Masterpieces of an Unknown Iranian Metalworker

Lecture by: Géza Fehérvári
Presented in English
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An extremely fine, beautifully decorated and well preserved brass incense burner was acquired by the Tareq Rajab Museum not long ago. Although this object is so magnificent that it definitely deserves a publication of its own, its decoration comes not only close to other contemporary objects, but even presents some decorative details that are identical to at least two if not more other contemporary objects. What is most striking is that this incense burner seems to be very akin to another brass incense burner that I wrote about nearly forty years ago. This second incense burner is in the Keir Collection, Richmond Surrey and was made for the Ayubul Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil II (636 – 638 AH/1238 – 1240 AD) in Syria. A third object which exhibits almost identical decoration is a Khorasan inkwell, dating from the end of the 12th or early 13th century in the Nour Collection, London. The decorative schemes and scenes of these three vessels (figure 1) nevertheless can be traced back to earlier examples, as will be shown further below, all of which betray the hallmarks of the Herat school.

The Tareq Rajab Museum’s new incense burner belongs to the Mesopotamian – Syrian type. These were first studied in detail by Mehmet Aga Oglu over sixty years ago. The incense burner is 24.5cm high with the lid and its diameter is 11.2cm (figure 2). It is made of cast brass and is richly decorated with silver and some copper inlay which are remarkably well preserved. Apart from the inlay, the lid also has extensive openwork decoration which is after all essential to its proper function. It is capped by an elaborate and comparatively narrow knob which rests on three feet which are in the shape of animal paws. The rim and the base of the lid give the impression of a rolled form and both are decorated with silver inlaid sliding lancets forming chevron patterns. The front parts of the legs are decorated with ascended scrolls ending in arabesques while the sides present series of lancets.

The side of the body is decorated by three unequal horizontal registers. The top and the lower ones are narrow, while the central wide register presents the major decoration of this vessel. It should be noted that the entire surface of both the body and lid are decorated with engraved scrolls and the inlaid decoration is placed over them. These ground scrolls are of the more elaborate type showing series of circles and on their outer side display tiny round-shaped leaves, while inside each one terminates in a trefoil. This type of ground scroll is more characteristic of Mesopotamian rather than of Iranian metal vessels. Admittedly this more elaborate trend started in Herat as one can notice on a Persian bucket which was signed by Said al-Harawi and can be dated to the early 13th century. Similar scrolls decorate a second Iranian example (figure 3).

The top register on the body carries a corrupt epigraphic inscription, inlaid with silver. Although the inscription is faulty, it appears to be a benedictory text repeating words such as al-żar, al-salat, al-salāt, al-baqā and išābīḥi. The band is continuous, without any gaps or interruption. The second epigraphic band runs around the base of the knob on top of the lid and is almost correct. It is interrupted by three round medallions, each filled by a silver inlaid seven-petaled rosette and reads:

Al-żar wa 1-ībād/1-dawlat wa al-salādat(?) wa al-baqā (…) li-šābīḥi “glory, prosperity, wealth, happiness and perpetuity(?) to the owner”.

The two lower narrow registers, one on the body and one on the lid, present running animals. The animals include dogs, rabbits and sphinxes. They are running towards the left. Some of these animals have exceptionally long bodies. The details of their thighs, legs and faces were made more attractive and realistic by the incised lines. Such animal bands were frequently used on Islamic metal objects, particularly during the 13th century, but their origin can be traced back to 12th century Iranian examples where such designs were first depicted.

The beautifully decorated openwork of the cover deserves special attention. Because of their functions, covers of these incense burners have to be perforated to let out the fumes of the incense. It is interesting to note that almost every one of the known Mesopotamian – Syrian brass incense burners have a different, but always aesthetically beautifully designed openwork. In this case it was executed by series of silver inlaid connected trefoils which are arranged in four horizontal bands (figure 4). Each trefoil is standing in an up-turned heart-shaped medallion. Above the fourth horizontal band there is a fifth, considerably smaller one which has down-turned heart-shaped medallions, each with a small, arrowhead-shaped leaf.

Below the already discussed chain of silver and copper inlay, a narrow register provides the framework, while on top a thin concentric border acts as a separation from the epigraphic zone. The lower part of the knob has a horizontal band of geometric strapwork, followed on top by floral arabesques, all beautifully inlaid with silver. The beautiful perforated trefoil bands are interrupted by a twelve-looped medallion that has a figurative scene. However, before we examine and discuss the figurative scenes of this vessel, we should turn to the second incense burner which is in the Keir collection.

