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CHINESE-IRANIAN RELATIONS XI. MUTUAL INFLUENCE OF CHINESE AND PERSIAN CERAMICS

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xi. Mutual Influence of Chinese and Persian Ceramics

Chinese influence on Persian ceramics. Chinese ceramics were the single most important stimulus to the development of fine pottery in the Islamic world, arriving first in the 3rd/9th century. Previously Islamic potters had produced mainly simple kitchen and storage wares, unglazed or with low-fired turquoise glazes. The first meeting with fine Chinese wares taught them that pottery making need not be restricted to serving mere utilitarian ends but could be developed into a skilled artistic enterprise, producing goods for the luxury market (Crowe, 1976). Contemporary textual references reflect the esteem in which the Chinese wares were held (Kahle, 1934; idem, 1940-41). Vast quantities of them came to the Middle East directly through a trade that has continued virtually uninterrupted until the present. By the mid-3rd/9th century potters in the Islamic world had transformed the quality of their products, creating a market in which their goods approached the status of fine

or precious metalwork, even if they did not directly compete with it. The burgeoning urban classes had a new manufactured commodity, in addition to textiles, metalwork, and glass, on which to spend surplus income.

All Islamic pottery is of earthenware fired at relatively low temperatures; neither the raw material nor the technology for making the high-fired stonewares and porcelains typical of China was available in the Near East. The hardness and strength of imported articles like the stoneware containers or simple dishes that arrived in quantity in the early ʿAbbasid period (2nd-4th/8th-10th centuries) could thus not be reproduced, but only the surface appearance. Islamic potters thus generally found it profitable to concentrate on copying wares that were valued for their looks and "status," rather than those valued for practical use.

A history of Islamic pottery can be structured around three successive "waves," or phases, of Chinese influence, each initiated by the arrival in the Near East of a new type of ceramic ware. The phases tended to follow a similar pattern. First, the Islamic potters developed a technology allowing them to make close copies of the imported ware. Then they, began to develop their own variations, usually involving the addition of color and decoration of an Islamic nature. It is not surprising that evidence for Chinese imports consists largely of copies; few sherds and even fewer complete pieces of early Chinese pottery have been found on Islamic territory. There has been little controlled archeological exploration in Persia, and less still has been published. Only from the 9th/15th century onward do Chinese originals survive in quantity.

1. "White glaze" phase, 3rd-4th/9th-10th centuries. Persia played as important a part in the overall development and exploitation of Chinese-inspired ceramic technologies and styles as any country in the central Islamic world, but in the earliest phase it seems that Syria and Iraq were far in the lead, and evidence for a Persian contribution is somewhat meager. Indeed, the two major contemporary groups of Persian fine wares—the so-called "Samanid slip-painted wares" of eastern Persia and Transoxania and the splashed and incised wares (Wilkinson, chaps. 1-5)—owed nothing to Chinese models (cf. Watson, 1970). The earliest Chinese ceramics to inspire copies in the Near East were white wares—both stoneware and porcelain—which began to arrive in the late 2nd/8th century (Sarre, pp. 54-64; Whitehouse, 1970; Crowe, 1978; Watson, 1987). Although uneven in quality, they must have astonished Near Eastern potters and patrons, who had not previously seen ceramics so white and pure or so hard and heavy. They were able to imitate the white bodies and

transparent glazes of the Chinese pieces by applying an opaque white glaze over an earthenware body, usually of yellowish color. This glaze could be opacified by means of the addition of tin oxide, though other, less expensive methods were also commonly used. The shapes are close to those of the originals: bowls with wide bases, often with broad, flat foot rings; gently curved or flaring walls; and rolled or slightly evened rims. The rims are occasionally notched, and raised ribs may be found on the interior walls. Plain white wares of this kind were made all over the Islamic world; "Sāmarrā wares" were the best known and of the finest quality (Sarre, pp. 66-67), though similar pottery was made all along the Euphrates into Syria, as well as in Egypt (Watson, forthcoming). In Persia white-glazed wares were probably produced at a number of sites: Examples have been found at Nīšāpūr, along with a few fragments of Chinese porcelain (Wilkinson, pp. 179-82, 254-58), and similar finds have been reported from Ray, Sīrjān (formerly Saʿīdābād), Eṣṭaḵr, and Sīrāf (Williamson; Morgan and Leatherly; Whitehouse, 1970; idem, 1973; idem, 1979).

