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2

Four Lectures on the IsMEO Activities in the Masjed-e Jom‘e of Isfahan

edited by Bruno Genito

I S M E O

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PREFACE

Located in the historic centre of Esfahan, the Masjed-e Jom'e ('Friday Mosque') can be seen as a stunning illustration of the evolution of mosque architecture over twelve centuries, starting in 841 CE, and now is one of the major Iranian sites inscribed on UNESCO World Heritage List.

The Italian restoration activities carried out in Esfahan during the 1970s were planned and organised in collaboration with the Service for the Restoration and Preservation of the Historical Monuments of Iran (now Iranian Cultural Handicraft and Tourism Heritage Organisation) (ICHTHO) and the Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente (IsMEO, afterwards IsIAO). The restoration activities headed by Arch. Prof. Eugenio Galdieri and the excavation activities headed by Prof. Umberto Scerrato in the Friday Mosque were aimed in particular at identifying the earlier constructional phases of the building: amongst them the Abbasid, Buyid and Saljuq.

Historical circumstances did not allow for long time (1979-1998) any Italian team to continue working at Esfahan. Only between 1999 and 2002 an Italian IsIAO team, under the invitation of ICHO (now ICHTHO) and with the direction of the late Prof. U. Scerrato went back to Esfahan, starting again the work in the Mosque jointly with the Iranian colleagues.

Many years after the end of the actual excavations, a joint Iranian-Italian Project named ADAMJI (A.rchaeological D.igital A.rchive M.asjed-e J.om'e I.sfahan) has been aimed at providing a gradual transformation of the whole set of original data and information (written, graphic, photographic etc.) in a digital archive. The Italian/Iranian Project jointly coordinated and directed from the Iranian

side by Dr. Faribah Saeidi Anaraki and from the Italian side by Prof. Bruno Genito, started in 2003 and ended in 2010.

A number of Institutions offered their precious contribution to the realization of the joint work, the Italian Ministero degli Affari Esteri (MAECI), the Sazeman-e Miras Farhangi Sanaye Dasti va Gardeshgari, Tehran, the Sazeman-e Miras Farhangi Sanaye Dasti va Gardeshgari, Esfahan and the Iranian Centre for the Archaeological Research (ICAR), the Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente, Rome (IsIAO), the Università degli Studi di Napoli L'Orientale (UniOr).

The idea of realizing a volume to illustrate to a wide public the activities of the Project was first imagined by Ambassador Alberto Bradanini who during the celebration day of 25th February 2010 suggested to publish in the shortest time a collection of papers related to the scientific work done in the Masjed-e Jom'e. *IsIAO decided to do that, making use of some papers (never published) devoted to an exhibition held in the National Museum of Iran, Tehran in December 2005, and adding further contributions in order to have a more complete collection of subjects.*

The volume, Adamji Project. From the Excavation (1972-1978) to the Archive (2003-2010) in the Masjed-e Jom'e, Isfahan*, Tehran 2010, was edited jointly by Faribah Saeidi Anaraki and Bruno Genito, printed in Tehran and jointly published by the Italian Embassy, Tehran, ICHTHO and IsIAO.*

Since many circumstances hampered a wide circulation of the book both in Iran and in Italy, ISMEO decided to republish some of the essays (originariously conceived as public lectures), mostly in an updated version, in his series "Conferenze ISMEO," devoted to the dissemination of high level scientific knowledge in Italy, also in the hope to contribute to the knowledge of this monument without equal in all the world.

Adriano V. Rossi
President, ISMEO

GLASSWARE FROM THE EXCAVATIONS AT THE MASJED-E JOM'E IN ISFAHAN: BRIEF NOTES ON THE ADAMJI PROCESSING ACTIVITIES

GIULIO MARESCA

In the frame of the joint Italian/Iranian ADAMJI Project great relevance was given to processing activities concerning the glass fragments. The *corpus* of glass materials retrieved by the excavations carried out by the IsMEO at the *masjed-e Jom'e* in Isfahan between 1972 and 1978 is made up by over 7000 fragments. By virtue of such a consistency, it thus represents an extremely precious source of information about the production of Islamic glassware in a region of the Iranian Plateau for which systematic archaeological information is still rather scanty. At the end of the 1970s IsMEO campaigns, a quite relevant part of the glass fragments brought to light was singled out and stored separately within specific boxes placed in the Mosque's main storeroom. About 450 fragments of this assemblage were already inventoried and 58 of them were also drawn.

