

A UNIQUE METAL OBJECT FROM TIBERIAS*

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INTRODUCTION

In the early 1960s, in the course of public works in Tiberias, a most uncommon metal artefact was uncovered. When discovered, the object was completely crushed, and although its shape is now restored, parts are still missing, and the exceptional decoration is damaged.

The Israel Department of Antiquities and Museums approached me at the time with a request that I study the find. Examination of the object's photographs convinced me immediately that the artefact held special interest. The more I concentrated on the details, however, the more I became aware of the many missing elements that would prevent its full understanding. Although many of the questions that inhibited earlier publication remain unsolved, I am presenting here an initial publication in the hope of generating debate that may give rise to solutions of the remaining issues.

DESCRIPTION OF THE OBJECT

The object is an open cylinder, made of sheet-metal, perhaps bronze (Figs. 1, 2).¹ Both edges are finished with a projecting rim, indicating that the object is complete. The lower rim is horizontal, and folded back on itself. The top one, measuring 2.5 cm, is slightly tilted upward. The height of the cylinder is 10.3 cm, and its diameter is 23.1 cm.

*In memory of J. David-Weill, who introduced me to Islamic art.

Both the outer and inner surfaces are adorned with a band of painted decoration, approximately 7 cm high (Figs. 1–3). Each band is of a different nature. The exterior one



Fig. 1. The bronze stand.



Fig. 2. Detail of the main scene.



Fig. 3. The central figure.

depicts a scene of human figures (Fig. 4), while the interior one is epigraphical (Fig. 5). The decorative bands, both inside and out, are delineated by a white line above a red one.

The function of this artefact is not yet securely determined, but most likely it is a stand, and we shall refer to it as such below. Indeed, some Mamluk stands are somewhat reminiscent of our object, but they are made of brass, and most of them are larger. I know of no similar item of the same size made of sheet-metal. However, some comparable stands in pottery, and even one in porcelain, are known (see below).

Technique

As mentioned above, the decoration on the stand is painted, a technique that is enigmatic, with no real parallels that can be cited, although there are various other techniques of producing colorful decoration on metal. One technique is inlay, using a variety of metals, including silver, gold, copper and niello. Another is enameling,



Fig. 4. Drawing of the painting on the outside.

for which there are numerous examples, from the Late Roman period to modern times, whether *cloisonné* or *champlevé*. Today, some of these enamels have deteriorated and look like paste coloration, whereas others are truly enamels and are sometimes even translucent. Painting on metal, however, is hitherto unknown (Grossmann 1993).²

Decoration

The most promising line of inquiry to determine the date of the object seems to be a consideration of the decoration itself.

The decorative band on the exterior depicts a continuous row of human figures (Figs. 2, 4), with a central, 'royal' seated figure (Figs. 2–4). Although several figures are damaged, those that can be made out are clearly distinct from one another. Each wears a garment of different appearance and color. They differ even in the details of their headgear. The physical features are personalized. No two faces are alike, nor do they face in the same direction. We can conclude that they are definitely not stereotyped figures.

Despite the diversity of detail, several elements are common to all figures. All wear a kind of tunic—or straight coat with long

sleeves—over long, loose trousers. Ample scarves that may be considered turbans, each slightly different, are neatly wrapped around their heads. Finally, although each face is different, the features—eyes, nose and mouth—are all very delicate and finely drawn. Mention should be made of the subtle depiction of the hands, where, in some cases, even the fingers are delicately rendered (Figs. 2, 3).

In the center of the scene, a seated figure is holding a cup (Figs. 2, 3). He wears a headgear of the folded turban type, and behind his back, the upper part of an impressive seat (throne?) is visible. Three standing figures flank the central one on each side. The two directly at his sides turn toward him, whereas the others face away (Fig. 4). The figures are outlined in black, and so are the details of their faces, hands and fingers. Black lines also emphasize the hair, the headgear and other details as required. The faces are painted in white, while the costumes are in three shades of green. The insides of the long sleeves are painted white, as are parts of the turbans, these last with patches of red. Red and white are also used for the figures themselves, contributing to the colorful effect.

