THREE ISLAMIC INKWELLS FROM GHAZNI EXCAVATION

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Three Islamic inkwells emerged from excavation in Ghazni in 1957-1958. The artefacts show extremely interesting features from a technical, morphological and decorative point of view. The study put them in relation with other known inkwells and the artistic production from Ghazni.

Keywords: inkwells; Ghazni; Islamic metalwork; silver decoration; scribes

In 1957-1958 three inkwells - two cylindrical and one hexagonal - emerged from the excavation of Islamic secular buildings in Ghazni. This paper aims to provide an analysis of the artefacts and propose chronological hypothesis putting them in relation with the artistic production (not only metalwork) coming from the city.

I. TWO CYLINDRICAL INKWELLS

In 1958, during the excavation of Ghazni royal palace, the Italian archaeologists retrieved two cylindrical boxes, intact and complete of their lids: the objects showed the unmistakable profile of Islamic inkwells.

The two inkwells emerged from room III, lying in the southwestern quarter of the palace close to the throne hall. The area served as private apartments, but it undergone many changes across time: ceramic evidence demonstrates a settlement dating to the late 11th-early 12th century and a presence even after the Mongol invasion.

1 I wish to thank Anna Filigenzi, director of the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan, and Roberta Giunta, deputy director of the Mission and director of the Islamic Ghazni Archaeological Project (Is.I.A.O. – University of Naples ‘L’Orientale’) for giving me the chance to study such interesting material.

2 Only the two cylindrical inkwells were given an inventory number (C10, C11) on the excavation field. For further information about archaeological activities, see Bombaci 1959, Scerrato 1959a, Adamesteanu 1960. See also http://ghazni.bradypus.net.

3 A fragmentary inkwell, composed by a sub-cylindrical glass vessel with everted rim, inserted in a plaster cube, also emerged from the royal palace (Inv. No. C4155). In 2004, the object was still stored in the Kabul National Museum (Inv. No. 05.2.0692).

4 This quarter was originally designed, in Ghaznavid time, as a copy on smaller size of the palace plan: four īwāns opening onto it, and antechambers leading to the inner rooms that flanked them (fig. 1). From the very first moment, the palace was ascribed to Masʿūd III (1099-1114): its foundation probably dates back to the late 11th, early 12th century. Scerrato (1959a, 42) suggested that it should date back to the period between the reign of Ibrāhīm (1049-1099) and that of his son Masʿūd III. In the last few years, Roberta Giunta has resumed studies about the palace chronology in collaboration with the architect Carlotta Passaro (a brief report of first results has been presented by Giunta on the occasion of the international conference The Architecture of the Iranian World 1000-1250, held in the Saint Andrews University [UK], in April 2016). The building knew many transformations in the Ghaznavid and Ghurid period until, once permanently abandoned, it became a source of re-employment materials and a place of burying (a mausoleum known as the ziyāra of Ibrāhīm raised on its former western īwān, see Scerrato 1959a; Laviola 2015).

5 Fusaro 2015, 225-226.

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Many bronze medieval inkwells are known from the Iranian world, but very few coming from an archaeological context, and none of them similar to those from Ghazni. In 1966, on the basis of the agreements taken by the Italian and Afghan Governments, some finds left Ghazni for Italy: among them, there was the inkwell no. C11, which since then has been on exhibition in the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale of Rome (fig. 2). The other inkwell (no. C10) remained in Ghazni and was included in the exhibition of the newly born Rawza Museum of Islamic Art, at least until 1978 (fig. 3). Then, unfortunately, the artefact has gone lost and it is still missing today.

Both inkwells are composed by a cylindrical box and lid surmounted by a lobed dome. This model is the most attested in the Islamic production. About thirty inkwells of this shape are known, coming from the regions of Khurasan and Transoxiana and dating from the 11th century on. Some of these inkwells bear inscribed the name of the owner, giving important information from a social and historical point of view. Among artisans’ signatures, some nisbas refer to the Khurasan, while other signatures without nisba belong to artisans known from other metalwork, as in the case of Šāḏī al-naqqāš.

Notwithstanding their importance, these two inkwells from Ghazni have never been published properly. Umberto Scerrato, then field director of the Italian Archaeological Mission, announced their finding in 1959 and later provided a description. James Allan included them in his PhD thesis about Iranian metalwork, discussing in particular the no. C11.

