the *zakat,* a tax specifically for non-Muslim inhabitants of the empire. This tax structure was one of many adaptations that exemplified the Umayyad policy of assimilation rather than imperialism. The Umayyads were overthrown in 750 CE by the Abbasids, who then restyled themselves as the Abbasid Caliphate.

The Abbasid Dynasty was the longest ruling of the early Caliphates, as their reign lasted until 1258 CE. They considered themselves to be the most pious of the Caliphates and attempted to return to Islamic study during their reign. Their caliph ruled from Baghdad, shifting the center of power from Greater Syria to modern-day Iraq. Their rule heralded the Golden Age of Islam, a period of great scientific, cultural, and technological advancements, and they graciously incorporated a diversity of religions and cultures into their ruling class. Their reign also marked a great transition period in the cultural sphere of their territory. Previously, the caliphates had been Arab, and maintained Arab traditions. The Abbasids, however, were greatly aided by the Persians in their revolution, and later adopted many of their practices. The Abbasids also employed Turkish armies, whose ideas diffused into the region. Moreover, during the academic pursuits of the Golden Age, the Abbasids imported scholars and philosophers from across the world to contribute to their knowledge bank. Most written work from the era is a product of this cultural emulsion. The depiction of the jinn also evolved in this period as they were examined both by religious scholars in a purely Islamic context, and Persian writers from a cultural lens. Artistic depictions of jinn from this era depict colorful and monstrous creatures in the Persian style as seen in figure 8 and 9.

Figure 8: medieval Persian manuscript illustration[39]

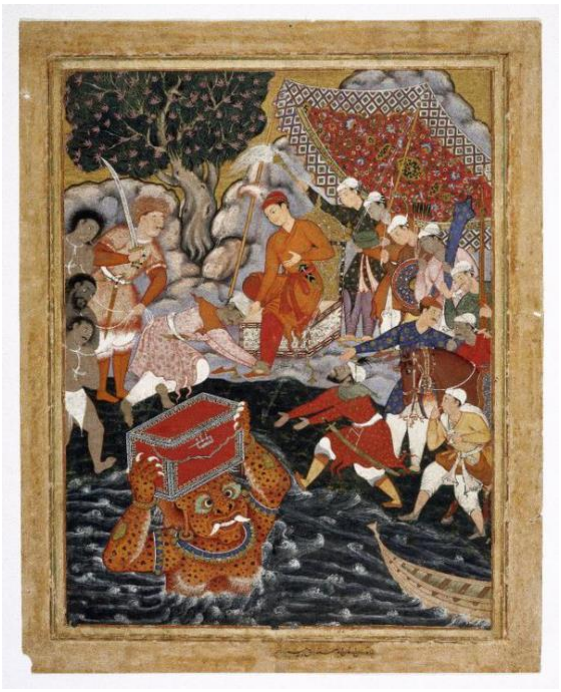

Figure 9: Persian manuscript illustration[40]

The Sack of Baghdad in 1258 CE by the Mongols forced the remaining Abbasid line of rulers, and with them Muslim culture, to flee to Cairo in 1261. Though lacking in both authority and territory, the Abbasid Caliph still claimed religious authority until the Ottoman conquest in 1517, which marked the final collapse of the Abbasid Caliphate. Despite the collapse of the original line of Caliphates, Islam had made its mark on the world. The spread of religion under these dynasties remained, with the result being massive Muslim populations across Western Asia, North Africa, and parts of Europe.

It is important to note that while many individuals did choose to convert to Islam, the vast majority of the Age of the Caliphates was marked by religious tolerance and inclusion. Converts frequently retained their own cultural beliefs and remnants of their prior ideologies, and the evolution of Islam smoothly incorporated them to provide ease for transition. Much like

[39] Ahmad, Muhammad Aurangzeb. "Jinns in Islamic Art," August 21, 2015. http://www.islamscifi.com/jinns-in-islamic-art/.
[40] Ibid

Christianity, previously existing symbols and ideas made their way into Islamic Theology over time, and creatures like jinn, who had existed before the spread of Islam, were adopted, and then codified as features of the new religion.

