A Humble Vessel for the Water of Life

Filiz Çakır Phillip
Independent scholar and curator, Toronto, Canada
filiz.phillip@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay explores the form and function of drinking vessels and their role and meaning in relationship to Arabic and Persian inscriptions within Islamic metalwork. The focus is a thirteenth-century jug from the Aga Khan Museum Collection. While similar jugs have been variously considered as vessels for water, wine, or sherbet, the anonymous epigrapher of the bilingual inscriptions on this example refers to water as the “water of life” (Pers. āb-e hayāt). These inscriptions prompt an examination of the relationship between object, image, and text in connection with water, an elixir of long or eternal life, in both a secular setting and a courtly context.

Keywords
Arabic and Persian inscriptions – jug – Mosul – thirteenth-century Islamic metalwork – “water of life”

The pyriform body of the Aga Khan Museum's jug has a slightly everted cylindrical neck and sits on a gently bevelled foot. The curved handle is a replacement mounted during a later period (Fig. 1). The jug displays the complexity of multiple layers through ornamental silver inlaid decoration. Between two inscription bands, interlinked polylobed medallions containing representations of zodiac signs are arranged on a T-shaped key-pattern background (Fig. 2). The neck is connected to the body by a toroidal moulding decorated with a chevron pattern. The ornamentation of the vessel corresponds to the Islamic intellectual tradition of the thirteenth century.

The Aga Khan Museum jug shares similarities in shape and decorative layout with the vase made by ʿAlī ibn Ḥamūd al-Mawṣilī, kept in the Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence. The latter assumed to have been executed in Mosul for Haqta bin Tudra, a Christian, is dated 657/1259.1 The T-pattern, well known for its presence on the famous Blacas ewer (dated 629/1232 and made in Mosul),2 also appears on both the Torontonian and Florentine vessels. However, unlike the Bargello example, motifs on the Aga Khan Museum's jug are not arranged in a diagonal grid. Both have bodies embellished with polylobed medallions and characteristic rosettes, all situated between horizontal inscription bands. In contrast to the Bargello vase, the vessel in Toronto only displays rosettes above its eight-lobed medallions, each filled with eleven of the twelve symbols3 of the zodiac cycle (Fig. 2).4 Although the Aga Khan Museum vessel is not of the same excellent quality as the Bargello vase, it has nonetheless, been described as appearing “to depend on the same tradition as Ali ibn Hamud.”5 Julian Raby emphasizes the importance of the Aga Khan Museum example as the only known thirteenth-century Mosul-style vessel with a Persian inscription, suggesting it was made for a Persian-speaking bureaucrat working for the Ilkhanids, either in Mosul or in western
Figure 1
Jug (Pers. mašraba), Iraq, Mosul, 648–73/1250–75, brass, cast, and inlaid with silver, overall: 16.5 cm × 13.5 cm, circumference: 39.8 cm, weight: 784.71 g. Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, acc. no. AKM986

Figure 2
Jug detail, Aga Khan Museum, Toronto, acc. No. AKM986
Iran.⁶ The extensive use of silver inlay and the decorative repertoire affirm its status as a “luxury object” for an elite household or a court, which supports his suggestion.⁷

1 The Inscriptions on the Jug

Around the neck, the Arabic inscription in silver plaited Kufic, surrounded by human heads (Fig. 4), reads: “and Glory and Long-life and Praise and Laudation and Generosity and Liberty and Piety and Favour to its owner (wa ḥallāj wa al-baqā wa al-hamād wa al-thamān wa al-jud wa al-sakha’ wa al-birr wa al-ata’ li-sahibīhī).” Around the shoulder, a Persian inscription in Naskhi, inlaid with silver reads: “o you whose rank is [as high as] the celestial orb and whose banners like those of the Sun, I have expectation from this humble vessel. That through your magnificence, its water becomes [the] water of life for you, So that you may drink and become eternal. (ey qadr-e asman-e to ra’yat-e Khoshid, zin mashrab-e haqir ke daram amid, kāz farr-e to garedad ab-e to ab-e hayat, ta be-khorī o zendeū many javid).” An Arabic inscription tracing the body, and written in silver plaited Kufic, reads: “Glory and Long-life and Praise and Laudation and Generosity and Liberty and Piety and Favour ... and Splendour and Magnificence and Forbearance and Modesty to its owner (al-‘izz wa al-baqā wa al-hamād wa al-thamān wa al-jud wa al-sakha’ wa al-birr wa al-ata’ ... wa al-majd wa al-baha’ wa al-hilāl wa al-haya’ li-sahibīhī).” Around the base, an Arabic inscription in silver plaited Kufic script repeats the word: “Glory” (al-‘izz).⁸