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6 Two bronze inkwells emerged from Nishapur excavation (see Allan 1982a, 87, nos. 104-105).
7 Inv. No. 8368. The Museum was entitled to Giuseppe Tucci in 2010. I express my gratitude to the Museum director Filippo M. Gambassi and Gabriella Di Flumeri Vatielli, curator of the Islamic Art Department.
8 The lobed lid is considered typically Iranian (see Baer 1972, 199-211; Fehérvári 1976, 58).
9 An 11th century inkwell from the British Museum (Inv. No. 1968.7-22.3) was property of a woman, ʿĀlima bint Ibrāhīm munağğim: her name, nasab and the fact that she owned a personal inkwell would suggest that she was a scholar herself (see Allan 1976, 289-290, 724, fig. 50; 1982a, 44). Another specimen from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Inv. No. 40.170.116) bears the name of mawlā al-amīr ʿAbdallāh ibn al-Ḥasan Pārsī, possibly a ḥaṭīb of Bukhara (see Allan 1982a, 44-45, 87, no. 105).
10 ʿAbd al-Razzāq b. Masʿūd al-Nišāpūrī (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Inv. No. 48.108; see Melikian-Chirvani 1979a, 8; 1982, 72, and previous bibliography); Nāṣīr b. Asʿad al-Nišāpūrī (Adrienne Minassian Collection, New York; see Melikian-Chirvani 1982, 72); Muhammad b. Aḥšāl al-Harawī (Walters Art Gallery, Baltimore, Inv. No. 54.514; see Ettinghausen 1943, fig. 4; Melikian-Chirvani 1986, 75).
11 See Melikian-Chirvani 1974, 29-30. Šāḏī al-naqqāš signed also a pen-case destined to Maǧd al-Mulk al-Muṣṭafār, vizier of Ṭāhir b. Muhammad Ḥwārizm-shāh (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.; Inv. No. 36.7; see Herzfeld 1936; RCA 10 1939, 51; Harari 1938-1939, 2521, fig. 841; Aga-Oglu 1946, 122; Melikian-Chirvani 1979b, 232). The artisan bears the nisha al-harawi only in a bird-shaped indigo flask (private collection; see Melikian-Chirvani 1979a, 8; 1979b, 224). Other unsigned artefacts are ascribed to him (see Melikian-Chirvani 1979b, 235).
12 See Scerrato 1959a, 39, fig 38; 1959b, 96-97.
13 Allan (1976, 290-291, 728, no. 7) curiously indicates Kabul as the location of inkwell no. C10.
1.1. Inkwell no. C11

Inkwell no. C11 presents slightly concave wall and rests on three low feet - one of which is missing. The lid rests on a protruding pointed edge with an underlying fillet. Lid’s side mirrors the same morphology of the box.

The outer surface shows a dark black and green colour and is perfectly smooth and polished; while the inner surface is extremely raw. The base material is a copper alloy, which precise composition has been ascertained in 2007 (see Appendix). The elevated percentage of lead in the alloy surely helped the stability of the inkwell. Silver, in plates, is employed as an additional material in decoration. The artefact is in a very good state of preservation.

Three flat loops protrude inside the box, just below the rim; given their thickness, they must have been cast with the box (fig. 4). As many circular holes, pierced through the lid shoulder, coincide with them. The lid fits perfectly on the box only making the loops and holes correspond. Through the holes and loops passed a suspension system – maybe chains or cords - to fasten the lid to its box, and then to the scribe’s wrist as well.

The small square feet are decorated in their inner section by a rhomboid lozenge. Certainly, they were soldered to the box as attested by the different colour visible in the missing foot’s original place. The underside is undecorated, but three pairs of concentric circles, at constant distance, show a red copper colour. They appear too thin to be considered a decorative pattern and could have been made by a manufacturing tool, as a lathe. A round hole, whose contour is extremely clear and precise, is pierced in the centre (fig. 5). It seems executed with expertise, so made on purpose. Beside it, there is a connecting smaller hole, which irregular contour is probably due to an accidental hurt. Some dents and surface raising in the area suggest that the blow should have come from inside the box. The reason for the main hole is unclear (see below § 2.).

On the lid, a dome is raised on a tympanum surrounded by a round funnel. Dome surface is lobed in six almonds (or lotus petals), carved in relief. The dome itself is topped by an almost spherical knob, which rests on a raised step.