One Thousand and One Nights

One of the seminal texts on jinn that reached the West from the Middle East was a palimpsest now referred to as *One Thousand and One Nights,* or *One Thousand and One Arabian Nights,* depending on the translation. *One Thousand and One Nights* is a compilation of stories passed down through oral tradition for thousands of years before being written down during the Abbasid Caliphate's Golden Age. Much like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* and Boccaccio's *The Decameron, One Thousand and One Nights* is a framework text in which a compilation of short stories are added into a larger frame story. Unlike *Canterbury Tales* and *The Decameron,* however, *One Thousand and One Nights* has been subject to a broad range of additions and edits by Western translators. Additionally, which translation of the text a reader selects has a large impact on the overarching message of the stories, as English translations alone vary widely between authors. "If nineteenth-century translators saw themselves as capturing the essential character of the Orient for readers in the imperial center, translators today are recovering a multiplicity of voices buried inside a collection that was shaped by many storytellers and many historical moments."[41]

For the purposes of my research, I have consulted *The Annotated Arabian Nights,* translated by Yasmine Seale and annotated by Paulo Lemos Horta, a new comprehensive and highly respected translation. While I am only focusing on two stories that reference the jinn specifically, it is crucial to note that "*One Thousand and One Nights* is…a vast and forever

[41] Seale p. lvii

incomplete compendium of stories leached from at least half a dozen cultural traditions and subjected to countless translations… [and] some of the most popular narrative hallmarks inspired by the stories, such as the jinni that grants only three wishes, are after-the-fact alterations."[42] Nevertheless, it is this text, forever fluid and growing, that perfectly illustrates the very nature of the jinn in this discussion.

In Seale's translation, the first of the stories that Shaharazad tells her husband to prolong her survival through the night is *The Story of the Merchant and the Jinni.* In this story, a wealthy merchant who is traveling stops to rest in an oasis and he tosses the pits of the dates he has eaten over his shoulder without care. Suddenly, a ferocious jinni appears in front of him with a sword, demanding his life in exchange for the life he had taken. The Merchant is of course, confused, as he didn't kill anyone on his travels, but the jinni states that a pit he threw struck his son in the chest and killed him, and blood must pay for blood. The merchant pleads for time to say goodbye to his wife and his children, swearing to God that he will return for his punishment. The jinni, content with the man's vow on God, allows him to go. When the merchant's time is up, he returns to the orchard and waits for the jinni to arrive to kill him. While he waits, three men approach the merchant and hear his story. They vow to stay with him until the end to be companions for him so that he might not die alone. When the jinni arrives, the first man kisses his feet and praises him before asking to tell him a story in exchange for a third of the claim on the merchant's blood. The story he tells amazes the jinni, so he stays good to his word. The second man makes the same deal, and once again, the story amazes the jinni so much that another third of the merchant's blood is given to him. The third old man strikes up the same deal with the jinni and receives the same reward. Having no more claim on the merchant's life, the

[42] Seale p. xvi

jinni leaves and the merchant goes home to his family where he lives happily until the end of his days.

This story illustrates the jinn in a new light that differs from Islamic tradition. In this story the jinn is clearly a believer in God, as he accepts the merchant's oath sworn to God that he might return when his time was up. The jinni, however, still wishes direct harm on the man in retribution for killing his son. The jinni in this light is very human in his relationships and sense of justice. The jinni can also be bargained with and satiated by the stories told to him by the three other men on behalf of the merchant. This is also a level of interaction between jinn and humans that Islamic tradition would not necessarily agree with. Far from remaining invisible or in an animal form to cause chaos, this jinn appears as a humanoid figure who seeks retribution for the crimes committed against him. Though perhaps more callous and cruel than modern sensibilities would deem appropriate, this is one of the early examples of Jinn being figures that humans can relate to.

The second of these stories is *The Story of the Fisherman and the Jinni.* In this story, an elderly fisherman with a wife and three daughters had ignored the morning call to prayer and gone to fish in hopes of catching enough food for the day. His net was caught and torn on a dead donkey. After mending the net, he cast it out again, this time praising the name of God as he did so, but again caught nothing but a heavy jar. Again, he cast his net, begging God to help his catch, and again returned nothing but a pile of rocks and shells. On his fourth and final net cast, the fisherman "begged his Lord to let the sea serve him as it had served Moses."[43] This time, he found "a jar of yellow brass, its mouth stoppered with lead bearing a seal ring's mark." The fisherman thought that perhaps, though he did not catch any fish, he could sell the jar at the