2 Historical Framework

Examining this vessel within its historical and dynastic framework, as well as the appropriate social context, suggests a connection to the metalwork tradition of Mosul during the thirteenth century. The artistic legacy of the Seljuqs survived strongly through their successor states in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, specifically in Anatolia and Jazira.⁹ Two Turkish dynasties with origins in the Great Seljuk state ruled Jazira: the Artuqids (ca. 495–812/1102–1409), who were of Turkmen origin, and the Zangids (521–649/1127–1251), who originally were military slaves. Zangid rule of the Jazira was split between different branches of the family, with one controlling Jazirat ibn Umar, Mosul, Shahrazur, and Sinjar until the Mongol invasions. In Mosul, one of the Zangids’ military commanders had rebelled: Badr al-Dīn Lu’Lu’ (608–57/1211–59), an Anatolian-Armenian enslaved soldier. Badr al-Dīn Lu’Lu’ became increasingly independent from the Zangid dynasty and established a centre of extraordinary courtly workshops in Mosul renowned for outstanding inlaid metalwork production.¹⁰ Richly decorated copper-alloy bottles, bowls, cups (jam), and jugs (mashraba) of the thirteenth century attest to the rich banquets and celebratory ceremonies with elaborate rituals organised at the Mosul court in the tradition of the Great Seljuqs. The variety of shapes and sizes of these artworks, particularly those cast in brass or bronze inlaid with silver, suggests a society with highly developed social customs and etiquette. Sophisticated examples of metalwork affirm Badr al-Dīn Lu’Lu’s patronage and his ambition to become a universal power, along with the iconographic repertoire and inscriptions employed by courtly artists and artisans of his time. The artistic repertoire of earlier dynasties included stellar constellations as well as figurative representations and symbolic illustrations of the planets, a trend that increased with the age of transformation of knowledge during the ‘Abbasid caliphal rule. Transformation and expansion of knowledge were decidedly linked to interactions among civilisations. In pursuit of
scientific knowledge, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scholars studied texts and treatises from Greek, Persian, Indian, and Chinese traditions, translating them into Arabic and disseminating them further. Between the late-twelfth and early-fourteenth centuries, interest in ancient Greek philosophy, science, and especially astronomy – including magic and the world of astrology – reached unprecedented heights. During this time, ancient Greek astronomy, the oldest of the sciences and one of the most powerful contributions to the evolution of human thought, became the source of artistic iconography on metalwork. Generally speaking, these motifs of heavenly bodies or signs fell into one of two categories: planets or zodiac signs with no relation to one another and astrological signs of the zodiac associated with their astrological lords or planets. Most of the representations of zodiacs on metalwork in the late-twelfth and thirteenth centuries belong to the latter category. The Aga Khan Museum jug follows this tradition (Fig. 3).

In the 1970s, James Allan carried out comprehensive studies on metalwork, and he accurately referred to the extensive use of the inlay technique on bronze artworks in the twelfth century as an important milestone within Islamic metalwork. Julian Raby’s research on Mosul metalware allows us to discuss this topic through various aspects and challenges: the formalised “school” of metalwork in the city, especially the motifs, styles, and techniques, were developed and shared over the course of five decades. Linda Komaroff laid the groundwork for further inquiry into socio-cultural interpretations of water vessels and classified them into two main categories: washing vessels and drinking vessels. She also offers information about their use. When examining their function, Komaroff takes inspiration from research on Italian Renaissance majolica, demonstrating that changes in vessel form reflect complex changes in diet and dining habits.

Drinking vessels are not restricted to a specific liquid, and poetic inscriptions may offer further suggestions for their use. Such inscriptions often refer to water, wine, or sherbet. In the case of the Aga Khan Museum vessel, the Persian inscription reveals its intended use for drinking āb-e ḥayāt, [the] water of life, also associated with the fountain of life. Āb-e ḥayāt is mentioned by Arab and Persian writers in connection to Alexander the Great and his search for the spring of eternity during his expeditions in the East, along with his legendary achievements and imaginary travels.
the tradition of the “Alexander Romance,” Alexander the Great, after many spectacular adventures, finally arrives with his three hundred and sixty chosen men at a spring: “the water was very clear and shone as though it were lightning. The air too was fragrant and most sweet.” In the legendary story, Alexander inadvertently (without noticing it, nor drinking from it) finds the “water of life,” the “spring of immortality,” before he continues with his expedition against Poros, the King of India.