Professor Géza Fehérvári received his doctoral degree from the School of Oriental and African Studies at the University of London in 1961. In the same year he was appointed a lecturer at SOAS and later, a Professor of Islamic Art and Architecture. He retired with the title of Professor Emeritus in 1991, and joined the Hungarian Diplomatic Service as the Ambassador of the Republic of Hungary to Kuwait. After retiring in 1995, he joined the Tareq Rajab Museum as curator.
A study of this incense burner has already been published by this writer, but it was not unknown before. The first reference to it was when it belonged to the famous Homberg Collection and was exhibited in Paris in 1908 and was included in the catalogue. Its inscriptions were incorporated in the RCEA.

From the Homberg Collection, it was acquired by a certain Sherif Sabri and it was at that time that the late Professor David Storm Rice received a photograph of it and referred to it in his monograph Wade Cup stating, that “A beautiful unpublished example of an Ayubid, probably Syrian ‘animated’ inscription decorates an unpublished incense burner with the titles of al-Malik al-Adil II (638-8 AH/1238-40 AD). Judging from a photograph which I owe to the present owner of this important and rare piece, Mr. Sherif Sabri in Cairo, the style of its inscription comes very close to that of the Wade Cup. It fills three compartments in the central band of the décor of the incense burner’s body and would deserve a detailed study”.

Subsequently the late Dr. Mohammad Mustafa exhibited it in Cairo and included it in the catalogue. Finally, in the early 1960s, Mr. Edmund de Unger has purchased it from Sherif Sabri and thus it became part of the Keir collection. Apart from the above mentioned article, this author has also published it in his monograph on the Keir collection’s metalwork in 1976.

The Keir incense burner, just like the Kuwait one, was made of cast brass and its decoration was engraved, inlaid with silver, while the lid also has openwork (figure 5). With the lid it is 20 cm high, without the lid the body is only 9.3 cm and its diameter is likewise 9.3 cm. Similarly to the Kuwait incense burner the sides of the body are divided into three unequal silver bands by two narrow borders, formed by silver inlaid pearls which are placed between engraved double strands. In the top narrow band is the historical inscription, written in Naskhi, which was once inlaid with silver. Unfortunately the silver inlay is now partly missing. The inscription reads:

(Teze) Il-mau'adda al-Sultan al-Malik al-Adil ....
Mu'ayyad al-Muzaffar al-Mansur sayf al-dunya wa t.
Din Abi Bakr ibn al-Sultan al-Malik al-Kamil Muhammad ibn Abi Bakr Ayub Khaliq Amr al-Munim)

“Glory to our Lord, the Sultan, the King, the Just, assisted by God, the triumphant, the victorious, the sword of the world and religion. Abi Bakr, the son of the Sultan, the King al-Kamil Muhammad, the son of Abi Bakr, son of Ayub, devoted friend of the Emir of the Believers”.

The lower narrow band, similarly to the Kuwait object, presents animals running towards the left. Likewise they are shown with unnaturally long bodies and, wherever the silver inlay has survived, it illustrates the body details with incised strokes. Another similarity to the Kuwait object is that not all these animals are dogs, but one can recognise hares and even a sphinx among them (figure 6).

The wide central register on the body is decorated with human and animal figures, but actually it is an “animated inscription”. This central band is divided into three parts by traces of a handle (which is now missing) and by two medallions. Accordingly, the animated inscription is in three parts. In part one the human and the animal figures give the reading of the first part of a benedictory script: al-'izz al-dhimm ‘lasting glory” (figure 7). We should also take note of the flying bird towards the end of this script, between the last two human figures. The second part is even more interesting. It reads al-İqab al-zaid “growing prosperity”. The definite article al is depicted in an extremely interesting way. It shows two dragon heads but with serpents bodies. The letter q can also be regarded as a serpent, just like the alif and the yar in the word zaid. Once more the inscription ends with a flying bird in front of the head of the last human figure.

The third part of this epigraphic band ends with the words al-jadd al-zaid “thriving luck” (figure 8). Here the script starts with a rising bird and terminates with another kept in the left hand of the last figure. Here we may notice more details, unfortunately not on the photograph since the silver inlay is almost entirely missing, but on the drawing. The first figure on the right seems to hold a jar in his right hand, while the second one keeps a long lance in his right hand; the third figure has a straight sword in a scabbard and raises his right hand. The letter's yun and dal look like serpents again.