The decorative band on the inside is a beautiful inscription (Fig. 5), in elegant and bold *kufic*

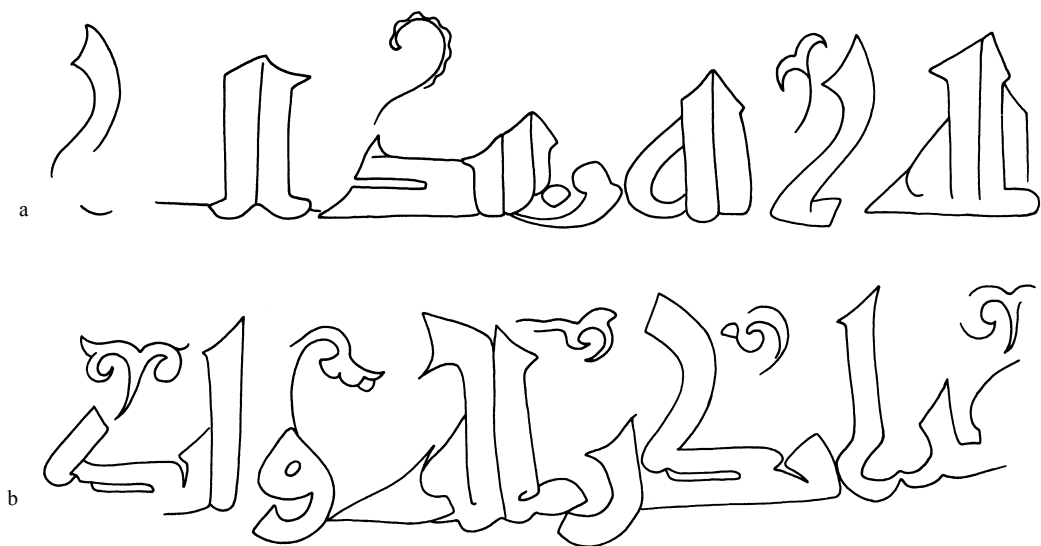


Fig. 5. Drawing of the inscription on the inside.

script. Unfortunately, the damage it suffered hinders decipherment, but nevertheless, the paleography of the writing is very distinct and can be identified.

The style and type of letters converge with all the other elements to indicate the Fatimid period. The distinctive attributes include the size of the letters, the proportions between the long and the short letters, and the very typical upper part of the letters ending in triangular shapes with ornaments evolving from them. Some of these floral motives seem to be floating above the letters. This is precisely the stage of the evolution of the *Coufique fleuri*, already assigned by Flury (1936) to the period we postulate, and as such further confirms the date.

PARALLELS

Figurative Decoration

Since the technique of painting on metal is unknown and there are no close parallels in terms of shape and function of the object, the search for comparisons to the thematic and paleographic details of the decoration was widened to include other media.

Among the closest parallels, primarily on stylistic, but also on typological grounds, one may cite the fresco painting of the Fatimid period from a hammam in Cairo (Fig. 6). The young person depicted sitting in a niche in Fig. 6 is drawn in a style similar to that of the figures on our metal stand in terms of the facial features and the headgear (Fig. 3). Just like our central figure, the painted youth holds a cup in his hand.

Another painting dated to the Fatimid period, this one on paper, also bears similarities to the decoration on our object (Fig. 7). Of the two standing figures depicted in this scene, the one on the right begs comparison with those in our painted metalwork. Moreover, the upper part of the painting has a very prominent strip of writing. The style of the script, with details such as the triangular ends of the long letters, as well as the additional floral decorative elements above the writing, are strongly reminiscent of the inscription on the inner band of our object.

These two paintings resemble the one on our metal stand in almost every detail—thematic, as well as conceptual. Both the style of the



Fig. 6. Painting from a hammam in Cairo (after Wiet 1939:50, Pl. 7).



Fig. 7. Painting from Fatimid Egypt (after Wiet 1937: Pl. 1).

paintings and the paleography of the inscriptions highlight the close relationship, and ultimately provide plausible grounds for dating.