The potters were not long content with plain, undecorated pieces and began to add color and pattern. In Iraq cobalt blue was used for simple calligraphic or floral and geometric motifs, whereas green or manganese brown was used elsewhere; luster painting was also introduced in Iraq. There has been considerable debate on the role of China in the development of Islamic "splashed" wares. They were long considered imitations of imported Tang splashed wares, examples of which had supposedly been identified at Sāmarrā and elsewhere (Lane, 1947, p. 12). Recent opinion tends to the view that no authenticated pieces of Chinese splashed ware have ever been found in the Middle East and that Islamic examples reflect an independent development (Watson,1970). Jessica Rawson has identified as Chinese a type of white ware that was found at Sāmarrā; it is decorated with splashes of green, often arranged in rows of large dots (Rawson et at., pls. 4, 5, 23). This green-on-white decoration, quite distinct from that of true "splashed ware," was also copied and became the most common type of white-glazed ware manufactured in Mesopotamia and Syria in the 3rd/9th century (Sarre, pp. 62-64, where it is identified, probably erroneously, as Chinese; Watson, forthcoming). Similar products have been reported from Nīšāpūr and elsewhere in Persia (Wilkinson, pp. 179-82).

2. "Fritware" phase, 6th-7th/12th-13th centuries. In this phase a new kind of Chinese import led to sweeping technological changes in the Near Eastern

ceramics industry. The role of Persian potters in these changes was particularly important. Evidence for the importation of the Chinese models to Persia in this period must be drawn almost entirely from surviving Persian copies, though imported Chinese material is known from Egypt (see Gyllensvard, 1973; idem, 1975). In the late 5th/11th century a radically new type of Chinese porcelain began to be imported. It was mostly of *ying-qing* (lit. "blue-white") type, of much thinner fabric, sometimes translucent, and often decorated with incised or molded patterns of complex and subtle design under a transparent glaze. It could not be adequately copied in earthenwares, which were of necessity thick-bodied and whose opaque glazes did not allow for subtle underglaze decoration. As a solution the Near Eastern potters developed a new fabric based on an ancient Egyptian technology: fritware, compounded of ground quartz with small quantities of clay and glaze. When fired it yielded a pure-white body; if sufficiently thin, it could be translucent. It matched the Chinese ware in all but hardness.

Fritware was probably developed in Egypt during the 5th/11th century, but it was taken up in Syria and particularly in Persia toward the middle of the 6th/12th century. In Persia it was the potters of Kāšān who exploited this material best, though it was certainly also produced at Nīšāpūr, as well as at a number of other places (Watson, 1985, pp. 22-24; Wilkinson, pp. 259-63). These wares laid the foundation for a most extraordinary burst of creative activity, perhaps unparalleled anywhere in the world until the rise of industrial pottery in Staffordshire in the 18th century. The initial stimulus came from the imported Chinese wares that were at first faithfully copied: white bowls and vases, plain or decorated with carved or molded designs (Lane, 1946-47). This activity was centered in Kāšān, where, from about 545/1150 until the Mongol invasions in 617/1220, a variety of decorative techniques was invented or adapted for the new material as the Chinese models were gradually forgotten: Molding, carving, and piercing were applied to a new range of forms; a wide array of colored glazes was introduced (see ceramics xiv, pls. xvi-xviii, xxii); underglaze painting and overglaze enameling were invented (see ceramics xiv, pls. xxi-xxii, xxvi); and luster painting attained new heights.

3. "Blue-and-white" phase, late 8th/14th century onward. The Chinese export trade throughout this period was dominated by blue-and-white decorated porcelain. It has been argued that this porcelain was initially manufactured specifically for the Near Eastern market (Medley, 1974; idem, 1975; idem, 1976). The earliest evidence for the arrival of Chinese blue-and-white in the