Apart from his self-representation as the universal ruler of Asia, Alexander the Great was undeniably attracted to the concept of Iranian kingship, defined by divine election, world domination, and imperial splendour. Within the Islamic intellectual tradition and in Perso-Arab literature, Alexander the Great is understood to be the ideal hero, king, and prophet. Equipped with a lust for wonder and adventure and a thirst for knowledge, he achieved the status of the ideal ruler and excellent warrior with unparalleled grandeur and ultimately reached the stage of a monotheistic prophet who had discovered the “water of life.”

Inscriptions on metalwork from the late-thirteenth century refer to allegorical and mystical poems. Vessels designated for water often carry allegorical inscriptions that include explanatory information regarding the quality of the liquid. A number of these inscriptions make allusions to Alexander the Great and the “water of life,” offering a promise of eternal life to the person who drinks from the vessel. While Arabic inscriptions on this humble vessel in the Aga Khan Museum Collection contain blessings to its unnamed owner, Persian inscriptions with a reference to the sun, the centre of the depicted zodiac circle, invite one to drink from the vessel, to become eternal. Through the inscriptions, the owner of this vessel can aspire to reach the status of an ancient king, e.g., Alexander the Great.

Another connection between the jug and Alexander is his thirst for knowledge, especially finding the “water of life” after entering the “Land of Darkness.” In this context, water becomes a symbol of knowledge and enlightenment. According to an esoteric interpretation (taʾwīl) of the Quran by the Ismāʿilis, “water is indispensable for the preservation and growth of life, knowledge is vital for the soul. As water washes away the material pollution from the body, knowledge purifies the soul from spiritual impurities.” This interpretation later inspired Sufis as well. A brass jug, dated 889/1484 and signed, bears inscriptions shedding further light on this context:

> may you know that every source of water is from Khidr, In this jug is the water of life, It is the water of life from the spring of knowledge, Boiling up from the source of meaning, You will find the eternal life of Khidr, If you bring this jug to your lips, If, of the water that gives life to your body, You do not consider it as being without the divine presence.

3 Form of the Vessel and Its Connection to Iran

When looking at the shape of this jug, the comparable vase from Florence indicates a connection to metalwork production in Mosul. The question arises: is the shape of these drinking vessels an original creation of Mosul? The jug’s Persian inscription warrants a closer exploration of Iranian art, where we find a fine type of pyriform jug (mašrabā) resting on a low-ring foot, which has existed in the repertoire of Iranian artisans since the eighth century. The development of its typology has previously been discussed through four examples. Even though the form of this vessel type remains relatively unchanged during its production history, the artistic repertoire and the inscriptions of these drinking vessels may provide insights into their production center[s].
Melikian-Chirvani alludes to a possible relationship between the “School of Mosul” and the “western Iran school” at the end of the thirteenth century or even earlier. Pyriform vessels were disseminated widely after the Mongol invasions in the Near East, and many artists from Mosul emigrated to Egypt, Syria, or even Iran, searching for new customers to buy their products. Pyriform jugs and ewers were not produced exclusively in bronze, as later examples of Iznik ceramics exemplify, underlining the intimate exchange between bronze, ceramic, and earthenware. The monumental work Iznik: The Pottery of Ottoman Turkey, first published in 1989, displays the wealth of types and forms of vessels produced in Iznik. One of these is the mašraba. Timurid examples show variations of this type executed in jade as well.

4 Conclusion

The long tradition of pyriform vessels clearly shows the legacy of an intellectual œuvre, which created an immersive blend of ancient Greek philosophy and science with pre-Islamic Persian etiquette and literature translated and adapted into Arabic and Farsi. The vessels were associated with thaumaturgical effects, likely believed to succeed with the cosmic help of the zodiac. Metalwork artisans of the thirteenth century, through their artistic repertoire and silver inlay technique, were able to manifest this multi-faceted kaleidoscopic knowledge and belief in the ornaments on a modest vessel, the jug.

