

THREE ISLAMIC INKWELLS FROM GHAZNI EXCAVATION*

Valentina Laviola - 'Alma Mater Studiorum' University of Bologna

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.¹ 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.

1. TWO CYLINDRICAL INKWELLS

In 1958, during the excavation of Ghazni royal palace,² the Italian archaeologists retrieved two cylindrical boxes, intact and complete of their lids: the objects showed the unmistakable profile of Islamic inkwells.³

The two inkwells emerged from room III, lying in the southwestern quarter of the palace close to the throne hall.⁴ 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.⁵

* 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.

¹ 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>.

² The ruins of the palace revealed a typical ancient Iranian plan: a central rectangular courtyard with 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 Mas'ūd 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 Mas'ūd 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).

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*, flanked by rooms, opened on a square courtyard with a well in its centre (halls with the same plan, beside the throne hall, appear in the palaces of Lashkar-i Bazar, cf. Schlumberger 1978, pl. 4.II, and Kufa, cf. Creswell 1989, fig. 2, as well).

⁵ Fusaro 2015, 225-226.

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.⁶

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).⁷ 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.⁸ 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.⁹ Among artisans' signatures, some *nisbas* refer to the Khurasan,¹⁰ while other signatures without *nisba* belong to artisans known from other metalwork, as in the case of Šādī *al-naqqāš*.¹¹

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.¹² James Allan included them in his PhD thesis about Iranian metalwork, discussing in particular the no. C11.¹³

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. Gambari 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, 'Ālima bint Ibrāhīm *munağğīm*: 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 'Abdallāh ibn al-Ḥasan Pārsī*, possibly a *ḥajīb* of Bukhara (see Allan 1982a, 44-45, 87, no. 105).

¹⁰ 'Abd al-Razzāq b. Mas'ūd al-Nišāpūrī (Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Inv. No. 48.108; see Melikian-Chirvani 1979a, 8; 1982, 72, and previous bibliography); Nāsir b. As'ad al-Nišāpūrī (Adrienne Minassian Collection, New York; see Melikian-Chirvani 1982, 72); Muḥammad b. Abī Sahl 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. Šādī *al-naqqāš* signed also a pen-case destined to Mağd al-Mulk al-Muzaffar, vizier of 'Alā'l-dīn Muḥammad Ḥwārizm-šāh (Freer Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C., Inv. No. 36.7; see Herzfeld 1936; *RCEA* 10 1939, 51; Harari 1938-1939, 2521, fig. 841; Aga-Oglu 1946, 122; Melikian-Chirvani 1979b, 232). The artisan bears the *nisba al-harawī* 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 wall¹⁴ and rests on three low feet - one of which is missing.¹⁵ 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).¹⁶ The elevated percentage of lead in the alloy surely helped the stability of the inkwell.¹⁷ 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.¹⁸

The small square feet are decorated in their inner section by a rhomboid lozenge.¹⁹ 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.).²⁰

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),²¹ carved in relief. The dome itself is topped by an almost spherical knob, which rests on a raised step.

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, 46; 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.²² 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.²³ 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: *bi'l-yumn wa'l-bara(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'.²⁴ 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 *bā'* is oblique and slightly concave, revealing a sharp profile. The *wāw* has a round body, surmounted by an upended terminal. Above the *yā'*, in the first term, there is a downward lance-shaped leaf, while a semi-palmette is barely visible behind the *bā'* 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 *bā'* and the *yā'* in the term *bi'l-yumn* are slightly shorter. The *yā'* 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 raises as an apicated *hasta*. The *rā'* 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 *yā'* 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 nīlīfārī*.

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 *yā'* 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 *bā'* is sloping, and the *rā'* 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.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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.²⁷

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.²⁸

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 Sabūktigīn (r. 977-997).²⁹ 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

Inkwell no. C10 rests on a flat base.³⁰ 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

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).

²⁷ See Allan 1982b, 32-35, no. 1.

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 Abū'l-'Abbās Valgīn ibn Harūn (Pope - Ackermann 1938-39, pls. 1345-1346; Melikian-Chirvani 1986, 99; Allan 1986, 56).

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:

باليمن والبركة وال / و الدولة و السلا(مة) / و الكرامة و السلا(مة)

With good luck, blessing, AL /, fortune, spiritual integri(ty) /, divine favour, spiritual integri(ty).