At the very beginning of the ADAMJI Project, the first task was to detect the location of these boxes and check their content. Unfortunately, materials had suffered a very long period of storage: inventoried fragments were partially merged with un-inventoried ones and, in some cases, even with other materials (especially pottery). Moreover, many of the boxes containing glass fragments were fully covered by dust and many of the plastic bags in which fragments were enveloped were almost totally destroyed, so that certain fragments were scattered in the boxes with their related labels irretrievably damaged or even lost.

In order to prevent further decay and loss of data, every single box, plastic bag and fragment was accurately cleaned from dust and the greatest part of the old bags and labels was replaced with new ones.

Anyway, it was possible to detect the greatest part of the previously inventoried *corpus*. The fragments were re-examined one by one: their descriptions and drawings were accurately checked (and in some cases, when necessary, modified), their dimensions measured again (including thickness, in many cases previously neglected) and colour photographs were taken to replace the old black-and-white ones.

After these preliminary operations, processing activities on the extant glass fragments took place, based on the macroscopic analysis of several features. The fragments processed during this phase were the ones already singled out in the 1970s (and properly kept separated from the other materials) with the addition of other several hundreds of fragments recovered by chance during the ADAMJI processing operations related to other classes of materials.

Fragments were all sorted according both horizontal and vertical provenance and those belonging to the same level in one of the Mosque's sectors were recorded together on a specifically arranged archive form, based on production-related[1] (i.e. colour,[2] technique of production, thickness), morphological (form and type of the original vessel, part of the object involved, measurements) and stylistic criteria (type and description of the decoration when attested).

Following this methodological approach, fragments were archived as "Diagnostic" or "Undiagnostic" and put in separated boxes. Subsequently, among the fragments considered as "Diagnostic," those attesting the most interesting morphological and production-related features were also inventoried: photographs of each of them were taken and drawings were made in many cases.

In this way, a number of 199 new inventoried glass fragments (from inventory number 7001 to inventory number 7199) was added

[1] Some pieces of glass slag were also found during processing operations. These fragments, apparently scattered without any stratigraphic or spatial order in different sectors of the Mosque, cannot be considered as an evidence of an *in loco* production centre.

[2] The chromatic *spectrum* attested on the glass fragments, ranging from colourless to dark or to "indefinable" (when fragments present too many encrustations or are in an extremely severe state of decay, with their surfaces altered and covered by iridescent and milky patinas) includes several variations, each of them attested in slightly different hues anyway taken into consideration in the main colour definition (i.e. "very light yellowish green," "light yellowish green," "yellowish green," etc.).

to the previous 450 and a total of over 350 drawn glass fragments was reached. In the last two seasons of work (2009 and 2010) other 6000 fragments of glasses were processed and 50 ca. were selected in order to be inventoried, drawn and photographed. To sum up the total were ca. 1500 "diagnostic" and ca. 5400 "un-diagnostic".

During processing operations also some restoration activities were carried out by a specialized restorer from ICHHTO (Mr Beshad Babaee). Restorations were carried out on some fragmentary vessels —particularly intensively on the inv. 739: a stemmed sub-cylindrical goblet (Fig. 1). After preliminary operations (collecting fragments, provisionally bonding and cleaning by means of ethanol and water), fragments were permanently bonded together with epoxy adhesive; then lost portions of the object were replaced by means of a mixture of epoxy adhesive and pigment, and the restored object was coated by Paraloid. New photographs were taken at the end of restoration and also new drawings were made.

Together with the accomplishment of the processing operations, during the archival phase it was also possible to put forward some very preliminary production-related and morphological observations concerning the objects in the assemblage.

According both to stratigraphic and technical-stylistic elements, the main bulk of the glass assemblage at issue may with a certain confidence be attributed to the Islamic period, especially from the 9th up to the 12th century CE. In this period, a new style, developed in Iraq under the Abbasid Caliphate, gradually radiated outwards to other areas of the Islamic world (Kröger 1995: 35; Carboni, Whitehouse 2001: 18-19). As shown by the archaeological literature, glass was very extensively utilized in the everyday life of the Islamic society of those centuries, and was mass-produced to meet the diversified needs of the urban middle-class.