That the object should be dated to the Fatimid period does not seem to be in doubt. Conclusive proof may be found by reference to the stylistic criteria for painting in that period, as suggested by Ettinghausen (1942). Drawing parallels between human figures depicted in paintings and those depicted on pottery, Ettinghausen argues that the attributes that were common to paintings and pottery—all of which are very close to our metal object—belong to the Fatimid period.

In addition to the two paintings referred to above, extensive analysis of several contemporary art works proves that they too display similarities to our stand in many respects, again supporting a Fatimid date. Perhaps the most pertinent description of the typical Fatimid drawing of human faces may be found in the following citation: "...a vital feature is the burning eye... strikingly large dark irises without pupils under a slightly curved eyebrow with a medial line in between eye and eyebrow" (Ettinghausen 1955:296). Indeed, this description corresponds perfectly to the facial features on our object.

With regard to details, such as headgear, costumes and collective scenes, there are

parallels to be found in other artistic fields, such as wood-carving or ivories. In this article, however, we confine the discussion to the domain of paintings.

Inscription

Parallels to the inscription, apart from the one in the painting published by Wiet, mentioned above (see Fig. 7), can be found on two wooden beams from North Africa. The inscriptions are both painted, with a very similar style of letters. One beam is fragmentary (Hill and Golvin 1976: No. 106), but the other is part of the Great Mosque of Kairouan (Fig. 8). On paleographical grounds, these inscriptions can be dated to the end of the tenth century. However, most of the parallels to our painted metalwork object are less precisely dated to between the tenth and the twelfth centuries. This is true of parallels to the inscriptions, as well as of paintings that display similar garments: a three-quarter length coat above a pair of trousers, and similar headgear.

Shape and Function

Regarding the object itself, as has already been mentioned, there are several metal artefacts that may be similarly identified as stands. Those that were positively identified as such, however, are later and date mainly to the Mamluk period.



Fig. 8. Painting on a wooden beam from Kairouan (De Carthage 1982:207, No. 276).

Stands of this type apparently became fashionable in the later Middle Ages, and have come down to us in pottery and even porcelain. Although the pottery stands are contemporary with later metal stands, and like them are slightly larger than the one under discussion, in shape they seem closer to it. The closest pottery comparison is apparently a Mamluk piece from Egypt, in the Keir collection, attributed to the fourteenth century (Grube 1976:288, No. 240).³

In his article introducing a Ming porcelain stand, Carswell sums up the typology of these stands, in metal as well as in pottery (Carswell 1966), and points out that such objects are well attested in Palestine as early as the second millennium BCE (Carswell 1966:176, n. 2). He mentions the existence of a metal stand in the Victoria and Albert Museum, which is assigned to the twelfth century CE, and another, ceramic one, which dates to the Mamluk period. The origin of the metal stands of the Mamluk period, as well as the two ceramic ones—from the Keir collection and from Cairo, introduced by Carswell—converge on the Near East, and more precisely on Egypt.⁴

Most of the cylindrical metal stands from the Mamluk period are of a distinct shape, narrowing toward the middle (Diakonova 1962: Fig. 60), and none is an exact parallel to ours. One artefact that is close to our piece in shape, and appears to be Mamluk, although there is insufficient information regarding its date, was published half a century ago by L.A. Mayer, who referred to it as a “stand for a tray” (Mayer 1952: Pl. 3). Mayer gives the provenance of the stand as the Kalehdjian Freres private collection. This may well be the same piece published by Louisiana several decades later (Louisiana 1987:63, No. 115; 90), and is apparently today in a private collection in Kuwait. Mayer gives its height as 24.8 cm and its diameter as 25.6 cm. The diameter is therefore close to our bronze, even though the height is different. Furthermore, the decoration also bears a resemblance to our object: the central register depicts a procession of figures

converging from both directions toward a central ‘royal’(?) figure.

