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EARLY MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC POTTERY: THE ELEVENTH CENTURY RECONSIDERED

In the spring of 1977, George Bass (then the president and now the archaeological director of the Institute of Nautical Archaeology at Texas A & M University) began in Serçe Limanı, a small natural harbor on the southern Turkish coast just opposite Rhodes, the excavation of a shipwreck lying under one hundred and ten feet of water. The results achieved during the three seasons of retrieval at this beautiful site are revolutionizing our view of early medieval Islamic art owing to the fact that the wreck is not only a time capsule of a single voyage, it is a datable one. Coins of the Byzantine emperor Basil II and gold coins and glass coin weights of the Fatimid caliphs al-Hakim and al-Zahir were among the objects brought up by the team of divers and the latest among these, three of the weights, permit us to pinpoint the ship’s sinking to ca. 1025. Thus, the wreck is serving as an invaluable tool for the archaeologist and art historian alike.

The most important cargo on this merchant ship was its glass. However, it was also carrying arms, metalwork, jewelry, wooden objects, two pairs of small rotary millstones, a small amount of arsenic ore, one or more perishable cargoes which have disappeared, and various types of pottery. The largest single ceramic group consisted of one hundred and ten amphoras which are of the Byzantine type in common use between the ninth and eleventh centuries. Besides these and other unglazed wares, forty-four glazed bowls were recovered. Ten of the latter are of the type of pottery known as champlevé and comprise the group on which this article will focus.

After each of these champlevé vessels was thrown in red earthenware, its decoration was created by first applying a slip of light-colored clay to the interior and part of the exterior surfaces. When dry, the slip was carved away, leaving the desired design in relief. Details were then incised in the slip and the vessel was finally covered with a transparent, clear or colored, lead glaze; in some instances, a bowl was further adorned with splashed oxide pigments before firing. Not only is the decorative technique identical on these ten bowls (which, like the other objects excavated at this site, are the property of the Turkish Government and housed in the Bodrum Museum of Underwater Archaeology), but the designs themselves are also very similar. They can be divided into four groups.

A. Group I (“Bisecting Arabesques”) consists of GW26, GW27, GW28 and the variant GW19. Each of the four bowls in this group bears two arabesque designs, con-

Fig. 1. Serçe Limanı No. GW26. Ht. 0.065; Gr. D. 0.232.

Fig. 2. Serçe Limanı No. GW27. Ht. 0.063; Gr. D. 0.225.
sisting of one or more palmette leaves, which bisect the interior surface of the object (figs. 1, 2, 3, 4).

B. Group II ("Undulating Arabesques") consists of GW528 and GW529. Each of these two bowls bears an undulating arabesque design which in the case of GW528 covers the entire interior surface and in that of GW529 is circumscribed by a calligraphic decoration (figs. 5, 6).

C. Group III ("Palmette Tree") consists of GW527, GW559 and the variant GW530. The first two bowls bear a single palmette tree as their sole decoration; the variant contains three such trees radiating from the center of the bowl (figs. 7, 8, 9).

D. The final group, Group IV ("Geometric"), comprises only one bowl, GW483. Its decoration combines the principal motifs from each of the other three groups while adding new design elements as well. The interior surface of this bowl is divided into three sections consisting of a large central ogive flanked by two semicircles, each bordered by a wide plain band. The ogive bears a “bisecting arabesque” design in its center on a ground of scale motifs, a “palmette tree” design in each of the semicircles and, in the interstices, “undulating arabesque” designs (fig. 10).

How do these ten bowls confirm or corroborate what is already known about other pottery objects produced at this time? What new information do they provide? Do they alter our thinking in any way about works of art produced in the Islamic world during the early medieval period (1000–1250)?

The three bowls constituting the “Palmette Tree” group and the single bowl in the “Geometric” group all bear a design which is very close to that on an Egyptian luster-painted bowl in the Museum of Islamic Art, Cairo, incorporating in its decoration an Arabic inscription in Kufic script which reads “Power and thriving to the mas-