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14 The cylindrical box with slightly concave wall was already in use in early Islamic time and probably derives from the ancient Iranian metalwork tradition.
15 The object measures 7.5 cm in the base diameter, 9.9 cm in its maximum height, 5.6 cm in the height of the body, 395 g in weight.
16 Chemical analyses were made in the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale by the Department of Engineering of ’Sapienza’ University of Rome.
17 To prevent the ink from splashing outside the box was a primary concern: many inkwells of any material had a tube inside the vessel, while others used a piece of felt or wool inside (Allan 1982a, 44).
18 A walking man holding in hand an inkwell suspended through a cord appears in a figurative scene engraved on an inkwell from the David Collection (Inv. No. 32/1970; see Taragan 2005, fig. 13).
19 Examples of rhombi included into squares, and vice versa, occur on some baked bricks belonging to the architectural decoration of Ghazni royal palace: a column element, currently on exhibition in the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale ‘G. Tucci’ (Inv. No. 7086), and other two finds (Inv. Nos. 5450, 5839); see Artusi 2009, I, 146; II 320.
20 Many hypothesis are conceivable: it could have had a functional role, maybe hosting a removable cap to consent the cleaning of the inkwell; a decorative role, hosting a now lost roundel or silver plate; or a mechanical reason, being the result across time of an area weakened by the manufacturing technique.
21 Melikian-Chirvani (1986, 75), talking especially about the ‘State inkwells’, interprets the architectural form of domed cylindrical inkwells as a celebration of the rotating celestial vault, a theme closely related to the role of
Dealing with the decoration: nine silver plates are applied on the undecorated box and lid with a mastic. Plates in precious metal usually are inlaid, hammering them inside specific incisions made on the object. This inkwell is the only known specimen to adopt a different technique. The width due to the mastic is clearly visible and makes the thin silver plates to emerge significantly on the surface.

Three circular silver plates are applied to the box wall, each one framed by an engraved roundel, filled with oblique cuts. A second roundel, defined by a double circle, is engraved on each plate: in two cases, it includes a pair of addorsed birds with backward turned heads so that the beaks meld. They hold an upturned trilobed flower, composed by two curl-shaped lobes at the base and an elongated and pointed central lobe that inserts between the birds’ wings (fig. 6). On the third plate, a single bird, looking leftward with an uprising double tail, is engraved. All the incisions on silver are nielloed to make them stand out.

Three trapezoidal silver plates are applied on the lid’s shoulder, alternated to the above-mentioned holes (fig. 7). Each one bears engraved an epigraphical cartouche, with concave short sides, defined by a double line, that frames an engraved and nielloed Arabic inscription in Kufic with ornamental apices (Text A). The same benedictory expression repeats any time: biʾl-yumn waʾl-baraka(ka), ‘With good luck and bless(ing)’. The second term, al-baraka, is shortened omitting the last two letters: this is a common feature that consents also a double reading, interpreting the term as al-birr, ‘devotion’. The inscription disposes on a single line, occupying the whole height available. The three cartouches show variations in the script, details that testify they were hand-written and not obtained through a stencil. In the first cartouche, the inscription looks a bit confused: letters lean one against the other; apices are sometimes thick and squared, and sometimes so thin and horizontal to blend one into the other. The bāʾ is oblique and slightly concave, revealing a sharp profile. The wāw has a round body, surmounted by an upended terminal. Above the yāʾ, in the first term, there is a downward three-pointed leaf, while a semi-palmette is barely visible behind the bāʾ of the second term. In the second cartouche, the script is bold with squared squat apices. All the hastae are cut horizontally at the same height, while the initial bāʾ and the yāʾ in the term biʾl-yumn are slightly shorter. The yāʾ is the only letter with a sloping profile. The mīm is shaped as a vaguely pointed round; the nūn draws a round body, wider and flatter than mīm’s one, and its terminal rises as an apicated hasta. The rāʾ in the second term resembles it closely, but its starting segment descends below the writing line. The conjunction wāw slims down vertically. Some signs belonging to additional letters are visible, in particular between the end of the first term and the wāw, and at the end of the cartouche, maybe to fake the missing syllable ka. Moreover, two vegetal elements appear, a downward three-pointed leaf above the yāʾ and mīm of the first term, and another one disposed obliquely above the second power exercised by the ruler on earth, whom the inkwell itself would have represented a symbol of. The six-lotus petals dome would then reflect the ‘blue lotus dome’, a standard metaphor in Persian literature for the sky, gunbad-i nīlūfarī.