About the Author

Filiz Çakır Phillip holds a DPhil. from the Institute of Art History at Freie Universität Berlin and is a specialist in Islamic art with extensive curatorial and research experience. She worked as a curator at the Aga Khan Museum (2013–22) and at the Museum für Islamische Kunst in Berlin (2006–12). Çakır Phillip has curated numerous exhibitions and authored several books, including Arts of the East: Highlights of Islamic Art from the Bruschettini Collection (Hirmer Verlag, 2017) and Syrian Living: Medieval to Modern (Aga Khan Museum, 2022). She also serves as a board member for the Association of Art Museum Curators.
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References


Shalem, A. (2004). Objects as Carriers of Real or Contrived Memories in a


Notes

1 Museo Nazionale del Bargello, Florence, acc. no. C. 360.
2 The inscription on the Blacas ewer indicates the name of its metalsmith, Shuja’ ibn Man a’ al-Mausili; British Museum, London, acc. no. 1866.1229.61.
3 The eleven zodiac symbols on the Aga Khan Museum jug (starting left from the handle): Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, and Aquarius. The twelfth sign of the zodiac, Pisces, is missing from the artistic repertoire. This might be explained as a miscalculation by the artist, or a last-minute addition of the handle.
4 According to Stefano Carboni, Arab astronomers learned from and translated Greek treatises on the stars. The treatise of Ptolemy, the Almagest, was the most influential. Special attention was devoted to twelve constellations that constituted a kind of belt in the sky, inside of which the planets were constantly in motion. This group of constellations was known as the zodiac. Each of the twelve groups of stars in the zodiac was given a name in Arabic based mainly on Greek sources. Aries, the ram; Taurus, the bull; Gemini, the twins; Cancer, the crab; Leo, the lion; Virgo, the virgin; Libra, the scale; Scorpio, the scorpion; Sagittarius, the archer; Capricorn, the kid; Aquarius, the water pourer; and Pisces, the two fish; see Carboni, S. (1997). Following the stars: Images of the Zodiac in Islamic Art. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, p. 4; Cf. also Canby, S.R. (2016). In: S.R. Canby, D. Beyazit, M. Rugiadi, and A.C.S. Peacock. Court and Cosmos: The Great Age of the Seljuqs. New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, cat. nos. 115–17; 119–25; pp. 194–209.
6 Ibid.
7 Ibid.
8 The inscriptions were read and translated for the auction catalogue of Sotheby’s, Arts of the Islamic World, 9 October 2013, lot 116.
9 Regarding the geographical centre of Iran, the Khwarazm-Shahs took control over much of it by the last quarter of the twelfth century. Their reign was short-lived due to the Mongol invasions. Khurasan initially capitulated, and then gradually, all of Iran fell to these Central Asian invaders. During the second phase of the Mongol invasions, beginning in the 1250s, Iran, Iraq, and much of Anatolia were gradually incorporated into the Mongol Empire. During the reign of the Ilkhans, the western lands of their empire included both Iran and Iraq; see Komaroff, L. (1992). The Golden Disk of Heaven: Metalwork of Timurid Iran. Costa Mesa: Mazda, p. 1.
10 The ethnic origin of Badr al-Din Lu’Lu’ may provide hints regarding the establishment of his court as well. Gahnamak, the “Book of Rank,” is the ancient Armenian official state document for nobility at the royal court, which was continued during the Sasanian dynasty. Following dynasties in this vast region, with their multi-ethnic and diverse cultures, may have found such historical sources inspirational.
12 The Aga Khan Museum Collection has a seventeenth-century copy of the treatise (Aga Khan Museum, acc. no. AKM.266) written by the court astronomer al-Sufi in Iran. His treatise was the most important guide to constellation forms stretching over the tenth-century sky. The book, focusing on the forty-eight constellations known as the Fixed Stars, is based on the work of the Greek astronomer Ptolemy, Almagest, and is noted as a significant improvement on the knowledge of ancient
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observations; Cf. the recently corrected early sequence of manuscripts, datable to the late-twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries, from the widely diffused treatise by al-Sufi, Savage-Smith, E. (2013). The Most Authoritative Copy of Abd al-Rahman al-Sufi's Tenth-century Guide to the Constellations. In: S. Blair and J. Bloom, eds., God is Beautiful and Loves Beauty. New Haven and London: Yale University Press/The Qatar Foundation, pp. 122–55. Seljuq and early Mongol period manuscript illustrations contain antic drawing style of garments and figures, which were used well into the thirteenth century; Cf. Ibid.


Ibid., pp. 248–74.


