

THE IDF HOUSE IN THE OLD CITY, JERUSALEM: A JUG BEARING A PERSIAN POEM

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A large fragment of a jar bearing a classical Persian poem (*rubāʿī*) commonly ascribed to Umar Khayyām (1048–1131/2 CE) was found in a fill, right below the entrance to Vault 306 in Bay 2 in the IDF House in the Old City of Jerusalem (B108.7; Stratum IV; see Avner and Avissar 2017; Fig. 1). Following Ruvanovich’s (2012) literary study of the poem, this article will elaborate on the date and production milieu of the jar.¹

The poem is written in *nastaʿlīq* handwriting, typical of Persian manuscripts from the second half of the fourteenth century CE onward (Ruvanovich 2012). The jug belongs to the Persian turquoise-and-black family of wares, which is characterized by glazed painted decorations in these colors. In our jug, the colors alternate as foreground and background: the neck bears a vegetal ornament in turquoise on a black surface; a band at the juncture between the neck and the body contains the poem, written in black letters with black dividers, which form cartouches, against a turquoise background; and the body is adorned with turquoise flowers and leaves drawn on a black surface, with more minute details—petals and the leaves’ veins—drawn in black. The painted reserve decoration on the jug, however, is rather unusual, since in most Persian turquoise-and-black wares it is carved.



Fig. 1. The inscribed jar.

Various vessels of similar ware, some decorated with black paint under a colorless or turquoise glaze, were produced during the twelfth–thirteenth centuries CE in the city of Kashan in central Iran (for two inscription-bearing plates painted in black under turquoise, dating from AH 873 (1468/9 CE) and AH 885 (1480/1 CE), see Golombek, Mason and Bailey 1996: Pls. 50, 51, respectively). Some of these vessels exhibit Persian inscriptions, as do a cup and a jar of the same ware published by Lane (1958:45, Pl. 51). However, the handwriting in these inscriptions is usually much more cursive than the one on our jug; furthermore, these inscriptions are not bracketed, as is the case here. Arabic inscriptions are also found on jugs, jars and albarello vessels. One such jar, dated to the twelfth–thirteenth centuries CE and probably from Kashan as well, is painted in blue, turquoise and black. The inscription (العز الدائم) is the blessing “continuous strength” (Watson 2004:134).

The poem decorating the jug tells of the speaker’s longing for his lover. The jug’s fragment bears the fourth line of the poem, which presumably was fully inscribed on the vessel:

This jug was once a plaintive lover, like myself,
And was in pursuit of the face of a beauty;
This handle that thou seest upon its neck
Was an arm that [lay] around the neck of a beloved (Ruvanovich 2012).

Thus, the jug can be classified with what Taragan (2005:29, 42) dubbed ‘speaking vessels’: “Vessels from medieval Iran that ‘tell’ about themselves or their function through inscriptions, verses, or proverbs,” and in rare cases through images. As Ruvanovich (2012) points out, the poem creates a wordplay, since it mentions twice the lover’s neck and is located where the vessel’s neck joins the body; furthermore, the speaker, a “plaintive lover”, likens himself to a jug.

As pointed out by Ruvanovich (2012), the poem was “incorporated into the ‘inventory’ of poetic verses used by potters to decorate their vessels.” Indeed, many other ceramic vessels with inscribed Persian poems are known. A love poem based on a Persian legend, in which the speaker addresses a beloved woman he dreams of, is found on a luster-painted jug dated to AH 669 (1270 CE; Lane 1958:40). Sometimes the poem is only reflected in a drawing on the vessel, as in a depiction of Prince Khusrau’s discovery of the bathing Shirin found on a large dish dating from AH 607 (1210 CE). This depiction is based on a poem that was written by Nizami some thirty years prior to the date of the dish (Lane 1958:40).

Although the jug originated in Iran and the text is clearly part of the Persian culture, both its decoration technique and the incorporation of a decorative script point to Chinese influence. Beginning around 1220 CE, when both China and Iran were ruled by Mongols—the Yuans in China and the Ilkhanids in Iran, both descendants of Chinghiz Khan—the political and social bonds between the two regions grew. During this time, the art of painting was revolutionized in Iran (Golombek, Mason and Bailey 1996:1), as Chinese motifs crept into all the decorative arts, including the decoration of ceramic vessels.

Although Chinese artistic influence in Iran may go back to the thirteenth century CE, John Carswell’s study of this influence on Islamic pottery leads him to date the jug to the fifteenth century CE (J. Carswell, pers. comm.).

This date is based on the use of cartouches in the inscription and the design of half a palmette in reserve, which decorates the jug's neck—neither of which appear prior to the fifteenth century CE. A later date is precluded, as Persian pottery in the sixteenth–seventeenth centuries CE far more resembles Chinese pottery (Golombek et al. 2014).

According to Rosalind Wade-Haddon (pers. comm.), the same date has been suggested for a vessel exhibiting a similar influence of Chinese scrolling found in the Samarkand Museum in Iran. She also reports on an exhibit at the Tabriz Museum in Iran, which offered a fourteenth or a fifteenth century CE date for the turquoise-and-black vessels. Furthermore, she points out that archaeologists, both at Tabriz and at Zanjan, in northwestern Iran, argue that this ware was favored by the Mongol and Turkish populations of Iran during these centuries. Any earlier date is rebutted, since all pottery sherds from the pre-Mongol levels (twelfth–thirteenth centuries CE) at Nishapur belonged to plain, undecorated turquoise vessels.

This jug is the only one of its kind found to date in Israel. Its provenance was no doubt Iran, but the route by which it traveled and the story of the people who purchased a jug with a love poem and brought it with them to Jerusalem will ever remain a mystery. And so, we are left to delight in Umar Khayyām's poem.

NOTE

¹ I would like to thank Dr. Rina Avner, the excavator, for allowing me to study this rare find. My most heartfelt thanks go to Dr. Rosalind Wade-Haddon, a UK-based independent scholar, for the help she happily provided regarding the vessel, both by email, back in 2009, and in a meeting in London, in 2014, and to Prof. John Carswell, a Professorial Research Associate at the Department of History of Art and Archaeology, the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, for dating the vessel. Prof. Carswell studies Chinese porcelain in Syria and its influence on Islamic pottery, and has surveyed the Near East, the Maldives Islands and the Indian subcontinent so as to trace the maritime routes by which these vessels travelled. Last but not least, I am in debt to Rebecca Cohen-Amin of the IAA, who first identified the inscription as a classical Persian poem by Umar Khayyām, and to Dr. Julia Ruvanovich of the Department of Islamic and Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University, for her literary study of the poem. The jug was photographed by Clara Amit of the IAA. Dafnah Strauss edited the article.

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