Near East dates from the last decade of the 8th/14th century, when it began to be represented in manuscript paintings (Gray, 1948-49; cf. Medley, 1974, pp. 32-34). The earliest surviving Persian copies are of the 9th/15th century (see ceramics xiv); they are few in number but sufficient to reveal close acquaintance with the originals. From the 10th/16th century, however, a series of Persian wares imitating Chinese originals survive in quantity and permit a detailed tracing of the evolution in the style of imported Chinese porcelains to the 13th/19th century. These imitations were made at a number of centers. A variety of wares from the 10th/16th century are known collectively as "Kubachi ware" after the area in the Causasus where they were first found (see ceramics xv, pl. xli). Mašhad and Kermān are claimed as major centers from the 11th/17th century to the 13th/19th century, when Isfahan and Tehran also became important (Lane, 1957, chaps. 2, 4-6; Watson, 1988, pp. 176-222). Many of the wares produced in these centers were faithful copies, though not always of contemporary imports. In the 11th/17th century, for example, copies of 8th/14th- or 9th/15th-century originals were being made (e.g., Rogers, pl. 156). Celadons and monochrome and gilded porcelains were also imported from the 8th/14th century onward, and they, too, were imitated (Lane, 1957, chap. 8; see ceramics xiv, pl. xxxiii). In the 13th/19th century "Canton" enameled wares provoked somewhat artless copies (see ceramics xv, pl. xlvii), as the quality of Persian pottery was by then declining under competition not only from China but also from the industrial potteries of Great Britain (Lane, 1957, pp. 84-87).

It is noteworthy that in this last phase Persian potters found it difficult to break from the Chinese idiom and develop their own styles. Painting in blue and white almost invariably followed the Chinese idiom, whereas Islamic designs were employed when locally developed techniques were used, as in the colored slip-painted wares of Kubachi or Kermān and luster wares from the Safavid period. The distinction was observed even when, for example, both blue-and-white technique and slip painting were combined on the same piece (Lane, 1957, pls. 54-55, 59; Watson, 1988, nos. C47-48, C61).

It is only from this last phase that ample Chinese pieces have survived from Islamic contexts, and, indeed, two of the best collections of such material are in Tehran and Istanbul respectively (Pope; Krahl). A collection of Chinese porcelain dating from the 8th/14th to the 10th/16th century was given as *waqf* (charitable endowment) to the shrine of Emām Ṣafī at Ardabīl by Shah ʿAbbās I (96-1038/1588-1629) in 1020/1611; it is now housed in the Mūza-ye Īrān-e

Bāstān, Tehran (Pope). A third collection of some 200 Chinese pieces ranging in date from the 8th/14th to the 13th/19th century is now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, London. They were gathered in Persia toward the end of the last century by the telegraph engineer Major General Sir Robert Murdoch-Smith.

In the 14th/20th century Western industrialized production was introduced, though imported wares still dominate. Traditional pottery continues to follow the downward spiral that started in the 12th/18th century (Gluck, pp. 68-94).

Persian influence on Chinese ceramics. Although it is certain that some early Islamic pottery reached China—fragments of turquoise-glazed storage jars have been reported—it is equally certain that they had no effect on the history of Chinese potting. There was, however, one area in which Persia contributed to a major transformation of Chinese pottery production: the supply of cobalt for the first underglaze-decorated blue-and-white porcelains. This mineral no doubt came from the mines at Qamṣar, in the hills above Kāšān (Garner, Medley, 1976, pp. 169-86). The Chinese name for it, *su-ma-li*, *su-ni-po*, or *su-ma-ni*, was probably derived from the Persian *solaymānī*, recorded in a text on pottery manufacture written in 700/1300-01 by Abu'l-Qāsem ʿAbd-Allāh Kāšānī (Allan, p. 114). As noted above, blue-and-white porcelain may have been developed expressly for the Near Eastern market and may have initially been considered vulgar by Chinese cognoscenti. The large numbers of 8th/14th--century porcelains that have been found in Islamic lands support this view. The types of vessel—in particular the large dishes—were unsuited to Chinese use but ideal for Islamic eating habits. Furthermore, some Near Eastern influence in the designs found on the early porcelains can be posited; for example, the idea of dividing the surface into friezes and panels may have been borrowed from Islamic artifacts, especially metalwork (Medley, 1972a; idem,1972b; idem, 1974; idem, 1975; for a contrary view, see Rawson, 1984, p. 135 n. 26).

Finally, it may be cautiously suggested that the Chinese took not only the idea of painting in cobalt from Persia but also the very notion of underglaze painting itself. The Persian potters of Kāšān and elsewhere had been using the underglaze technique for more than a century before the Chinese began to do so, and they had used cobalt blue for their designs. Could the Persian underglaze technique have been adopted by the Chinese at the same time as the cobalt pigment? If so, Persia would deserve credit for a major innovation in the ceramic history of China and, indeed, of the world.

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