Such a massive production was possible thanks to the free-blown technique so well attested in our assemblage. while mould-blown, the other main technique utilized during this period, is instead attested in a very limited number of cases, especially on some open vessels (such as bowls and plates) and only with a decorative intent.[3] No significant traces of other production techniques seem to be attested in the assemblage.[4]

One of the most frequent categories of glass objects brought to light by the excavations at the *masjed-e Jom'e* is represented by vari-

ous types of little or medium-size flasks and bottles. These objects had almost always strictly utilitarian purpose, mainly concerning cosmetics or pharmaceuticals,[5] but could anyhow show some of the most elaborate decorations attested in the assemblage. That is the case of the small bottle decorated with applied threads (Inv. 145) (Fig. 2), in some way reminiscent of the more elaborate "cage flasks" common in Syria between the 7th and the 8th century CE (Carboni 2001: cat. nos 4a, 4b; Carboni, Whitehouse 2001: cat. nos 29-32).

Various and very significant are also un-restricted vessels as bowls and plates, even though their precise function and utilization is still not very clear. However, their presence may in some way be connected with some specific socio-economical dynamics, according to which these vessels were possibly considered as precious "display items."

Much more widespread and diagnostic are, instead, the so-called "Mosque Lamps." Of probable Byzantine derivation, these lamps were suspended to the ceiling by means of chains or ropes passing through the handles. Several examples of this type of lamps are attested, frequently revealing a very elegant profile (Inv. 256) (Fig. 3). Anyway, this type of lamp, very common at many Islamic context, usually displays a ring-shaped base and not the convex base attested on many examples in the assemblage at issue (Carboni, Whitehouse 2001: cat. no. 235; Kordmahini 1988: 115).

Noticeable in the assemblage is also the presence of fragmentary examples of another type of lamp, with cone-truncated goblet on a stem having a rounded terminal element (as Inv. 884) (Fig. 4). This type is frequently attested in the Byzantine and also in the Islamic world, especially at Fustat, in Egypt, where, in the 9th century CE, it

[3] Apart from a few cases with different mould-blown decorative motifs or with applied, figurative decorations, the main decorative pattern attested in the assemblage is simply represented by one or more whirling or spiralled glass threads applied around the body and/or the neck of some of the vessels. Incised or scratched patterns are very sporadic, while is noteworthy the absence of pinched-impressed examples.

[4] The prominent utilization of the free-blown technique is the reason why the average thickness of the fragments in the assemblage can be measured between 0.1 and 0.2 cm, with extremely rare cases approaching to 1 cm or even more, but almost always in the case of specific parts of the vessels (usually bases or handles).

[5] It is also probably (even if there is not any specific indication related) that some of the largest examples were utilized to store some quantity of oil or other combustible material for the fragmentary glass lamps found in huge number within the assemblage.

replaced the conical lamp which had been common in the entire Egyptian region since the 4th century CE (Pinder-Wilson, Scanlon 1973: figs. 18 and 19).

Some examples of ringed stems (as Inv. 889 and 1764) (Figs. 5-6) are probably related to a third type of lamps. Deriving from the Byzantine tradition and attested at several Islamic sites, they find the closest analogies with objects coming from Susa (Kervran 1984: figs. 10,1 and 3) and dated to the 9th-11th century CE.

It is however important to recall that many other types of glass vessels, especially goblets, cups or bowls with sub-cylindrical or cone-truncated profile, even without a wick-holder, could have been used as lamps if a separate wick-holder, perhaps of a different material, was placed in the vessel (Kröger 1995: 180).

Of noticeable importance are also three examples of applied decorations consisting of stamped medallions with figurative motifs showing evident analogies with objects belonging to the Late Sasanian —Proto-Islamic period. A lion's head similar to the example in the assemblage (Inv. 528) (Fig. 7) is attributed by Balog (1974: no. 11) to the Syrian region and is dated to the Omayyad period by virtue of its typical style, reminiscent of the stucco sculptures (representing both men and animals) in the palace of Khirbet al-Mafjar, near Jericho.