[43] Seale p. 40

market and make enough money to buy food for the day. When he could not lift the jar, however, he decided to empty it and pulled the lead stopper from the mouth of the jar. From the depths of the jar, a monstrous jinni poured out. The jinni began to beg forgiveness from Solomon, prophet of God, claiming he would never again disobey orders. The fisherman was confused, as Solomon had long died, and asked the jinni to clarify his statements. The jinni turned on the farmer and asked him to wish for how he would like to die, so that the jinni might kill him that way. Again confused, the fisherman asked why he had to die. The jinni explained that every century of his entrapment, he had sworn a different reward for whoever freed him from the jar with this century's promise being one of death. The fisherman thought hard and began to form a plan to trap the jinni back into the jar. When the jinni had returned to the jar to prove that a being so mighty could be trapped in such a small space, the fisherman clapped the seal back onto the jar and contained him again. When the jinni begged for his life, the fisherman told him three fables, and after hearing the jinni's vow to God that he would not be harmed, he released the jinni, who rewarded him with riches in the form of magical fish.

This story deviates less from the Islamic tradition, as the jinni was punished for straying from his promise to God. Again, however, the jinni appears in a powerful form and a human is able to directly interact with him. What we see in both of these stories is the beginning of the split in personality of the Jinn after the direct interaction with western ideas. This new form becomes more blatant in the Western tradition of the jinn, who will become genies, as will be discussed in the next section. Nonetheless, the spread of this Western ideology back to the Middle East will directly influence how the jinn are viewed in different communities.

Imperialism in the Middle East

One of the major culture shifts that occurred in the Middle East came as a result of European Imperialism. While the region had always acted as a geographical hurdle to European trade with India, it was not until the conquest of the Ottoman Empire that the peoples of the Middle East were subjected to the blatant exploitation on which Imperialism depends. In regards to the conquest of the Ottoman Empire, an Arab Studies Quarterly article by George Kieh suggests that, "[t]his action truncated the process of autonomous political, economic and socio-cultural development in the area: under the imperial multiplex, the people and the resources of the region were exploited. Thus, while the region was experiencing the malaise of underdevelopment, the Ottoman Empire was developing."[44] Alongside exploitation of resources and labor under Ottoman rule, the peoples of the Middle East were also suddenly united under a single imperial entity. Whether this unification was to the people's benefit or detriment is up for debate, as the academic, scientific, and philosophical advancements of the region are undeniable. However, for the first time in its extensive history, the cultural identity of the West blanketed the region as a whole.

After the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Imperial powers that emerged victorious from World War I, Britain and France, once again splintered the territory, dividing the Middle East into their respective mandates as sanctioned by the League of Nations.[45] Syria and Lebanon were handed to the French, while Mesopotamia (Iraq) and Palestine were given to the British. Turkey was set to be split between France, Britain, Greece, and Italy, but the treaty was never ratified due to the Turkish War of Independence, saving the territory from geographic

[44] Kieh, George Klay. "Western Imperialism in the Middle East: The Case of the United State's Intervention in the Persian Gulf ." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 14, no. 1 (1992): 1–16. https://doi.org/10.13169/arabstudquar.44.1.0001.
[45] Ibid p. 2

destruction.[46] There was universal discontent for being yoked by another set of Imperial powers across the Middle East, and the response was two-fold. On one hand, there was internal pressure from the burdened nations against Western control. On the other, a growing sense of nationalism united the region. Kieh states, "The Arab people became disenchanted because they expected these Western powers to live up to their rhetoric of being the paragons of democracy and self-determination. The emergent frustration gave rise to the birth of a nationalist fervor that had at its cortex the determination to regain Arab control over their own destiny."[47]

While some portions of the region's Imperial powers eventually caved to the pressure for decolonization and some Middle Eastern states were liberated, those states still under imperial control, such as Palestine, saw their preexisting borders splintered, instigating mass scale social conflict. The evolved Arab Nationalist movement suffered under the weight of the ongoing discontent, unable to effectively eliminate Imperialism in the region. Nonetheless, the spirit of Pan-Arabism remained, fundamentally altering the Middle East's internal relationship dynamic. In certain communities, this shift encouraged a hard fall back on fundamentalism, giving rise to future Islamist groups. In others, western ideals were more readily adopted inspiring a more democratic future. What grows out of this period of Imperial control is difficult to generalize, as every state reacted uniquely and on their own timeline. However, what can be surmised is that the West had infiltrated the region in a way that could never be undone and the core of Middle Eastern identity and culture was shifted due to this influence.