David Roxburgh describes the jug's contents as the “water of life” (āb-e hayāt), a synonym for wine (most directly referenced by the nouns may, sharbār, bāda). Wine, the “water of life,” becomes molten or liquefied rubies, and rubies become rosy lips on the object of one's desire. See Roxburgh, D. (2007). Timurlı Minyatürlerinde Şarap: “Saki, Bize Ab-i Hayat Ver” (Wine in Timurid Miniatures: “Cupbearer, let us have some water of life”). In: P Art and Culture Magazine 15, p. 57. By the early fourteenth century, the Arabic term mašraba had come to be understood by Iranian lexicographers as “a wine-vessel” or a “water-emplacement.” In poetical usage, the term mašraba was common in the fourteenth century and was associated with wine. See Melikian-ChIRVANI, A.S (1982). Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World: 8th–18th Centuries. London: h. M. s. o., p. 394. Nurhan Atasoy brings the medieval Greek term “mastrapa” into the discussion as an adaption of the Turkish type of drinking vessel. Clearly, “mastrapa” is a Greek derivation of the Arabic term “mašraba” and is evidence of intercultural exchanges, especially their reflection on linguistics and commerce. Cf. Atasoy, N., Raby, J., and Petsopoulos, Y. (2008). Iznik: The Pottery of Ottoman Turkey, p. 37 et seq.


Āb-e hayāt is also called ʿayn al-hayāt or nahr al-hayāt and is associated with Khidr, who is identified as the unnamed companion of Moses in the Quran (1865–82). Khidr is the patron saint of wayfarers and is believed to be immortal since he drank from the fountain of life; see Poonawala, I.K. (1982). ʿAb ii. Water in Muslim Iranian culture. Encyclopaedia Iranica, I (1), pp. 27–8; available online at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/ab-ii-water-in-muslim-iranian-culture (accessed on 20 July 2021); for Khidr and his identification as Andreas, the cook of Alexander the Great, see Dawkins, R.M. (1937). Alexander and the Water of Life. Medium Aevum 6 (3), pp. 178–81.


Ibid.; in the Shahnaneh of Firdausi, Alexander undertakes a pilgrimage to the Ka'bah. Firdausi sends Alexander to the city of red-faced and blond-haired warriors. Alexander inquires about the marvels worth seeing and is informed of the existence of the “Land of Darkness” (al-zulūmāt). In the “Land of Darkness,” there is a spring (firdaūs), whose water comes from paradise (firdaʿis) and confers
immortality to those who bathe in it. Alexander enters the Darkness accompanied by forty war-
riors and the prophet Khidr, who is described as his counsellor (rāy-zan). Khidr is the unnamed
companion of the prophet Moses, cf. footnote 19; in the Islamic tradition, the Quranic episode of
the prophet Moses' journey to the junction of the two seas (Maǧmaʿ al-bahrayn; Q 18:60–4), was
gradually merged with the Dā al-Qarnayn story found in the same Sura adapted into the Alexander
Romance. While following Alexander's identification with the Quranic Dā al-Qarnayn, Nizāmī trans-
forms the conventional framework of the Dā al-Qarnayn narrative. In Nizāmī's Book of Alexander,
Alexander goes on his mission equipped with the three Books of Wisdom (širāznāmeh) presented

28 According to Avinoam Shalem's interpretation, an artefact belonging to an ancient king, like
Alexander the Great or Solomon, was a useful relic for every medieval king who wanted to claim an
equally important position in history; see Shalem, A. (2004). Objects as Carriers of Real or Contrived
Memories in a Cross-Cultural Context: The Case of Medieval Diplomatic Presents. In: Stegmann, P.,
ed., Migrating images: Producing ... reading ... transporting ... translating. Berlin: House of World
Cultures, p. 47.
31 Melikian-Chirvani, A.S. (1982). Islamic metalwork from the Iranian world, pp. 29–65; the image of a
jug from a private collection attributed to tenth- to eleventh-century Khurasan is featured on p. 30;
and a comparable museum piece attributed to tenth- to eleventh-century eastern Iran at the V&A
(Victorian & Albert Museum, acc. np. M.152-1923) is included on p. 47; a third jug attributed to eastern
Iran, Khurasan, or Sistan, twelfth to thirteenth centuries, can be found on pp. 62 and 65; another
undecorated pyriform jug is in the Keir Collection and attributed to the twelfth to thirteenth cen-
Art from the collection of Edmund de Unger. Munich: Hirmer Verlag, p. 111.
already observed similar relationships between Eastern and Western traditions in the art and its
production, especially regarding the Blacas Ewer; see Harari, R. (1999). Metalwork of Later Islamic
Periods. In: Pope, A.U., Ackerman, P., and Besterman, T., eds., A survey of Persian art from prehis-
35 Cf. Jug, Samarkand or Herat, 1417–19; greenish white jade (nephrite). Calouste Gulbenkian Museum,
Inv. no. 328.