Resembling our piece even more closely in shape and size, although of quite different function, is a brass mortar (height 13 cm, diam. 19.5 cm). Its origin is not well-established, but either Turkey or Iran have been suggested, and it has been attributed to the twelfth century (*The Unity of Islamic Art* 1985: No. 60).

DISCUSSION

When considering the date of our object, the extraordinary Fatimid metal cache that was discovered a few years ago in Tiberias (Hirschfeld et al. 2000:27) should be taken into account. Nearly a thousand pieces, in various shapes, functions and techniques were uncovered, indicating that a most important metalwork center must have existed in Tiberias in the Fatimid period. One should not overlook the possibility that this center could have been a transitory one, whether a trading post, or a temporary storage place. The existence of such a center would help explain the presence of our painted stand in Tiberias, although even among the numerous metal artefacts that were found in this city and date to the Fatimid period, this piece is extraordinary.

Although there is no conclusive proof of metal manufacture in Tiberias, the recovery of large quantities of metal artefacts of astounding quality points to a center of artistic production, situated at this major crossroad of routes of commerce. The discovery of contemporary metalwork in Caesarea,⁵ would also argue in favor of a major center of craftsmanship in Fatimid Palestine. So far, Tiberias, Caesarea and even Ashqelon (Rosen-Ayalon 1991), have yielded finds of extraordinary artistic value, and thus may be considered potential candidates for the site of a major metal production center.⁶

Considering this Fatimid painted bronze in its historical context, we should remember that only a short time later, enamel paintings were used to decorate Ayyubid glass (Brosh 1999:268). At the same time, polychrome

enameled metal spread throughout Byzantium (Cormarck and Vassilaki 2009:102, 182) and the Christian world (Gauthier 1972), reaching the Muslim world as well. The most extraordinary piece of this type is probably the twelfth-century Innsbruck plate. Interestingly enough, Buchtal (1946) had no doubt that this plate was not unique, although he stressed that at the time it was the only one known, and deplored the loss of all others. Also noteworthy is the connection drawn by Buchtal between the enameled Innsbruck plate and Fatimid art, which is precisely the connection to emerge from our study regarding the painted stand.

If we include in the discussion the enameled jewelry, so fashionable in the Fatimid period, we seem to be facing a widespread phenomenon of preference for colorful schemes. In his study of the enameled jewelry of the Fatimid period, Ross (1940) makes two noteworthy claims: that this technique apparently originated in Persia; and that this phenomenon of colorful effect on metal existed in Byzantine art as early as the sixth century. The manufacturing of the stunning *cloisonné* jewelry of the Goths and the Visigoths also dates to the same period, and its origin is also associated with Persia (de Palol and Ripol 1990: Nos. 14–16, 17, 19, 184–187).⁷ These are, however, only inferences so far, and no tangible evidence has been presented to date (Margulies 1939).⁸

Islamic metalwork had demonstrated this preference for polychromy in its extensive employment of the technique of gold and silver inlay on bronze or other metals. This technique reached its peak in artefacts such as the twelfth-century Bobrinski kettle (Ettinghausen 1943:195, Fig. 1), as well as many Ayyubid and Mamluk metalworks (Barrett 1949:xiii–xvii). It is no surprise, then, that this technique is one of the most important contributions of Islamic art to the medium of metalwork. The medieval enamels, whether employing the *champlevé* or the *cloisonné* techniques, pursued these earlier experiments of creating polychrome decoration on metal, in addition to using other methods, such as inlay of colored glass or even of

semiprecious stones.⁹ The enameled jewelry of the Fatimid period fits perfectly with this spirit (Hassan 1937:243–246). Gonzalez, in an effort to contribute to the discussion about the use of color on metal in the Fatimid period, deals with various aspects of such art (Gonzalez 1999). No wonder that the subsequent era of painting—that of glass enameling—would flourish and become such an extraordinary chapter in the history of art.

