A Persianate Drawing of the *Tazza Farnese*: A Work by Muhammad Khayyam?*

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Since the beginning of research on the Diez albums, a black-line ink drawing of an antique composition (fig. 14.1), bearing a shakily written attribution to “Muḥammad-i Khayyām” in the lower right corner outside the circular frame (fig. 14.7a), has aroused scholarly interest. In 1964, the archaeologist Horst Blanck identified the image carved into the front side of the *Tazza Farnese*, a well-known antique cameo (fig. 14.2),¹ as the model used for it.² He has shown how accurately the Persianate drawing replicates the antique relief, cut from sardonyx (a type of banded agate), which he interprets as a gathering held by the Greek god Dionysus. Erika Simon has convincingly re-identified the bearded god leaning against a tree trunk on the left as Neilos, the Ptolemaic-Egyptian god of the Nile: not only is he accompanied by a royal Egyptian sphinx, he is also holding a so-called *rhyton*, a horn from which liquid, such as Nile water, was poured.³ This attribute distinguishes him from Dionysus, who is generally shown holding a *cornucopia* filled with fruit. Most scholars agree that the *Tazza Farnese* cameo was produced in Ptolemaic Egypt, probably in Alexandria, in the latter half of the second century BC.⁴ Called a *tazza* (“cup”) because of its enormous size, the cameo was additionally named “Farnese” after the Italian princely family

* This essay presents the results of an analysis which was carried out in 2011 during my research project on biblical themes in Islamic book painting within the program “Connecting Art Histories in the Museum: The Mediterranean and Asia 400–1650”, a cooperation between the Staatliche Museen zu Berlin and the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florence – Max Planck Institut. Fourteen drawings from the Diez albums were investigated by focussing on their stylistic, technical, and material aspects. The scientific part of the analysis was undertaken by Oliver Hahn, who was assisted by Lars Lühl and Renate Nöller (BAM Federal Institute for Materials Research and Testing). I am most grateful to Gerhard Wolf and Hannah Baader, who initiated this study as the heads of the CAHIM project. I would also like to thank Claus-Peter Haase and Julian Raby for their thoughtful comments on the final draft of this paper. Special thanks are due to the co-editors of this volume, Julia Gonnella and Christoph Rauch, for their advice and support.

¹ However, no Persianate drawing of the back of the cameo, where the mask of Medusa is carved, has survived.
⁴ Cf., e.g., Ulrico Pannuti, *La collezione glittica*, vol. 11, Rome 1994, cat.no. 68, p. 92.
who owned the valuable piece since 1586 until it came to its present location, the Museo Archeologico Nazionale in Naples.

As yet unaware that the Tazza Farnese was the direct model, Ernst Kühnel was the first to write about the drawing in 1959, calling it “a circular composition showing a design borrowed from antiquity”⁵ He thought that it depicted Dionysus accompanied by several enigmatic figures.⁶ In his opinion, Muhammad Khayyam had adopted the human figures and the sphinx from various antique sources in an eclectic manner, adding only the gnarled tree on the left (fig. 14.16) in his own “Persian-Mongolian” idiom.⁷ Ernst Kühnel knew the corpus of drawings credited to Muhammad Khayyam⁸ quite well through descriptions and reproductions of some of his eleven signed works in the Timurid workshop album (TSMK, H. 2152), published by Arménag Sakisian,⁹ and Mazhar Ş. İpşiroğlu and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu.¹⁰

Some forty years after Kühnel’s rather pejorative judgement, David J. Roxburgh gave a new appraisal of such imitative practices by stating that Muhammad Khayyam, as a Timurid-period calligrapher and draftsman, had “the habit of remaking and refining selected designs, correcting what he may have perceived as unfortunate formal slips, miscalculations of line, awkwardnesses of composition”, and that he thus proceeded in a similar way to his artist peers, the poets and calligraphers.¹² However, because of the “often eccentric subjects and varied finesse of execution”, Roxburgh suspected that Muhammad Khayyam was active as a draftsman only for recreational purposes.¹³ From this perspective it seems conceivable that the Tazza Farnese was one of Muhammad Khayyam’s models chosen to develop his skills as a draftsman by translating the unfamiliar form of the antique composition into his own graphic language.

However, two fundamental questions arise in this context. The first is whether and how it can be ascertained that Muhammad Khayyam actually executed the Tazza Farnese drawing as well as the other works credited to him by means of and also first hand through the seven drawings with signatures or attributive notes pasted into the Diez albums (figs. 14.1 and 14.4a−f). He classified all these works as copies of models from the past, which prompted him to call Muhammad Khayyam an “epigone and eclectic”.¹¹

⁶ Ibid.
⁷ The gnarled tree is indeed stylistically close to Sinizising trees in Persianate paintings, but it is nonetheless a faithful copy of the tree as it is depicted on the cameo.
⁸ Although his full name was Muhammad b. Mahmudshah al-Khayyam, according to the signatures, the artist will be here referred to throughout as Muhammad Khayyam, which is the short form of his name appearing in the attributive notes.
⁹ Arménag Bey Sakisian, La miniature persane du 12e au 17e siècle, Paris 1929, pp. 60–61.
¹⁰ Mazhar Ş. İpşiroğlu and Sabahattin Eyüboğlu, Fatih albumuna bir bakış (Sur l’album du conquérant), Istanbul c. 1955, figs. 118–122.
¹¹ Kühnel, “Malernamen”, p. 76: “dem Epigonen und Eklektiker”.
¹³ Ibid.