[46] "Turkey, Mustafa Kemal and the Turkish War of Independence, 1919–23". Encyclopædia Britannica. 2007. Archived from the original on 25 June 2008. Retrieved 29 October 2007.
[47] Kieh, pp. 1-16

The Orientalist Movement

While Western imperial powers were entrenched in political domination of the Middle East as far back as classical antiquity, their artists, writers, and scholars were occupied with creating representations of the region to distribute to their homelands. This growing fascination with "the Orient" was ripe with cultural bias and outright misrepresentation of the cultural practices in the region, the least of which was a general assumption that those individuals in the Middle East shared similar characteristics and practices with those as far away from them as China. The largest body of this work sprung from the age of European Imperialism wherein, "Western scholars appropriated for themselves the interpretation and translation of Oriental languages, and the critical study of the cultures and histories of the Oriental world."[48] While this work seems innocuous, much of their work was tinged with cultural superiority and set the Eastern World up to be an abstraction; both exotic and inscrutable.[49] In short, European powers taking it upon themselves to speak for these societies have created a lasting alteration to the understanding of the region, whether this was the intent of their work or not. In fact, it was not until the 20th century that the field of "Oriental Studies" split into the distinct categories of Asian Studies and Middle Eastern Studies, and many Western societies still hold onto the ideas that the work of Orientalists have placed in our minds to this day.

Stereotypes abound out of the works of the Orientalists, and several are important to dispel prior to the discussion of the jinn in the post-colonial world later in this paper. Most importantly, the Middle East is not a homogenous region. It is a diverse region with a multitude of religions, ethnicities, political systems, sociocultural identities and more. The jinn, as

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[48] *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*, Third Edition, J.A. Cuddon, Editor. 1991, pp. 660–65.
[49] Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. London, UK: Penguin, 2021, pp. 38-41

discussed, do provide a reflection of the generalized social shifts in the region, but they are not all-encompassing. Secondly, devout religious belief and superstitious conviction are not indicative of a lack of knowledge or intellect as some sources suggest. A search to understand the unknown and to seek purpose and understanding of the human place in the world has been fundamental to the existence of the human species. To choose to find answers to these questions or take comfort in belief systems different than one's own should not be evaluated as a mental or moral failing. The Orientalist movement often examined the Middle East from the Imperial perspective, dismissing the practices of the region as lesser than and other, and relayed that position back to their homelands.

Palestinian-American scholar Edward Said was one of the most famous scholars to have published a work of criticism about Orientalism. Though his work has been subject to debate by historians and notable Arabist scholars such as Lewis, Bhabha, Hourani, and Kramer for its lack of historical context and highly emotional connotations, Said aims to argue that "Orientalism" is both detrimental and not innate, but rather a Western conception. His book, very simply titled, *Orientalism,* eloquently summarizes the issue on the very first page. Said writes:

> On a visit to Beirut during the terrible civil war of 1975-1976 a French journalist wrote regretfully of the gutted downtown areas that 'it had once seemed to belong to … the Orient of Chateaubriand and Nerval.' He was right about the place, of course, especially so far as a European was concerned. The Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences. Now it was disappearing; in a sense it had happened, its time was over. Perhaps it seemed irrelevant that Orientals themselves had something at stake in the process, that even in the time of Chateaubriand and Nerval Orientals had lived there, and that now it was they who were suffering…[50]

What Said brings to light in this passage is the European imaginings of a place without any regard for its inhabitants or realities. Of course, this is a dangerous path to travel down under

[50] Ibid p. 1

the guise of academic study as it is this very attitude towards the region that allowed for such heavy-handed imperial practices in the first place. None of this is to say that there is no place for external analysis of the region, but rather, special consideration must be given to work on the subject to forgo these ingrained biases in order to make an accurate representation.

West vs East: Modern Depictions of the Jinn

To speak of the modern understanding of the jinn in the Middle East is a complex question, as it is heavily impacted by Western influence. The modern jinn have undergone what can best be described as a personality split, much like the culture they represent, as these influences from the West, the continued practice of Islam and other Abrahamic faiths, and a resurgence of traditionalism are all vying for dominance in the region. Orientalism filtered a skewed view of the legends of the jinn and the region to the West, who continued with this interpretation in books and film. These ideas were then filtered back into the Middle East with the influx of globalism and the domination of Western Media. The Western tradition kept with many Orientalist tropes about the jinn, many of which were extracted from translations of *One Thousand and One Nights* while examples from the Middle Eastern Media tradition are more varied in their representation. Western representations of the jinn have removed them from their social and religious context entirely in favor of producing an entertaining and "othered" character for the consumption of Western audiences.