22 Allan (1976, 290) named the technique ‘overlay’.
23 Already Scerrato (1959b, 96-97; 1966, 62) pointed out this feature. In his opinion, it was a cheaper solution less resistant than the usual one, and this would explain why no other specimen of this kind survived. However, from the moment of finding (in 1958) up today, silver plates have always been firm in their location.
24 The shortened form of the term al-baraka probably derives from its splitting in two parts, a habit that recurred especially in the Samanid period to convey an esoteric meaning. See Melikian-Chirvani 1982, 34.
term’s bā’. The third cartouche shows most of the already mentioned features. The profile of
the yāʾ is clear and sharp at vertexes; the mīm has an almost triangular body, while the nūn
is deformed by an unprecise execution. The wāw is stylized, with a just sketched apice. The
second term’s bāʾ is sloping, and the rāʾ presents a very thin horizontal apice. A vegetal
element, extremely thinned, surmounts the first term, while the one above the second term is
barely visible.

Three silver almond-shaped plates used to cover as many lobes of the dome: one of them
is lost revealing that only the undecorated lobes were polished. Each plate bears engraved an
almond-shaped frame, defined by a double line and enclosing a vegetal element.

To sum up, the suspension system passing inside the object represents an early device,
since in other Islamic cylindrical inkwells the lid usually is bent through loops applied on the
external surface (see inkwell no. C10). The external system should have been introduced in
the early 12th century.

Other three specimens are known to adopt such system: the first is the already mentioned
inkwell from the British Museum (see footnote no. 9), ascribed to the 11th century on the base
of the Kufic inscription. The second specimen is an inkwell lid from the de Unger
Collection, assigned to the 12th–early 13th century and reckoned to have been produced in
Transoxiana. The third is also a lid - unrelated to the inkwell it is associated to - from the
Nuhad Es-Said Collection that bears three holes on its shoulder.

Decoration is executed according to a stylistic coherence: roundels, cartouches and
almond-shaped frames are defined by a double line, engraved and nielloed. Oblique cuts
encircle the round plates on the body and recur on the fillet underlying the box edge and at
the base of the dome tympanum on the lid. Birds, vegetal elements and inscriptions show
variations typical of the handmade work, which must have been a tricky challenge on such
thin plates. Moreover, the niello is quite well preserved, another rare circumstance.

The presence on the epigraphical background of additional signs and trilobed leaves
above the text recurs in the inscriptions carved on the upper part of the marble tomb of
Sabüktigīn (r. 977–997). The Kufic script, particularly sober, is attested in Ghazni within
the 11th century. Taking into account the technical, decorative and epigraphic features, the
early 11th century looks an appropriate date for this inkwell.

1.2. Inkwell no. C10

Inkwells no. C10 rests on a flat base. Three heart-shaped loop handles are hinged to the
wall of the box through as many trilobed plates; three fixed semi-circular loops are nailed on

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25 Inv. No. 1968.7-22.3. The inkwell is provided with internal tubes, cast in one with the box, through which
passed the cords (see Allan 1976, 289-290; 1982a, 44).
26 It would attest a late persistence of the internal system in a period when it had already been abandoned in the
Iranian area (see Allan 1976, 291, 724).
28 Other silver artefacts with engraved and nielloed decoration are known, but most of them coming from western
Iran. See for example the wine service from Hamadan, probably dating to the first half of the 11th century,
inscribed in the name of Abūl-ʿAbbās Valgīn ibn Harūn (Pope - Ackermann 1938-39, pls. 1345-1346;
29 See Giunta 2003, 24, figs. 3-4.
30 The object measures 7.6 cm in the base diameter, 9.2 cm in maximum height, and 6.2 cm in body height.
the lid side. The dome on the lid is raised on a tympanum and lobed in six almonds carved in relief. It is topped by a slightly squared and raised knob finial. The inkwell, in excellent state of preservation, was inlaid with copper and silver. 31

On the underside, in the centre, a small roundel includes a bird looking rightward on a vegetal background (fig. 8). Around this, three elongated almond-shaped frames, with vertexes pointing to the roundel, enclose a lance-shaped leaf ending in two curls at its base. 32

A continuous ribbon runs on the body distributing the space and obtaining three trilobed niches, flanked by round knots, and three cartouches (Text A) on the lower body. The benedictory inscription in Kufic with ornamental apices reads:

\[
\text{باليمن و الباكرة ولا} / \text{الدولة و السلاامة} / \text{والكرامة و السلاامة} \]

With good luck, blessing, AL /, fortune, spiritual integrati(y) /, divine favour, spiritual integrati(y).

