



ABŪ ṬĀHER

ABŪ ṬĀHER, designation of a family of leading potters from Kāšān, known through four generations (602-734/1205-1333). The first member of the family may be a certain Bū Ṭāher Ḥosayn, who is known through a single signed example of his work, a bowl decorated in the *mīnāī* technique and dateable by its style to the end of the 6th/12th century. Painted in colored enamels on a blue glaze, it displays a series of circular medallions each containing a seated figure ([Plate XVII](#)). With one exception, Bū Ṭāher's descendants are known only for tiles decorated in the luster technique.

1. Moḥammad b. Abī Ṭāher cooperated with the potter [Abū Zayd b. Moḥammad b. Abī Zayd](#) in decorating the shrines at Qom and Mašhad. At Qom he was responsible for a large panel of luster tiles, in *meḥrāb* form, which was set on top of the tomb of Fāṭema. This signature gives us the clearest reading of his name: *katabaho wa 'amalaho . . .* “Moḥammad b. Abī Ṭāher b. Abī'l-Ḥosayn made and decorated it.” This panel may be dated 602/1205, the date found on luster tiles in the same shrine made by Abū Zayd. Ten years later the two potters are found cooperating again in the decoration of the shrine at Mašhad. Moḥammad's signature is found on the luster tiles that frame the entrance into the tomb chamber, together with the date Jomādā I, 612/September, 1215. An incomplete signature on a pentagonal tile from a large luster *meḥrāb* (reading *'amal-e Moḥammad . . .* “the work of Moḥammad . . .”) is also doubtless by this potter (ex-Kelekian Collection).

2. 'Alī, Moḥammad's son, is known through five signed works. The earliest is a large *meḥrāb* originally installed in the tomb chamber of the shrine at Mašhad



(now in the shrine museum) which bears the date 640/1242. Fragments, including a signed panel, of a similar *meḥrāb* and probably of the same date, were found in the basement of the Emāmzāda Moḥammad b. Ja‘far al-Šādeq near Gonbad-e Qābūs. In 663/1264 ‘Alī made a third large *meḥrāb* for the Emāmzāda Yaḥyā in Varāmīn (ex-Kevorkian Collection). A smaller two-tiled *meḥrāb* of the same date, now in the Islamic Museum, East Berlin, is said to have come from a building in Qom, possibly from the Āstāna, where further signed pieces by ‘Alī are reported to be still in situ. To ‘Alī may also be attributed fragments of yet another large *meḥrāb* installed in the Zīr Dālān mosque attached to the shrine at Naḥaf. Though unsigned, it is close in design to ‘Alī’s *meḥrāb* from Varāmīn.

3. Yūsuf, ‘Alī’s son, is known through five signed pieces. The earliest, a two-tile *meḥrāb* from Emāmzāda Yaḥyā in Varāmīn, is dated 705/1305. This piece, now in the Hermitage Museum, Leningrad, also bears the signature of ‘Alī b. Aḥmad. In 709/1309 and 710/1310 Yūsuf signed and dated lustered frieze tile (British Museum, Kevorkian Collection, Cairo Museum, etc.) whose provenance is unknown. In 734/1334 he was responsible for a large *meḥrāb* originally in the Emāmzāda ‘Alī b. Ja‘far in Qom (now in the Īrān Bāstān Museum, Tehran). Finally, in Qaḥ’a mosque in the small village of Qohrūd outside Kāšān stands a single tile *meḥrāb* signed by Yūsuf and with an incomplete date reading 716, 717, 726, or 727 (1316, 1317, 1326, or 1327). It is of particular interest in that it is decorated in blue and black underglaze painting, and is the only piece known, signed by a luster potter, that is not decorated in the luster technique.

4. Abu’l-Qāsem, Yūsuf’s brother, was a historian at the court of the Mongols, and the author of a book called *‘Arā’es al-ḵawāher wa nafā’es al-aṭā’eb* to which he appended a short treatise on the manufacture of ceramics. Though not a practicing potter, he was well-acquainted with the processes involved and the sources of the materials. He provides a unique and immensely valuable account of the formulation of ceramic bodies and glazes, and of various decorative techniques, including monochrome glazing, underglaze painting, luster painting, and overglaze enameling (see [Abu’l-Qāsem Kāšānī](#)).

Two points may be noted in the study of this family. Firstly the degree of collaboration between potters—between Moḥammad and Abū Zayd in 602 and 612, and a century later between Yūsuf and ‘Alī Aḥmad. The second point of interest is the large time gap between generations. Far from the works of the son following close upon those of the father, the gap between known works of



the first generation is twenty-eight years, and between the second generation forty-two years. Late marriage and long apprenticeships may be the explanation. However, the time gap would seem to indicate that the son did not learn his skills directly from father, and if this is the case then to whom were the sons apprenticed? ‘Alī may have learnt the craft from Ḥasan b. ‘Arabšāh, whose major work (the *meḥrāb* from Kāšān dated 623/1226) occurs between those of Moḥammad and ‘Alī, but there is no known potter who could have played a similar role for ‘Alī’s son Yūsuf.

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