French Romantic novelist and poet, Victor Hugo, penned a poem entitled "Les Djinns" in 1875. His conception of the jinn was not a comedic one, as many later Western authors would default to, but rather demonic in description. His jinn swarm a town and he describes, "It's the swarming Jinn passing by/ whirling and hissing / Yew trees, stirred by their flight / crackle like burning pine/ Their herd, heavy and swift / flying in the void / seems like a livid cloud /ringed

with lighting."[51] "Les Djinns" inspired three pieces of classical music and was recomposed for a choir, a piano and orchestra, and as a symphonic poem.[52] This darker nature of the jinn was not a popular motif moving forward in Western culture, however, as many British authors chose to turn in the direction of comedy.

F. Anstey's (Thomas Anstey Gutherie) 1900 comedy novel, *The Brass Bottle,* was one of the first original works incorporating the jinn in Western Literature in a comical interpretation. In his novel, a love-struck British architect is struggling to please his prospective father-in-law, and uncovers a *jinnee* (A term carefully selected by a professor in a more accurate replacement for the use of *Genie* by the protagonist) in his search for an "Oriental" gift to give him. The mischievous jinnee takes it upon himself to make every situation he is involved in comedically awkward, including the repeated presentation of "camel-loads of rubies."[53] The jinnee is described as "elderly, and indeed, venerable of appearance, and [wearing] an Eastern robe and head-dress of a dark-green hue."[54] This jinnee, much like his counterpart in *The Fisherman and the Jinn,* has been forced into a bottle as punishment for his crimes against God. Nonetheless, he is depicted as an overly formal and Orientalized[55] scoundrel who can do no real harm to his new master outside of placing him in embarrassing situations (see figure 10). This book inspired three comedy film interpretations in 1914, 1923, and 1964. It also inspired William Aubrey Darlington's 1920 novel, *Alf's Button* (also turned into a film that same year, redone in sound in 1930, and another adaptation in 1938) in which a soldier in the trenches discovers that rubbing

[51] Oxford Lieder. "Les Djinns | Song Texts, Lyrics & Translations," n.d. https://www.oxfordlieder.co.uk/song/3739.
[52] Eliza, and Eliza. "The Music of Poetry Victor Hugo's Les Djinns." *Interlude HK Limited*, October 14, 2022. https://interlude.hk/the-music-of-poetry-victor-hugo-les-djinns-in-music/.
[53] L.J. Hurst (93)Richard Lance Keeble (61)John P. Lethbridge (21)Carol Biederstadt (20)(View All Authors). "The Brass Bottle of 1900." The Orwell Society, February 23, 2021. https://orwellsociety.com/the-brass-bottle-of-1900/.
[54] Anstey, Thomas. *The Brass Bottle*. New York, New York: Penguin, 1946, p. 29
[55] "Orientalized" being a term utilized by Edward Said to describe an entity given stereotypical "oriental" traits.

one of his brass buttons will summon a *genie* to do his bidding and bring him beer, women, a hot bath, and much more.

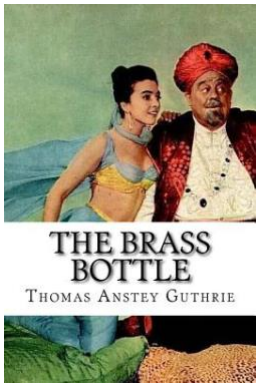

Figure 10: 2017 cover of *The Brass Bottle*[56]

Both of these novels and their film adaptations inspired the classic 1965 comedy sit-com *I Dream of Jeannie.* In this show, an astronaut (Larry Hagman) who landed far away from his recovery zone finds a strange bottle. When he removes the stopper, smoke emerges and a beautiful woman (Barbara Eden) materializes and kisses him for freeing her. Jeannie is depicted in a stereotypical "Oriental woman" outfit with large puffy pants and pointed shoes as well as a veil that wraps under her chin with American starlet blonde hair and blue eyes (see figure 11). Continuing in the vein of Western stereotypes of Oriental women, Jeannie is not very intelligent, and therefore entirely dependent on her Western savior to keep her out of trouble. Jeannie falls in love with her rescuer, and the continuing five seasons of the show revolve around her comically misguided attempts to keep him happy, and his attempts to conceal her powers to prevent her from being caught by his bosses at NASA and studied for her magical powers. In this light, Jeannie is not far removed from the women described by Gustave Flaubert, a French novelist whom Said criticizes heavily in *Orientalism.* Most notably, Said sites Flaubert's description of