The inscription disposes on a single line; letters occupy the whole height available inside the cartouches, even with their terminals (see the wāw and tāʾ marbūṭa). Apices are thin and triangular. At the end of the first cartouche, the article al- is left suspended. The word al-salāma appears two times, in the second and third cartouche, in its shortened form. Conjunction wāw has round body, with terminals drawing a 90° angle resting on the writing line. The dāl in the term al-dawla is wide and flattened, with a high terminal. Signs in the last term of the sequence appear less neat than previous ones, maybe due to a deterioration of the surface in that area.

Hinged loops divide the box wall in three panels. An intricate vegetal background, composed by concentric budded scrolls ending in five-lobed flowers, covers as a wallpaper any space framed by the ribbon. Each niche encloses a figurative scene related to the writing art (scenes nos. I-III). In scene no. I a man, in three-quarter profile looking leftward, sits on his heels (fig. 9). He wears a three-pointed hat, a tunic closed at centre and waist enriched by decorated inserts (ṭirāz) on the shoulders, trousers and boots. Clothes softness is conveyed through the incisions, which also help in indicating the bent arms and suggesting the knee’s angle. Long hair frame his face descending in two locks on the shoulders. The figure is portrayed in the act of presenting the spectator with a round-bottomed box, probably an inkwell, which he holds with both hands.

In scene no. II there is a man sitting cross-legged, as the trousers’ volume and roundness suggest; his body is in front position, while his face in a three-quarter profile looking rightward (fig. 10). He wears a small turban, from which a fabric ribbon goes out flying backwards, and a tunic closed on the front, enriched by decorated inserts (ṭirāz) on the shoulders recalling those on the turban. The right arm, close-up, is bent: wrist and hand come

31 To detect a copper inlay in black and white pictures is not easy, unfortunately. Scerrato (1959b, 96-97) noted such decoration without specifying its position. On the base of comparison with similar inkwells mentioned below, the inlay is likely to have involved the niches framing the figurative scenes and cartouches framing the inscriptions.

32 The engraved almond-shaped elements occupy the position usually hold on other inkwells by almond-shaped feet: see an inkwell from the Metropolitan Museum of Art (inv. No. 35.128; see Baer 1972, 201, 203, fig. 9) and another one from the Victoria and Albert Museum, whose three feet are lost leaving traces of the solder (inv. No. 86-1969; see Melikian-Chirvani 1982, 124, no. 52). See also below the hexagonal inkwell excavated in Ghazni.
in the wide sleeve holding vertically a long pen. Face features are defined simply: a long thin eyebrow runs parallel to the elongated almond eye; the nose ends in a square profile.

In scene no. III a man sits in the same position as the previous one, wearing the same clothes (fig. 11). He handles a long pen, which seems moving on a square tablet. The latter bears engraved two ‘S’ signs, probably meant to represent the already written text. Face features are sketched fleetingly.

Fixed loops alternate on the lid side to long, thin rectangular cartouches, which frame a Kufic inscription with ornamental apices, on a vegetal background (Text B). It reads a benedictory expression:

\[
\text{ﻠﺴ)...( اﺑﺎﻟﯿﻤﻦ و اﻟﺒﺮﻛﺎة و اﻟﺴﻼ)ﻣﺎ) (و اﻟﺪوﻟﺎة و اﻟﻜﺎرﺎﻣا) (و اﻟﺴﻼ)ﻣﺎ (و اﻟﺪوﻟا و . . .)}
\]

With good luck, blessing, spiritual integri(ty)/, fortune, divine favour /, spiritual integri(ty), fortune, al-sa(…).

The text disposes on a single line and the script presents the same characteristics already outlined in Text A. The term al-salāma, repeating two times followed by al-dawla, is always shortened in the form al-salā. The kāf in the term al-baraka is significantly smaller than the one in the word al-karāma, but both are thinner than the dāl in al-dawla, which is particularly thick. Wāws rest on the writing line with triangular terminals.