Now we must return to the Kuwait incense burner and examine the figurative scenes of the wide central horizontal band of its body. This band is divided into three parts by three round medallions, each including a “Solomon’s seal” or the “Buddhist eternal knot”, a hallmark of Khorasan and the Herat school. Each of the three figurative scenes represents five figures. The first scene depicts warriors (figure 9). Starting from the right, the first figure holds battle-axe in his right hand, while in the other one there is a round shield with a cross on it. Across his shoulder appears to be a bow. The second figure, shown running towards the right, holds a long sword or judging from the identical figure in the following scene, a serpent in his hands. Between these two figures a bird, probably a duck, is depicted. The third figure, in the centre of this scene, holds a lance in his right hand, while in the other one is again a round shield with a cross and two further lances behind, across his shoulder. In front of his feet is a rising snake, most likely a cobra. The object that is in the hands of the fourth figure is not quite clear, but seems to be a hammer-like weapon with a long handle. On the right side of this figure is a twisted double serpent but their bodies terminating in dragon heads. These entwined dragon-headed serpents appear not only in all these three scenes, but is also present on the Keir collection incense burner.
identical to the second figure on the previous scene and therefore it may indicate that in the fact in the first representation it is not a sword but also a snake. The third figure, whose body is turned towards the right, keeps a lance in the right hand, resting on his shoulder and raises his left hand. He has a sword attached to his belt on his right. The next figure, who may be a female, is turned to the left raises her right hand and has a long shawl on her head and back, and there is a jug or jar in front of her. The last and fifth figure is a bearded man who holds a kind of an object in the right hand which seems to be too short to be a lance. It looks rather like a Buddha vajra. At his feet there is a bird, a duck or a peacock and a serpent above completes the scene.

The third scene (figure 11) presents musicians and dancers. The first two figures are turning towards the left. One of them is a fiddler, followed by a seomel who may probably be holding a clapper in his raised right hand. Between him and the following figure are the twin dragon-headed snakes with a third one hanging down and followed by a fourth below. The third figure is most likely a dancer with a down-turned crescent above his left hand. He is depicted in a frontal position. The fourth figure is extremely interesting having a Chinese cap on his head, holding up his left hand, while in the right one is a musical instrument, most likely jingles. Similar musical instruments are not unknown. One such example has already been illustrated on a wall painting in Pyandzhikent and from the early Islamic period on a ca. 12th century fragmentary lacquer box which was discovered among the ruins of the caravanasal of Robat-e Sharaf in Khurasan. The last figure is again a dancer. There are three animals in front of him: a flying bird above, a lion below and a serpent just behind it.

The depicted human figures, whether they are warriors, musicians or dancers or snake-charmers, frequently occur on earlier and contemporary, i.e. first half of the 13th century Persian and Syro-Mesopotamian silver inlaid metal vessels. All these figures and the animated inscription can be traced back to the earlier examples.

The earliest known such metal vessel is the Bobrinsky bucket in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, which displays an elaborate silver and copper inlaid decoration (figure 12). According to its inscriptions, it was made at Herat in 559 AH/1163 AD by Muhammad ibn ‘Abd al-Wahhab and Hajib Muslim ibn Ahmad al-Naqquz for a merchant. This bucket has served as a model for metalworkers for the next century if not longer in Herat, later in Mosul, then in Syria. Its refined decoration, arranged in six horizontal bands with large number of human and animal figures depicted on it were copied by Khorasan, then by Syro-Mesopotamian metalworkers right up to the end of the 13th century. That was also the first on which animated inscription was used on a metal object and it was also the first time that the dragon-headed serpent appeared inlaid in silver and copper. On the topmost register in a round medallion it shows a cross-legged seated figure, flanked by two dragon-headed snakes.

It is very unlikely that on the two incense burners under discussion these dragons were intended to have an astronomical symbolism. More likely that the artist simply used figures, human or animal, that was familiar to him from his previous work and experience. The dragon, the jawzahr was frequently used in Islamic art, not only in metalwork, but also in other media of the decorative art, in miniature painting and also in architecture. One of the earliest and extremely interesting example was illustrated by Hartner. It is on the Man’s entrance to a Jacobite church in Jazirat ibn ’Urmar in Iraq, showing a lion attacked by this dragon-headed serpent.

The silver inlaid representation of jawzahr three times on the Kuwait and once on the Keir collection incense burner, although from the latter one the silver is now missing, are so similar that they seem to have been made by the same hands. The close likeness, however, does not end there. When we examine the decoration of the two covers we discover further resemblances. Above their rolled and slanting lacquers decorated rim both lids are decorated by a narrow concentric bands showing animals running towards the left. On the Keir cover they alternately depict hares and dogs, but there is also a sphinx. The same type of animals are included on the Kuwait lid, but among them one can observe also a lion. It has an upturned tail terminating in a brush, variations of which can be seen on several animals on both objects. More remarkable is the close similarity of the representation of the winged sphinxes.