[56] Bookshop.org. "The Brass Bottle, Thomas Anstey Guthrie," 2020. Accessed April 11, 2023. https://bookshop.org/p/books/the-brass-bottle-thomas-anstey-guthrie/6838272?ean=9781544034973.

an Egyptian courtesan with whom he slept, writing that, "he was foreign, comparatively wealthy, male, and these were historical facts of domination that allowed him not only to possess Kuchuck Harem physically, but to speak for her and tell his readers in what ways she was 'typically' Oriental."[57]

Figure 11: Jeannie[58]

Perhaps the most familiar adaptation of the jinn to younger audiences is the 1992 Disney film *Aladdin*, whose story was borrowed from a French iteration of *One Thousand and One Nights* and previously adapted into a popular British film *The Thief of Baghdad*.[59] It depicts a street urchin, Aladdin, living in the fantastical city of *Agrabah* (loosely based on Baghdad), whose animation style roughly resembles a cross between an Indian and Middle Eastern city. Certain selections of the film's original lyrics have been adapted by Disney, and are no longer available due to controversy over their racist suggestions that describe *Agrabah* as a place "where they cut off your ear/if they don't like your face/ it's barbaric, but hey, it's home".[60] In the film, Aladdin

[57] Said p. 6
[58] I Dream of Jeannie Wiki. "Jeannie | I Dream of Jeannie Wiki | Fandom," n.d. https://i-dream-of-jeannie.fandom.com/wiki/Jeannie.
[59] *The Thief of Baghdad* premiered first in 1924 and was reworked into a 1940 film of the same name.
[60] "Orientalism in Film: Aladdin over the Last Century." Orientalism in Pop Culture. Accessed April 8, 2023. https://wgst2013.domains.drew.edu/christina-bevianos-post/film-aladdin/.

falls in love with the beautiful princess Jasmine who is dressed much like Jeannie in *I Dream of Jeannie* (see figure 12). Aladdin finds a magic lamp containing the jovial, comical, caring, and bright blue Genie (see figure 13) and uses his wishes to attempt to impress Princess Jasmine, ultimately defeating the evil Vizier, Jafar, and winning her heart. The success of the film led to two sequels in 1994, and 1996, an animated TV series, a Broadway adaptation, and a live-action Disney remake in 2019. All of these Western Media representations capitalize on the mystical and magical "Genie" going on lighthearted, and sometimes mischievous, adventures with their always male, often white "masters" and ignores in its entirety the role of the jinn in religious and cultural belief systems of the Middle East. Of course, however, as the influence of Western cinema grew in the world's film industry, these depictions of the Jinn have filtered back into the Middle East. Today you can find depictions of Disney's *Aladdin* across the Middle East. Far fewer representations of traditional jinn, however, still exist. In recent years there have been limited representations of jinn such as is in the 2015 Jordanian mini-series *Jinn,* in which an invisible spirit possesses a student in the caves of Petra and seeks to wreak havoc on the world. However the majority of representation is still limited to religious texts and poetry, while the comedic genie dominates media.

Figure 12: Princess Jasmine[61]

Figure 13: Genie[62]

Conclusion

The modern Western character of the wish-granting Genie has its roots in ancient Mesopotamian religious tradition as a vengeful nature spirit. This transition was not a sudden one, but rather a reflection of an entire region's history and interaction with the world around it. By distinguishing the Western conception of the genie from its predecessor, the jinn, and placing the latter back into the appropriate cultural and historical framework that was discussed, we can interrupt the stereotypes perpetrated by the former in Western media. These stereotypes of the Middle East as a fantastical place have served to "other" the society, making it seem distant and intangible. Mixing styles and stories from across the "Orient" have furthered misunderstanding, such as is seen in *The Thief of Baghdad* and, subsequently, *Aladdin*'s design choices. The trope of the genie as either a trickster, or simply unintelligent, have also influenced the perception of the people of the region. While this form of genie is entertaining, it is important to distinguish it as a westernized figure. The jinn are distinct from the genie, and still hold a sacred role in the

[61] Disney Wiki. "Jasmine | Disney Wiki | Fandom," n.d. https://disney.fandom.com/wiki/Jasmine.
[62] Ibid

expansive religion of Islam. Moreover, tracking the evolution of the jinn over time can provide a more intimate glance into the values of the society than the historical narrative provides.

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