Two stamped medallions, each portraying a male head (Inv. 933 and 959) (Figs. 8-9) find instead their closest parallels in some examples of applied decorations, all dated to the Late Sasanian—Early Islamic Period, brought to light at Aqaba, along the Palestinian shore, and in the region of Fars, at Qasr-i Abu Nasr and Istakhr (Whitcomb 1995).

From this brief discussion is therefore clear how a great deal the glass finds form the *masjed-e Jom'e* of Isfahan can contribute about the knowledge regarding the utilization of glass and the exploitation of its technical and artistic possibilities by the early Islamic society in a context of primary importance not only for Iran but for the entire Islamic world as well.

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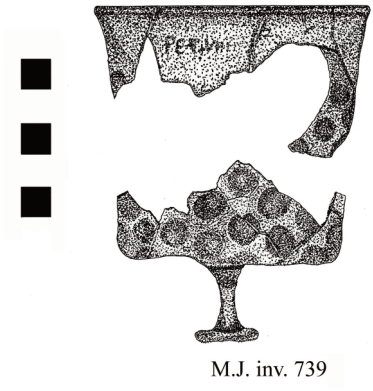

Fig. 1 – Stemmed goblet inv. 739 after restoration activities. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Beshad Babaee.

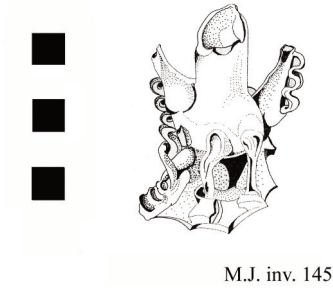

Fig. 2 – Small bottle decorated with applied threads. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Emanuela Bossa-Morichi.

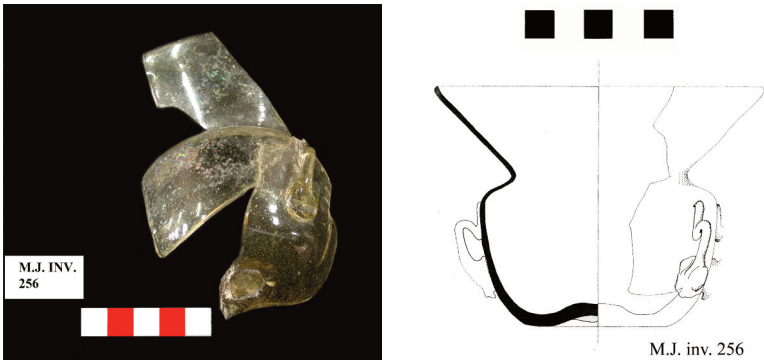

Fig. 3 – “Mosque Lamp” of probable Byzantine derivation. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Emanuela Bossa-Morichi.

Fig. 4 – Fragment of a stemmed lamp with a rounded terminal element. Photo by MAI.

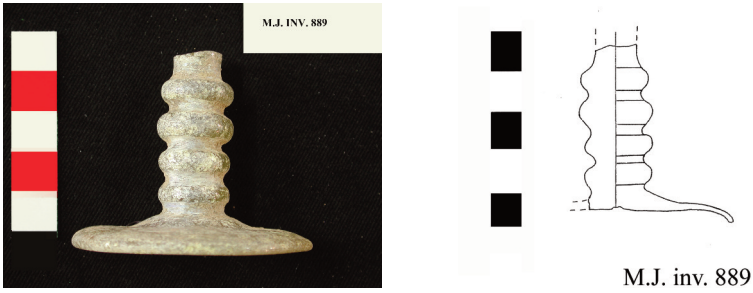

Fig. 5 – Fragment of a lamp with ringed stem. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Emanuela Bossa-Morichi.

Fig. 6 – Fragment of a lamp with ringed stem. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Emanuela Bossa-Morichi.

Fig. 7 – Glass medallion portraying a lion's head. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Shabnam Juzdani.

Fig. 8 – Glass medallion portraying a male head. Photo by MAI. Drawing by Shabnam Juzdani.

Fig. 9 – Glass medallion portraying a male head. Photo by MAI.

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