The animal bands are separated from the upper part of the covers by the already mentioned narrow frieze of pearl motifs which were also used on the bodies. That the Keir collection was entirely made by silver inlaid dots placed between engraved double straights. The band on the Kuwait object, like on its body two silver inlaid pearls are always followed by one with copper. The perforated part of the Keir collection cover is interrupted by three eight-lobed medallions, each decorated with two human figures. The first medallion depicts two seated human figures. The figure to the right offers a goblet to the cross-legged seated person opposite him, who also has a halo around his head. Above, between their heads a footed-bowl is shown. The scene in the second medallion is more or less similar to the previous one, except that here it is the figure on the left who also has a halo, and he offers the goblet to the person on the right. Instead of a footed-bowl, here a bottle is shown below between the figures legs.

Nevertheless it is the third scene in the third medallion which deserves special attention. It presents two musicians. The figure on the left is playing on a tambourine, while the second person opposite seems to be playing on a harp. On the Keir collection piece (figure 13) this scene is not quite clear and the details cannot be clearly observed since the silver inlay is entirely missing. Nevertheless exactly the same scene is depicted and the silver inlay is perfectly preserved (figure 14). Therefore we are able to notice the folds and decorations of the garments of the two personages. More significantly we can see the object, if it is an object, behind the figure on the right, who is most likely a female. It appears to be not a harp, but probably a serpent since its head is clear. If that is the case here, then on the Keir collection cover must be the same. Once more this scene can be traced back to the Bobrinsky bucket. In the second horizontal band, counting from the top, a very similar scene is depicted. There are two musicians; one of them is playing on a string instrument, probably on an ʿud, while the figure next to him to the right holds an identical instrument, which again could be a harp or a serpent.

Around the base of the large knobs which crown these two covers, there are epigraphic bands. The one on the Kuwait object has already been mentioned that it is written in silver inlaid naskh, while the Keir collection piece it is in foliated Kufic, interrupted by three round medallions, each with an eight-petaled rosette. The inscription here is also benedictory, reading: al-ʿizz al-adīrīm “lasting glory”, al-ʿiqāb “prosperity” and al-sālim “unimpaired life.” There is further an inscription on the base of the body of the Keir incense burner, a graffito reading: bi-rasūl al-tishkhabān al-Aḍāliyyah “to the Royal vestry of al-Adil.”
Based on this graffiti, Mohammad Mustafa suggested that the incense burner was made for the Sultan upon his accession to the throne in 636AH/ AD1238. There are two other objects with the same graffiti, a bowl in the Louvre, made by famous artist, Ahmad al-Dhaili in Mosul and a box in the Victoria and Albert Museum.

Let us now examine the details of some of these figural scenes, particularly those which occur on both incense burners. The scene which is depicted on the covers of both objects is the two musicians within the eight-lobed medallions. While this scene is not quite clear on the Keir collection piece, due to the lack of the silver inlay, it is much more discernible on the Kuwait one. The head of the object indicate the figure of a serpent. The same representation can be observed on the several other vessels, all of which are more or less contemporary with these two incense burners. First of all similar scene is shown on the side of the British Museum's Vaso Vescovoli which was most likely made in Khorasan towards the end of the 12th or early 13th century. Then the same object appears twice on the famous Blacas ewer, again in the British Museum, which was made in Mosul in 630 AH/1232 AD and is signed by Shu'ayb ibn Mamo' two. Here it is clear that the instrument is a harp and not a serpent, and the two figures can be identified in the first representation.

which is very similar to those on the incense burners, there are two musicians, one of them a flautist sitting on the right and opposite to the left figure plays on a harp. The identity of the two figures becomes clear from the second scene, showing the same two figures riding a horse. It is a scene from the Shahnamah, representing Bahram Gur and his favourite musician, Azada, holding a harp. Accordingly, the scenes on the covers are the same, recalling one of the stories of the Shahnamah.

The Evolution of Arab Science – A Social Perspective

Lecture By: Ahmed Abdulla Al-Rab’i
Presented in Arabic
19 February 2007

In the attempt to explain the phenomenon of science, we are confronted by so many questions that need answers. This is as true of Islamic civilization as it is in any other civilization. The phenomena of evolution and the decline, rise and collapse of civilisations, form two philosophical questions. However, when these are related to science, then the case is much more difficult. In an attempt to do that, I will “throw some stones in the lake”. Since the issue is part of extensive research, including a large number of texts, reference sources and information, this is an invitation for discussion.

