

MUSLIM POTTERY AND OTHER VESSELS OF THE LATE 'ABBASID CALIPHATE IN THE PRINCE OF WALES MUSEUM, BOMBAY

DOCUMENTS of early Muhammedan civilization are still very rare in India as museums have hardly started to collect non-Indian objects; and as Islam became a power in this country only six centuries after the Hijra of the Prophet, it is still much easier to study the art of the Umayyad and 'Abbasid caliphate in London, Paris, Berlin, New York, Boston or Chicago than in India with her 75 millions of Muslims. Nevertheless there are at present a few beginnings to redress this want. The Baroda State Museum possesses a small, but excellent set of painted tiles of the 11th/12th Century A.D. from Fustat in Egypt. The earliest example of Arabic pottery de luxe, however, are in the Prince of Wales Museum in Bombay. Most of them were discovered by the Parsi scholar, J. M. Unvala during excavations in the ruins of ancient Susa between 1926 and 1929. Susa had long attracted the interest of scholars, since the British Consul, Loftus had in 1849 identified it with the winter capital of the Achæmenid kings of Persia. Since 1883 a French archæological mission has explored the site under the direction of famous scholars, M. Dieulafoy de Morgan (since 1897) and R. de Mecquenem (since 1912). Their researches have made Susa one of the most important centres of human history where, one after the other, the ruins of many cities were discovered: several prehistoric settlements belonging to a civilization nearly related to that of Mohenjo-Daro in Sind; the capital of the ancient kingdom of Elam with its Babylonian culture; the city and the palace of the Achæmenians which saw the prophet Daniel and the Jewish queen Esther, envoys from Greece and finally the marriage of the Macedonian conqueror Alexander with the daughter of the last king of Persia; the Hellenistic Seleucia; Nishapur founded by the Sasanian Shah Shapur I; and finally a Muhammedan provincial town which, after a long decay, was destroyed by the Mongol armies of Chinghiz Khan. It was in the ruins of Arab houses, of a potter's kiln and from the bottom of a contemporary well in the easternmost mound of Susa, the so-called "City of Artisans," that the early Muhammedan finds in the Prince of Wales Museum had been excavated.

A few belong to the 10th and 11th centuries, but most of them to the 9th century A.D. and are, therefore, more or less contemporary with Samarra, the magnificent residence of the 'Abbasid caliphs from 838-883 A.D. whose ruins have been excavated during the last decades by French, German and British scholars and have become the most important archæological evidence for our knowledge of Arabic civilization in its heyday. And it is indeed very fortunate that the Bombay Museum possesses also another, much smaller collection of potsherd fragments from Samarra proper which excellently complements the bigger and better preserved collection of contemporary pottery, glass and bronze work from Susa.

Popular pottery of this time can be easily distinguished by its decoration of impressions made with the thumb or with the nails. But many pieces of the better unglazed ware, decked with delicately cut floral ornaments, still continue the old Babylonian tradition, and it is often difficult and sometimes impossible to say whether they are of Sasanian or of Arab origin. In fact, a similar observation has been made about certain types of painted pottery found at Samarra which scholars would have attributed to the earliest periods of the Ancient East, if the circumstances of their discovery would not, beyond any doubt, make certain their Muhammedan character.

Sasanian tradition is evident also in the so-called Gabri (Guebri) ware. In spite of the conventional trade name connecting it with the fire-worshippers, its grafitto (scratching) technique is characteristic for a numerous class of Islamic pottery fabricated in Persia, especially at Susa, Hamadan, Zenjan, Amol, Rai and Kermanshah, in the 8th-11th centuries A.D. Unfortunately the Bombay Museum possesses no intact pieces but only some fragments with geometrical designs. In other pieces foreign influences are to be felt. The most beautiful of them are a small bowl and a cup, together with several small fragments, of a very fine and thin, almost white ware, decked with very delicate rilievo designs, apparently formed with the help of moulds. These designs, sometimes garlands and medallions, but mainly a rich vine creeper ornament, is of purely Byzantine character. Scholars have, therefore, sought the origin of this pottery in Syria, the Arab province which for so many centuries before the coming of Islam had been under Roman sway, and where Byzantine traditions survived until late in the 'Abbasid period. But our fragments had been found in a potter's kiln at Susa and must be of local origin. The only possible explanation of this contradiction is that they were the product of Syrians settled so far to the East; that Syrian and even Greek artisans were working in Iraq has in fact been testified by artisan inscriptions found in 'Abbasid ruins at Samarra, Baghdad, etc. Christians of the heretic sect of the Mandæans were also living not far from Susa, at Hawiza on the Kerkha river; the Bombay Museum possesses two vessels of the 9th century A.D. inscribed with old Mandæan benedictions, from this very place, brought home also by Dr. Unvala.

