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AN EARLY ISLAMIC BRONZE EWER REEXAMINED

Among the collections of Eastern art at the Hermitage in St. Petersburg is a particularly beautiful bronze ewer variously attributed to late Sasanian and early Islamic Iran (fig. 1).\(^1\) Despite the fact that the piece is well known among Islamic art historians and has been widely published, no detailed study has thus far been devoted to its intriguing shape and decoration. This is the more surprising as the ewer is a key piece in an important but still enigmatic group of silver and bronze ewers with horizontal neck spouts of late Sasanian or early Islamic date.\(^2\) Here the Hermitage ewer will be reintroduced to scholars to initiate thoughts on the typological origin, provenance, date, and function of this important piece.

The Hermitage ewer has a bulbous pear-shaped body, faceted around the lower part. It rests on a low pedestal (replacement) foot with splayed base. Above, a narrow rounded collar introduces a tapering waisted neck, also faceted. The long horizontal spout above is tubular, very narrow, and rectangular in section. The small almond-shaped mouth is covered by a hinged lid. A rounded projecting lip runs around the mouth. The lateral extensions surrounding the outer mouth are lobed to indicate abstract floral motifs. The handle is S-shaped, of angular appearance, and plain. It is held to the back of the neck and the lower body by means of stylized zoomorphic attachments.

The typological origin of this ewer has often been related to late Sasanian prototypes made of silver. Strictly speaking, however, none of the objects presented as comparative material shows any convincingly close resemblance to the piece under discussion, particularly as far as the peculiar shape of the spout is concerned. Undeniably, Sasanian silver ewers do display a very similar profile, comprising an ovoid or pear-shaped body, a pedestal foot, and a long, waisted neck. However, the horizontal spout, which is also a characteristic feature of the Hermitage ewer, is rendered in a very different way. Here, the neck extends into a flat almond-shaped spout with a protruding, angular edge terminating in a pointed tip.\(^3\) The tip of the spout is closed, and thus any liquid would be forced over its upper edge (fig. 2). In the case of the bronze ewer under discussion, on the other hand, the spout consists of a rounded mouth section protruding from the neck, with a small almond-shaped and lid-

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\(^1\) Fig. 1. Cast bronze ewer allegedly from Daghestan. H. 20 cm. St. Petersburg, Hermitage Museum, inv. no. KZ5753. (Photo: courtesy Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg)
ded aperture above. Towards the front, this section narrows down abruptly and extends into a very narrow and very long angular tube, which is closed from above. With a spout system like this the liquid would flow through the tube rather than over the outer edge.

From these observations it becomes clear that although the Hermitage ewer and its immediate predecessors share a similar profile and the same concept of a horizontal spout, the technical execution of this concept is very different in the two cases, and it can therefore not be readily argued that the spout profile of that piece is directly derived from Sasanian vessels. There is, however, one late Sasanian silver ewer which in its appearance seems to provide a half-way stage between the classical Sasanian ewer shape and the bronze ewer discussed here (fig. 3). This piece, preserved in the Cincinnati Art Museum, shares its overall appearance with the other Sasanian pieces. At the same time, several details in the ewer’s execution seem to anticipate the profile of the Hermitage piece: the more bulbous appearance of the body and the clear demarcation of the central body by the neck collar above and the emphatic ridge below, which at the same time serves clearly to set the lower body apart. Finally, and most interestingly, the rendering of the spout seems to some extent to anticipate the narrow tubular spout applied to the bronze ewer. The characteristic almond-shaped profile terminating in a closed pointed tip of the more typical Sasanian spouts has been abandoned here and replaced by an open tubular tip of square section, not unlike the tubular (though closed and more pronounced) spout of the Hermitage ewer.

Even in the case of the Cincinnati ewer, however, the similarities with the piece under discussion are not far-reaching enough to argue that it may have derived directly from vessels of probable Sasanian origin. In fact there are indications that its origin may have some connections with pre-Islamic metal objects from countries to the west of the Sasanian Empire, particularly the Roman world. It has often been suggested that the general body profile of early Islamic bronze ewers with horizontal spouts can be traced back to a late Roman ewer shape current in the fourth and fifth centuries A.D. (fig. 4).

This type was characterized by a bulbous, inverted, pear-shaped body, which rested on a high pedestal foot with an annular knob in the center. Above the body rose a conical neck interrupted by a collar in its upper section. From the upper neck projected a horizontal spout which was rendered as an open tube.