



BERENJ “BRASS” I. GENERAL

i. General

The earliest dated reference in lexicography to *berenj* occurs in Adīb Kordī Nīšāpūrī's Arabic-Persian dictionary *Ketāb al-balāga*, completed in 438/1046-47 (ed. M. Mīnovī and F. Ḥarīṭčī, Tehran, 2535 = 1355 Š./1976, p. 283). It renders Arabic *šabah*, literally “simile, resemblance.” Bīrūnī comments in the *Ketāb al-jamāher fī ma'refat al-jawāher* (Hyderabad, 1355/1937, pp. 262-63) that *šabah* is copper made yellow by adding zinc (*tūtīā*) until it resembles gold, so much so that it has been called “simile.” The equivalency of Persian *berenj* and Arabic *šabah* is confirmed by all later dictionaries, notably Maydānī's *Sāmī fī'l-asāmī* (fac. by J. Šahīdī, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966, p. 216). In the mid-7th/13th century, K̄vāja Našīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī specifies that *berenj* is made of purified copper, “to give it a thoroughly yellow color,” and zinc (*Tansūk-nāma-ye ilkānī*, ed. T. Modarres Rażawī, Tehran, 1348 Š./1969, p. 227). The historian and polymath Abu'l-Qāsem Kāšānī (early 5th/14th century) adds that it has a sheen (*jalā*) and glitter (*āb*) like gold (*'Arā'es al-jawāher wa nafāyes al-aṭāyeb*, ed. Ī. Afšār, Tehran, 1345 Š./1966, p. 244) and that the best *berenj* is the *šāmī* (Syrian/Damascene), which resembles gold. Kāšānī puts brass after gold and silver in the hierarchy of “substances that can be smelted,” i.e., metals and alloys, saying that whatever can be made of gold can be made of brass, utensils, vessels, furniture.

Very few proper analyses have been carried out on Iranian metalwork. It would seem that brass was used for making many of the wares executed from sheet metal hammered into shape and then engraved and inlaid with silver that have recently been shown to be the products of the Khorasan school in



the later 6th/12th and early 7th/13th century (A. S. Melikian-Chirvani, *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World*, London, 1982). These include ewers (pp. 114-18, *āftāba* no. 45), rose-water sprinklers (pp. 120-21, *golābzān*, *golābpāš* no. 58), etc. In the middle Safavid period, beautifully cast vessels with thick walls covered with engraved patterns were made of brass. Lexical information also makes it possible to identify objects preferably made of brass. *Bring* is recorded in Manichean Middle Persian (D. N. MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London, 1969, p. 20). Around 1300 the form *bereng* is glossed *jaras* (bell) by Mobārakšāh Qawwās (*Farhang-e Qawwās*, ed. Naḍīr Aḥmad, Tehran, 1353 Š./1974, p. 175). From this it may be inferred that bells were at that period largely made from brass. Similarly *berenjīn* or *berenjan* means “bracelet” or “ankle-ring” (Enjū Šīrāzī, *Farhang-e jahāngīrī*, ed. R. ‘Afīfī, 3 vols., Mašhad, 1351 Š./1972, Tehran, 1354 Š./1975, I, p. 864b). Although Enjū Šīrāzī writes that these are made of gold, silver, and other metals, the derivation leaves no doubt that in early times bracelets were made chiefly from *berenj*. The word also occurs in Bīrūnī’s *Ketāb al-tafhīm* (ed. J. Homā’ī, Tehran, 1362 Š./1983, p. 389). Both bells and bracelets were intended to ring and Bīrūnī associates the *dast-baranjan* and *pāy-baranjan* with *jalājel* in the iconography of the moon depicted as a seated woman. This would seem to confirm that *bereng* is a pre-Islamic onomatopoeia (compare Persian *tarang* and old German *dringen*, English *ring*) coined to describe brass as the “ringing metal,” rather as German *Glockenmetall* and English *bell metal* have described a multiple alloy with a ringing sound since the Middle Ages.

In modern times *berenj* has continued to be used in a variety of household objects, ranging from bowls and beakers to ewers and basins (*āftāba-lagan*); samovars (*samāvar*), of a type borrowed from Russia some time in the 13th/19th century, are also made of brass. In the eastern Iranian world, particularly in Afghan Khorasan, Kābolestān, and the area of Ġazna, teapots (*čāynak*, corresponding to *gūrī/qūrī* in Iran) are often made of an alloy that resembles brass (laboratory analyses have yet to be carried out to determine the exact nature or the alloys used).

Equally important is the use in traditional architecture of openwork plaques in the shape of rosettes and a wide assortment of studs used as door fittings. In contemporary architecture taps, the pipes of public fountains, and spouts in garden pools are often made of brass, translating into modern terms a tradition that is centuries old. Spouts in pools are invariably depicted in book painting in the golden color associated with *berenj*. Brass is used extensively



for making bangles, rings, seal rings, and bells (*zangūla*), as well as for a variety of studs and mounts for horse trappings. It is also common in Turkmen and other tribal jewelry.

For the thriving brass industry serving the tourist market, see [crafts](#). One aspect of this industry that has been little studied is the trade in forged antiquities, for example, the manufacture of “old” brass astrolabes in Isfahan (see L. D. Loeb, “Creating Antiques for Fun and Profit. Encounters between Iranian Jewish Merchants and Touring Coreligionists,” in *Hosts and Guests. The Anthropology of Tourism*, ed. V. L. Smith, Philadelphia, 1977, pp. 185-92).