A third inscription, in cursive, (Text C; fig. 12) runs on the shoulder, distributed in three trapezoidal cartouches with concave short sides: an intricate and luxuriant vegetal pattern, composed by scrolls ending in trilobed flowers, is on the background. Roundels alternate to cartouches enclosing a vegetal element: a thin vertical stem surmounted by a big bloom and flanked by two smaller ones. The text reads a benedictory expression for an unknown recipient:

\[
\text{بﮫ(ﺤ)اﻟﻌﺰ و اﻻﻗﺒﺎل و ا/ﻟﺪوﻟﺔ و اﻟﺴﻼﻣﺎ)ة( و اﻟﺴﻌﺎد)ة( و اﻟﺒﻘﺎ ﻟﺼﺎ}
\]

Glory, prosperity, / fortune, spiritual integrity/, happiness(s), eternal life to its own(er).

It disposes on a single line, with one exception in the third cartouche: the ḥāʾ in the term li-ṣāḥ(ti-hi) is elevated above the sād and overlaps the alif manḍūda. Shortness of space forced the decorator to omit the following two letters. An article is split between the first and second cartouche. The tāʾ marbūta at the end of the term al-saʿāda lacks. Wāws rest on the writing line with a soft curve and often overlay the articles’ alif and lām that follow. The sīn is flattened on the writing line, barely visible, in contrast with the height of the following group lām-alif, whose hastae diverge. The small tāʾ marbūtas lean forward. Each lobe of the lid dome bears engraved an almond-shaped frame enclosing a lance-shaped leaf, an accurate copy of those on the box underside. One last detail concerns this artefact: the word Allāh is engraved with a tiny, rapid incision on the knob finial that tops the dome - that is to say in the highest position available.

The three scenes devoted to the writing art portray the inkwell itself and related implements, testifying the object function. This is a quite rare circumstance among metalwork. Other inkwells, generally ascribed to Khurasan and datable to the second half of the 12th-early 13th century, showing kātibīs portrayed in the same way are known:33 one from

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33 I wish to thank Margaret Graves, who signaled to me a still unpublished inkwell, from the Khalili collection, belonging to this group.
the Royal Ontario Museum; a second from the Victoria and Albert Museum; and a third from the Eretz Israel Museum. The three figurative scenes are clearly based on the same model: scribes position, their clothes, the tools they handle, even face features are quite all the same, executed relying on the same stencil. Few variations have been detected on the specimen from Ghazni. The halo encircling the scribes face is just hinted, confused in the hair locks, but well visible on the other inkwells; about the scribes’ clothes, the ṭirāz-strip inserts show a highly-stylized design of squarish form if compared with the ‘S’ shaped one on the above-mentioned inkwell from the Royal Ontario Museum. The inkwell presented to the spectator in scene no. 1 has an unusual round bottom, while in the other representations it is square. The whole execution looks far less naturalistic than that on the other specimens. On the other hand, the ground covering vegetal pattern that plays a crucial role in the decoration is executed with an incision deep enough to create a vivid chiaroscuro. Trilobed and five-lobed flowers represent a traditional feature in Eastern Iranian metalwork, and especially in Ghazni, detected on numerous artefacts and materials. Vegetal elements enclosed in the almond-shaped frames on the underside, on the lid’s dome and into roundels on the lid’s shoulder are executed with a lighter, but precise incision.

In Kufic cartouches, the script is geometric and squat, almost forced into the limited space available. The cursive inscription, instead, shows a remarkable game of proportions between the letters, which creates an alternation of empty and full spaces, vertical leaps of the hastae and soft curves of the wāw. Texts A and B almost mirror each other: the wishing terms chosen are the same, with particular stress on the terms al-dawla waʾl-salāma, repeated with a changing in the word ordering. Al-salāma is the only shortened term, always appearing in the form al-salā. Text C, instead, employs different terms, none of whom is shortened. The sequence is common and shares some details with the inscription on an inkwell lid, also coming from Ghazni, ascribed to the second half of the 12th century; the term al-saʿāda lacks the final tāʾ marbūṭa; the ḥāʾ in the closing formula li-ṣāḥibi-hi overlaps the alif. The three inscriptions express good wishes to an unknown recipient, while each one of the above-mentioned inkwells is dedicated to a more or less specific person: the Persian expression muʿallim rā, ‘for the teacher’, appears on the tablet written by the scribe on the Victoria and Albert inkwell. The name of a royal treasure inspector, ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. Maḥmūd b. Muḥammad ḡawāhir-zāda on the Eretz Israel Museum inkwell.

Traditionally, the use of precious metals and figurative scenes including animal or human figures on inkwells was opposed on the ground that these vessels would have been employed to copy the holy Quran. Ghazni inkwell no. C10, with its human figure decoration on the box and God’s name on the lid would represent a loud offence to such rule.