The first issue is the examination of the deep roots of the evolution of the phenomenon of Arab Science. Was this science at its historical moment of revelation during the 9th and 10th centuries a marginal phenomenon? Was it exclusively limited to circles of scientists working on astronomy, medicine and other sciences, or was it a deeply-rooted phenomenon affecting the economic and social structure of that civilization? Was this just repetition and explanation, or as Dr. Abdullah Al-Omar described it, was it just the Arab world acting like a policeman, whose role was to protect the treasure inherited from Greece? Is it true that our responsibility was to protect it and present it to others?

In all likelihood, the role extended beyond “protection”, and that the treasure was researched, investigated and criticised. Therefore, it ceased to be a marginal phenomenon, interesting only a limited number of people. But, is it really a phenomenon deeply rooted? Is it related to the conflict between what we call the sciences of “predecessor and that of contemporaries” or between the “sciences of Satan” and the “sciences of God”; between the traditional religious institutions of the time, as represented by Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal, a great figure, followed by Ibn Taymiya and al-Ghazali, in opposition to “Satan sciences”; an expression used by Al-Ghazali, (figure1) Al-Amiri and other contemporaries. Is the issue deeply rooted in the socio-political balance? Is it related to political power and the development of economic and social power in society? Or is it just a limited and marginal phenomenon?

When discussing any phenomena related to Arab Islamic heritage, especially in the domain of science, we

Dr. Ahmed Al-Rab’i Who died recently, was a minister and member of the National Assembly for many years. He was a journalist, writing daily columns for a newspaper based in Kuwait and a second paper based in London. Dr. Al-Rab’i was awarded his PhD from Harvard University and was a founding member of both the Human Rights Society in Kuwait and the Gulf Cooperation Programme for the guidance of researchers among businessmen and academics in the Gulf states.
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The journal Hadeeth ad-Dar of Dar al-Athar al-Islamiyyah (DAI) is intended to share the wealth and beauty of Islamic culture contained within the extensive and comprehensive Al-Sabah Collection of Islamic art and the variety of scholarly and artistic activities associated with the collection.

The collection itself, ranging from early Islam to the 18th century, is organised according to both historical period and geographical region. The reference library and the publications of DAI are closely related to the collection.

DAI has sponsored archaeological excavations in Bahaha, Upper Egypt that date to the Fatimid period. We are also involved in the Raya excavation at al-Tur, in Sinai Peninsula in Egypt. At present, our annual lecture series has been revived and is a focal point for historians and other specialists in the field.

It features talks by prominent international scholars on various topics of Islamic art, history, archaeology and architecture.

This publication is sponsored in part by


LNS 1276
Glass bowl
(base in photo)
Probably Syrian region
7th - 8th century
hgt: 4 cm; diam: 9.4 cm

Dr. Yehiya Bin Jenna
In Volume 24 we ran the wrong photo of Dr. Bin Jenna. Here is his picture and we apologise for any inconvenience created by the error.
المحتويات

حديث الدار
تعمد دوني محيط الدار
التي تصدر عن جدار الأكاديمية الإسلامية، إلى دراسة الدين الإسلامي باللغة العربية، كما تميز به من قدر باحتضان جامع أخاذ يجتاز في جمعية الصبايا الأسلامية الشاملة لتشمل المناط والأعمال، أثر على الفن الإسلامي. كما يهدف إلى إشارات جمهور الزوار، والإجابة على التنازل الإسلامي بمواد الأنظمة النباتية والفنية

ومضم مجمع الصبايا مسئولية يعود تاريخها إلى القروة القديمة من صدر الإسلام وحتى القرن الثاني عشر الهجري، وقد أدرك أن الصبايا يعنفها بعد الفترات التاريخية التي تدور فيها وتؤثر في الجغرافية التي تتم فيها.

أما مكاتب الصبايا فهي تضم مراعاة وشمولية تكاد ذات ملائمة بالجودة.

نتذكر أن الدار الإسلامية عبارة عن مكتب تشغيلية في مدرسة، وثمة مكتب بعث مباشر في الصحافة، وثمة عدد من خريجي الصبايا، الذي يتعاون مع جمعيات في تطوير نشر الصبايا، وثمة عدد من خريجي الصبايا، الذي يتعاون مع جمعيات في تطوير نشر الصبايا،...