Painting on Islamic artefacts is well-attested under the Fatimids in Egypt. The rich collection of luster ceramics with paintings of figures wearing lavish turbans, as on our bronze, is one of the best known chapters of Fatimid art (e.g., Lane 1953: Pl. 26B, 27A). No wonder this trend radiated to neighboring countries as well, most specifically to Sicily, where painting played a prominent role, especially in pottery decoration, but also on other materials. Particularly notable are the painted wood ceilings in Sicily, in Cefalu (Gelfer-Jorgensen 1986) and Palermo (Monneret de Villard 1950); even the contemporary ivories in Sicily benefit from painted decoration. The Fatimid period yielded several fragmentary paintings on paper, as well (Grube 1995:1–125). Although Wiet (1937), who published the Fatimid drawing mentioned above (Fig. 7), tends to assign it an oriental origin; a variety of its characteristics are, in my view, suggestive of a date in the Fatimid period. As we have seen, painting also influenced the medium of monumental art (see Fig. 6). Inshore, although unique, our painted metalwork object should perhaps be seen within the wider context of the art of painting under the Fatimids.

Our extensive knowledge notwithstanding, we have not yet discovered parallels to Islamic painted metalwork. Although the technique of painting on metal has some early antecedents, continuity to the medieval period cannot be demonstrated (Born 1990).

Could our painted bronze be a forerunner of the Islamic medieval enamels, such as the Innsbruck plate? The quality of the workmanship convincingly argues in favor

of viewing our object as a daring attempt to experiment with the technique of painting on metal—one of the many means of painting *en*

vogue during the Fatimid period, rather than as a preliminary ‘draft’ for future inlay or enamel.

NOTES

¹ Figures 1–3 were photographed by Gaby Laron; the drawing in Figs. 4 and 5 are by Pnina Arad.

² When looking for the origin of painting on metal, the discovery of a small figurine in an underwater survey at Apollonia is worthy of mention. This figurine, a ‘Goddess Minerva’, still preserves a painted black and green decoration. It was dated to the Late Roman period by the archaeologist who uncovered it about a decade ago. Although the nature of the metal is different, and the object does not bear any other resemblance to our bronze, the painted surface and the location in the same country seems to justify mention.

³ In the same publication (Grube 1976:289, No. 243) there is also a small stand with monochrome glaze, which should be mentioned, although typologically it is less similar to our metal object.

⁴ However, bearing in mind the ancient Palestinian specimen mentioned by Carswell, perhaps we should consider our painted metal stand from Tiberias as a forerunner of this type of stand.

⁵ Ayala Lester has completed a Ph.D dissertation on the Fatimid metal cache from Caesarea (Lester 2011). A first sample of this collection was published in Lester, Arnon and Polak 1999. In his recent book, Bloom (2007) does include the Dome of the Rock and the Aqsa Mosque, but overlooks the rich Fatimid finds from Palestine.

⁶ It is worthwhile to refer to an object, which, at first glance may not seem to be a valid parallel.

It is a shallow bowl, located in the Louvre, Paris, which was the subject of detailed study (Will 1983; Holum et al. 1988). The object is not Islamic, but Roman, and the technique of its decoration is not painting, but silver inlay. This bowl is nevertheless included here, primarily because it has a decorative strip depicting figures reminiscent of the drawing on the metal piece under discussion. In addition, both objects were found in the same country, although the Islamic one was found in Tiberias, and the Roman one was uncovered in Caesarea.

⁷ The spread of this fashion can be traced in the metal crafts of their successors, the Lombards and the Merovingian, see Coulon and Vlaeminck 1983:127.

⁸ Early examples of polychrome decoration on metal, using the inlay technique, may be found in Mycenaean items, which date back as early as the second millennium BCE (Karouzou 1993:22–24, No. 2489; 26, No. 394). One such example is an extraordinary bronze dagger, with polychrome *cloisonné* decoration (Karouzou 1993:26, No. 295). Other examples are Roman finds dating to the second–third centuries, or the case of the “Sutton Hoo Ship Burial”, attributed to the seventh century CE. Metal coloring is undoubtedly an intriguing topic, and many questions still remain (Bowman 1991).

⁹ The beginnings of enameling are discussed in Maryon 1971.

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