The inscription disposes on a single line; letters occupy the whole height available inside the cartouches, even with their terminals (see the *wāws* and *tā' marbūtas*). 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 (*tirāz*) 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 (*tirāz*) 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.

out from 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:

باليمن و البركة و السلا(مة) / و الدولة و الكرامة / و السلا(مة) و الدولة و الس(ر) (...)

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:

العز و الاقبال و الدولة و السلامة / و السعادة(ة) و البقا لصاحب(ه)

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

It disposes on a single line, with one exception in the third cartouche: the *hā'* in the term *li-ṣāḥi(bi-hi)* is elevated above the *ṣād* and overlaps the *alif mandūda*. Shortness of space forced the decorator to omit the following two letters. An article is split between the first and second cartouche. The *tā' marbūṭa* at the end of the term *al-sa'āda* 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 *tā' marbūṭas* 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 *kātib*s portrayed in the same way are known:³³ one from

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;³⁴ a second from the Victoria and Albert Museum;³⁵ and a third from the Eretz Israel Museum.³⁶ 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 *tirāz*-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. I 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 *wāws*. *Texts A* and *B* almost mirror each other: the wishing terms chosen are the same, with particular stress on the terms *al-dawla wa'l-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:³⁷ the term *al-sa'āda* lacks the final *tā' marbūṭa*; the *ḥā'* 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 *mu'allim 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, 'Alī b. Muḥammad b. 'Alī *al-mušrif*, is on the inkwell from the Royal Ontario Museum, and that of 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.³⁸ 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. Muḥammad - 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 INK WELL

In 1957, a third inkwell came from the excavation of the so-called 'House of the Lusterware', near Ghazni (fig. 13).³⁹ 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.⁴⁰

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.⁴¹ 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.⁴²

3. CONCLUSIVE REMARKS

The three inkwells found in Ghazni were the first bronzes coming from a regular excavation in the whole Afghanistan.⁴³

Their technical, morphological and decorative features attest a high variety, also confirmed by other inkwells documented by the Italian Mission.⁴⁴ The two sites of

³⁹ The nickname came after the discovery of some intact lusterware sealed in a *ḥāq* 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 Muḥammad 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 Scerrato 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

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.⁴⁵

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,⁴⁶ 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 *dawāṭhāna*, under the guarding eye of the *amīr-i dawātdār*.⁴⁷ 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

Description	Fe	Cu	Zn	Pb	Ag	Au	Hg
Black patina	1,75	69,11	4,31	24,43	0,00	0,00	0,00
Silver plate	0,54	13,48	1,21	0,00	81,98	2,35	0,43

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

Description	Fe	Cu	Zn	Pb
Inner surface of the lid	0,29±0,04	71±1	10,2±0,3	18,2±0,2
Loop inside the box	0,29±0,04	76±1	12,0±0,3	11,0±0,1

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 Muḥammad - the writing, *qalam*, is called as the first teaching of God to the human kind.

⁴⁷ Melikian-Chirvani 1986, 72.