34 Inv. No. K 722 A, already in the Köfler Collection; see Baer 1972, 199-201, figs. 1-5.
35 Inv. No. 86-1969; see Melikian-Chirvani 1982, 124-125, no. 52.
36 Inv. No. MHM1.93; see Taragan 2005. The scholar attributes the Tel Aviv inkwell to a specific date and place of origin - the last quarter of the 12th century in the city of Herat - on the basis of an alleged kinship between the inkwell’s recipient and the artisan who decorated the famous Tiflis ewer - dated to the 557/1181 and made in Herat. Such relation seems hard to verify, considering how largely spread the name under discussion - Maḥmūd b. Muhammad - can be in the Islamic world.
37 Louvre Museum, Paris, Inv. No. AA 65; see Marchal 1974, 10, fig. 3.
38 See Baer 1972, 199.
2. A HEXAGONAL INKWELL

In 1957, a third inkwell came from the excavation of the so-called ‘House of the Lusterware’, near Ghazni (fig. 13). The aristocratic dwelling extended on at least two floors of vaulted rooms, disposed around a square courtyard with no īwāns. The retrieved ceramic dates the superficial occupation of the building to the second half of the 12th century.

Not a hint about the inkwell discovery was in the publications. Only recently its place of finding has been ascertained through to a crosscheck between Italian Mission registers and photographic negatives. The object’s last picture portrays the inkwell in Ghazni storage, in 1966; there is no news about what followed.

The hexagonal box rests on three almond-shaped feet and protrudes in respect to the shoulder (fig. 14). The inkwell looks in fair condition, with the exception of a gap enlarging the regular round opening on top. The lid is missing. Three small holes are pierced on the shoulder and underside, communicating with each other (fig. 15). Thus, the object is provided with an internal suspension system passing through the whole body. This inkwell is then to be added to the short list mentioned in paragraph 1.1. Being the base raised by the feet, there would have been enough space to knot, under the inkwell, the cords passing through the box. The same could have been possible in inkwell no. C11, using the central hole pierced on the underside. At the state of our knowledge, this would be the most reasonable explanation for the mysterious central hole.

The hexagonal inkwell is undecorated, so no clue other than its technical device can help in dating. The model is quite a rarity in the medieval period: the only similar specimen come to my knowledge is an incense burner on exhibition in the Archaeological Museum of Tehran, provided with three holes pierced on the lid.

3. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The three inkwells found in Ghazni were the first bronzes coming from a regular excavation in the whole Afghanistan. Their technical, morphological and decorative features attest a high variety, also confirmed by other inkwells documented by the Italian Mission. The two sites of

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39 The nickname came after the discovery of some intact lusterware sealed in a ṭāq in the southern wall of the building. A second inkwell, in transparent glass, with octagonal faceted body and flaring neck, came from the same site. The latter is in exhibition in the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale ‘G. Tucci’ of Rome (Inv. No. 8292).
40 Fusaro 2015, 256. Two coins with the name of Mu’izz al-dīn Muhammad b. Sām (1173-1206) emerged from the house (Inv. Nos. V142, V585; dynastic attribution by Giunta).
41 No picture of the inner box is available, so it is impossible to state whether each pair of holes was linked through a tube or not.
42 Inv. No. 3463. The artefact, attributed to the 12th century, is published by Ettinghausen (1969, pl. 13) who infers its function on the base of the open-worked wall of the box, echoed by the open-worked hold on the lid. It would be worthy to note that the object is very close to inkwells in shape and size. Should have been used as an inkwell, an inner vessel would have been necessary.
43 Scretto 1959a, 39.
44 Along with specimens coming from excavation, the Italian Mission archives record other inkwells, purchased or documented in the Afghan museums between 1957 and 1978: four cylindrical boxes - only one of those complete of its lid -, three unrelated cylindrical lids and two parallelepiped inkwells. A catalogue including the
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provenance are physically very close (about 550 m) and not distant chronologically as well. The finding of two inkwells, no. C11 and the hexagonal one, featuring the same rarely attested suspension system represents more than a coincidence. The number of survived inkwells testify that the internal suspension system was not the successful device in Islamic time. The common provenance may demonstrate that this system was popular in Ghazni. Far more crucial in placing inkwell no. C11 in Ghazni are its decorative details, recalling the early artistic production of the city. This artefact could testify, along with other evidence, the existence of a highly skilled silversmith active in Ghazni in the golden age. 