In spite of its Byzantine character the vine ornament is, however, Oriental. It began to invade Roman art not before the end of the 2nd century A.D., introduced from Syria and Iraq, and became the leading decoration only with the Orientalization of the Empire and the transfer of its capital to Byzantium. Its real origin was in Babylonian civilization, not yet the vine, but a hieratically misunderstood date palm, the "Tree of Life." Under the influence of later mystical movements in that period of religious fermentation which began some time before the appearance of Christianity and ended with the coming of Islam, this "Tree of Life" was identified with the vine, the symbol of spiritual life since the old Greek festivals in honour of Dionysos. To the Christians it became the symbol of the spiritual union in Christ, and thus spread over whole the art of early Mediæval Europe. Reduced to a mere ornament, it appears in the 'Omar Mosque at Jerusalem, in the Umayyad desert castle Mshatta, and, mixing with Sasanian traditions, finally developed into the well-known arabesque.

In this connection we may mention also five glass bottles and a perfume flacon of cut glass on four legs in which, too, the Roman-Byzantine tradition is undeniable. In spite of their fragile material they are very well preserved, and their long concealment in the earth has but contributed to their beauty, adding a sweet iridescent glitter to their surfaces.

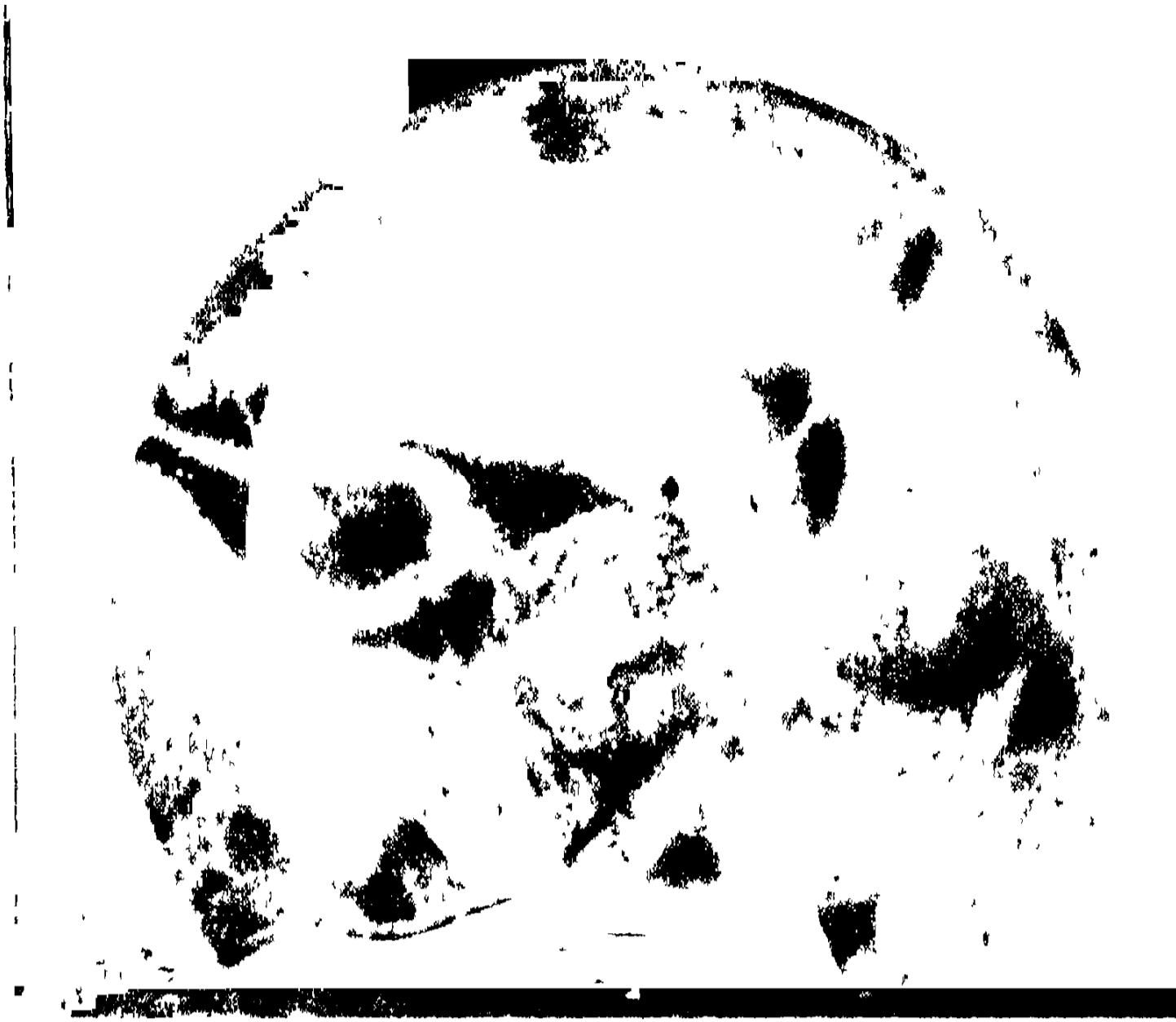
A bronze ewer, plain, but comparatively well preserved, which had been unearthed in the mound of the Achæmenian palace, also belongs to the 9th or perhaps early 10th century A.D.