REFERENCES

- ADAMESTEANU, D.
1960 Notes sur le site archéologique de Ghazni: *Afghanistan* 15/1 (1960), pp. 21-30.
- AGA-OGLU, M.
1946 A Preliminary Note on two Artists from Nishapur: *Bulletin of the Iranian Institute* VI (1946), pp. 121-124.
- ALLAN, J.W.
1976 *The Metalworking Industry in Iran in the Early Islamic Period*, PhD thesis, Oxford University 1976. <http://ora.ox.ac.uk/objects/uuid:278c6978-9421-46af-af61-a062a2044591>.
- 1982a *Nishapur: Metalwork of the Early Islamic Period*, New York 1982.
1982b *Islamic Metalwork. The Nuhad Es-Said Collection*, London 1982.
1986 *Metalwork of the Islamic World. The Aron Collection*, London 1986.
- ARTUSI, S.
2009 *La decorazione architettonica in cotto, in cotto e stucco proveniente dal palazzo di Mas'ūd III di Ghazni, Afghanistan*, PhD thesis, Udine University 2009 (unpublished).
- BAER, E.
1972 An Islamic Inkwell in the Metropolitan Museum of Art: R. ETTINGHAUSEN (ed.), *Islamic Art in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*, New York 1972, pp. 199-211.
- BOMBACI, A.
1959 Introduction to the Excavations at Ghazni. Summary Report on the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan: *East and West* 10 (1959), pp. 3-22.
- CRESWELL, K.A.C.
1989 *A Short Account of Early Muslim Architecture*, Aldershot 1989.
- ETTINGHAUSEN, R.
1943 The Bobrinsky Kettle, Patron and Style of an Islamic Bronze: *Gazette des Beaux Arts* XXIV (1943), pp. 193-208.
1969 Some Comments on Medieval Iranian Art: *Artibus Asiae* 31/4 (1969), pp. 276-300.
- FEHÉRVÁRI, G.
1976 *Islamic Metalwork of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Keir Collection*, London 1976.
- FUSARO, A.
2015 *Studio del Corpus ceramico di età islamica dagli scavi italiani a Ghazni, Afghanistan (X-XIII sec.): contributo alla ricostruzione storica del palazzo sultaniale e della 'Casa dei Lustrì'*, PhD thesis, Sapienza University of Rome 2015 (unpublished).
- HARARI, R.
1938-1939 The Arts of Metalwork. Metalwork after the Early Islamic Period: A.U., POPE - PH. ACKERMANN (eds.), *A Survey of Persian Art*, London - New York 1938-1939, pp. 2466-2519.
- HERZFELD, E.
1936 Arabische Inschriften aus Iran und Syrien: *Archäologische Mitteilungen aus Iran* 8 (1936), pp. 78-81.
- GIUNTA, R.
2003 *Les inscriptions funéraires de Ġaznī (IV-IX/X-XV siècles)*, Università degli Studi di Napoli 'L'Orientale', IsIAO – Fondation Max van Berchem (*Series Maior* 8), Naples 2003.
- LAVIOLA, V.
2015 *Ziyārāt of Ghazni: Three Case Studies about Marble Re-Employments: Eurasian Studies* 13 (2015), pp. 42-53.

- 2017 Drinking from a Golden Cup, Eating from a Silver Dish. Precious Metalwork in Islamic Iranian Sources (11th-12th century): *Annali dell'Università di Napoli 'L'Orientale'* 77 (2017), pp. 181-214.
- MARCHAL, H.
1974 L'art du bronze islamique d'Afghanistan dans les collections du Louvre: *Revue du Louvre et des Musées de France* 24/1 (1974), pp. 7-18.
- MELIKIAN-CHIRVANI, A.S.
1974 Les bronzes du Khorassan - I: *Studia Iranica* 3 (1974), pp. 29-50.
1979a Les bronzes du Khorassan - VI. L'œuvre de Hasan-e Bā Sahl de l'emploi de l'unité modulaire et des nombres privilégiés dans l'art du bronze: *Studia Iranica* 9 (1979), pp. 7-32.
1979b Les bronzes du Khorassan - VII. Šāzī de Herat, ornemaniste: *Studia Iranica* 8 (1979), pp. 223-243.
1982 *Islamic Metalwork from the Iranian World 8th-18th centuries*, London 1982.
1986 State Inkwells in Islamic Iran: *The Journal of the Walters Art Gallery* 44 (1986), pp. 70-94.
- POPE, A.U. - ACKERMANN, PH. (eds.)
1938-1939 *A Survey of Persian Art*, London - New York 1938-1939.
- RCEA
1939 *Répertoire Chronologique d'Epigraphie Arabe, vol X*: G. WIET - J. SAUVAGET - E. COMBE (eds.), Le Caire 1939.
- SCERRATO, U.
1959a The First Two Excavation Campaigns at Ghazni, 1957-1958. Summary Report on the Italian Archaeological Mission in Afghanistan: *East and West* 10/1-2 (1959), pp. 23-55.
1959b Oggetti metallici di età islamica in Afghanistan. I: Antiquario di Kandahar: *Annali dell'Istituto Orientale di Napoli* N.S. 9 (1959), pp. 95-130.
1966 *Metalli islamici*, Milano 1966.
- SCHLUMBERGER, D.
1978 *Lashkari Bazar. Une résidence royale ghaznévide et ghoride*, Paris 1978.
- TARAGAN, H.
2005 The 'Speaking' Inkwell from Khurasan: Object as 'World' in Iranian Medieval Metalwork: *Muqarnas* 22 (2005), pp. 29-44.



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).



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).