Inkwell no. C10 attests the spread of a drawing which origin can be either in the Khurasan or in Ghazni. In any case, it comes not as a surprise that the same decorative model could be employed in both areas, anytime adapted by artisans. Among the group of inkwells which decoration is devoted to the writing art, no. C10 looks much closer to the specimen from the Victoria and Albert Museum, in particular for the vegetal pattern on the background executed in champlevé. These two inkwells are likely to be most ancient than others. As no conclusive proof can demonstrate that inkwell no. C10 was actually made in Ghazni, there is no apparent reason to state the contrary.

As far as we known, the two inkwells unearthed from the royal palace could have been used in the same moment, even if dating to different periods. They were luxurious objects, endowed with symbolic value, based on the great esteem assigned to writing art by the Islam, and political importance, as actual tools of government. Such assessment led to preserve them carefully. In Ghaznavid time, in fact, State inkwells were preserved in a specific room, the dawātẖāna, under the guarding eye of the amīr-i dawātdār. Their finding in the same room could be a remarkable archaeological evidence in support of such conservative custom. To imagine these inkwells in the hands of the highest profile personalities serving at court may be daring, but extremely fascinating as well.

**APPENDIX**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Fe</th>
<th>Cu</th>
<th>Zn</th>
<th>Pb</th>
<th>Ag</th>
<th>Au</th>
<th>Hg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Black patina</td>
<td>1,75</td>
<td>69,11</td>
<td>4,31</td>
<td>24,43</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>0,00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Silver plate</td>
<td>0,54</td>
<td>13,48</td>
<td>1,21</td>
<td>0,00</td>
<td>81,98</td>
<td>2,35</td>
<td>0,43</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 1 - Chemical analysis made by the Department of Engineering, Sapienza University of Rome.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Fe</th>
<th>Cu</th>
<th>Zn</th>
<th>Pb</th>
<th>Ag</th>
<th>Au</th>
<th>Hg</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Inner surface of the lid</td>
<td>0,29±0,04</td>
<td>71±1</td>
<td>10,2±0,3</td>
<td>18,2±0,2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loop inside the box</td>
<td>0,29±0,04</td>
<td>76±1</td>
<td>12,0±0,3</td>
<td>11,0±0,1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Tab. 2 - Chemical analysis made by the Department of Engineering, Sapienza University of Rome.

whole metalwork documentation (more than 400 artefacts) is in preparation by the author: *Islamic Metalwork from Afghanistan* (9th-13th c.). The Italian Archaeological Mission Archives (1957-1978), Brill publisher.

45 A silver spoon-fork engraved and nielloed; two sets of silver door rings with a lock, produced for the Ka’ba (see Laviola 2017, 209).

46 In the fourth verse from the Quranic *sura* no. 96 - regarded among the most ancient revealed to the Prophet Muhammad - the writing, *qalam*, is called as the first teaching of God to the human kind.

47 Melikian-Chirvani 1986, 72.
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RCEA

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Fig. 1 - Plan of Ghazni royal palace (Drawn by G. Ioppolo in 1966).

Fig. 2 - Inkwell no. C11 on exhibition at the Museo Nazionale d’Arte Orientale ‘G. Tucci’, Rome 2017 (© V. Laviola).

Fig. 3 - Inkwell no. C10 on exhibition at the Rawza Museum of Islamic Art, Ghazni 1978 (IsIAO archive).
Fig. 4 - Inkwell no. C11: loops inside the box (© V. Laviola).

Fig. 5 - Inkwell no. C11: underside (© V. Laviola).

Fig. 6 - Inkwell no. C11: silver plate on the box, with engraved and nielloed decoration (© V. Laviola).

Fig. 7 - Inkwell no. C11: lid (© V. Laviola).
Three Islamic inkwells from Ghazni excavation

Fig. 8 - Inkwell no. C10: underside (IsIAO archive).

Fig. 9 - Inkwell no. C10: scene no. I (IsIAO archive).

Fig. 10 - Inkwell no. C10: scene no. II (IsIAO archive).

Fig. 11 - Inkwell no. C10: scene no. III (IsIAO archive).
Fig. 12 - Inkwell no. C10: lid with cursive inscription (IsIAO archive).

Fig. 13 - Hexagonal inkwell (IsIAO archive).

Fig. 14 - Hexagonal inkwell: underside (IsIAO archive).

Fig. 15 - Hexagonal inkwell: upper view (IsIAO archive).