On the other side also the forebodings of Far Eastern influence appear at the same time. In the late 'Abbasid Empire the import of the fine Chinese pottery was its chief medium. In the Bombay Museum there are two almost complete earthenware bowls with the splashed green and cream, *viz.*, green and brown slip so characteristic for the ceramic ware of Samarra. Fr. Sarre in his standard work on the pottery of Samarra (1925) had already pointed out that this type was an imitation of the famous semi-porcelain ware imported from the China of the T'ang Emperors (618-906 A.D.). Fragments of genuine Chinese T'ang pottery have been found at Samarra, and similar fragments of Chinese hardware, white or green-yellow splashed are in the collection of the Prince of Wales Museum, from Samarra as well as from Susa. That the green-yellow Arab pottery was copied on this Chinese model, is especially evident in one fragment from Susa on which the Chinese letters, drawn in grand, flourished brush strokes, have been imitated though, no doubt, misunderstood.

When new waves of nomadic tribes from Inner Asia destroyed the Arab-Persian empire of the 'Abbasid caliphs and threw the Near East into a series of political and cultural revolutions, Far Eastern influence became stronger and stronger. Already the Saljuqs brought many new habits and artistic conceptions from non-Muslim Central-Asia, some of Irano-Indian origin, others of Far Eastern. With the Mongols the decisive

From left to right :-

1. Perfume Flacon
2. Small glass bottle
3. Pottery Fragment of Samarra type imitating Chinese T'ang porcelain with " inscription "
4. Fragment of green and yellow splashed Chinese hardware
5. Kangura ornament of terra-cotta



Green and cream splashed bowl of Samarra type

Bowl of Byzantino-Syrian type (slightly enlarged)

By permission of Prince of Wales Museum, Bombay.

revolution became a fact, which replaced the—already assimilated—Arabo-Byzantine-Sasanian art tradition of the Arabic caliphate by the art of China and of the Central Asian Uigurs. It was in this same time that Chinese influence first reached Europe, contributing to the overthrow of the Byzantine tradition which ended in the Renaissance. The following centuries saw the slow ebbing down of Far Eastern influence and the reassertion of the Islamic art spirit.

A few fragments in the Bombay Museum permit us at least a glimpse into this development. A fragment of a Persian vase, with a vine ornament in moulded relieve under a dark blue and cream glazing, from Qale Madrassa near Malamir, in Persia, is too small to ascertain its date with certainty, but probably belongs to the Saljuq period, the 11th-12th centuries A.D. Another well-preserved terra-cotta moulding, not glazed, is interesting because it shows one of those "Kangura" battlements which, according to modern researches, had once crowned the entrance and the balconies of the Qutb Minar in Delhi. A few other fragments finally lead us to that wall decoration in cut encaustic tiles which had come into fashion under the later Il-Khans, had reached the zenith of its beauty under the great Tamerlan and was introduced into India by the Bahmanis and Moghuls (though isolated used already under the Lodi and Suri sultans); finally to that last Chinese fashion, the white and blue porcelain of the Ming and early Manchu dynasties which was introduced and imitated in the Persia, Turkey and India of the 17th century A.D., and of which the Hyderabad Museum possesses such a splendid collection.

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