

# BAYṬĀR ENIGMA OF A FĀṬĪMID POTTER

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The Tareq Rajab Museum in Kuwait a few years ago acquired a large luster-painted jar which bears the signature of Bayṭār who, as far as it is known today, was an outstanding potter during the early Fāṭimid period (fig. 1)<sup>1</sup>. Very little is known about the work of this artist and hardly anything of his life. Most of the information we have was provided in two articles by ʿAbdarraʿūf Yūsuf (1956 & 1958). He signed a floral decorated Fāṭimid lustre-painted dish, which is now preserved in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo<sup>2</sup>. His signature appears here as *ʿAlī Bayṭār*. A fragmentary lustre-painted jar also bears this artist's signature where it is given as *ʿamal ʿAlī al-Bayṭār bi-Miṣr*, "the work of ʿAlī al-Bayṭār in Egypt" (Yūsuf 1956:98-99, plates 22-23, and also Yūsuf 1958:176, fig.3). A further base fragment of a bowl gives his signature as *ʿamal al-Bayṭār*, "the work of al-Bayṭār" (Yūsuf 1958:177, figs. 4/a-b). A second base fragment showing a standing peacock and his signature on the reverse within the foot-ring simply gives his name as Bayṭār (Yūsuf 1958:177, figs. 5/a-b). One of the most interesting examples of these base fragments depicts the hands of a female figure playing on an *ʿūd* and on the reverse the potter's name appears again as simply Bayṭār (Yūsuf 1958:178, figs. 8/a-b). These last items are all in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo. The Gayer Anderson Museum in Cairo also possesses a base fragment which carries this potter's name. Inside it presents a gazelle eating from a haystack, while on the back the name is given in large cursive style as Bayṭār (Yūsuf 1958:177-178, figs. 7/a-b). Finally there is a fragment with his signature, within the base of a bowl in the Benaki Museum in Athens, which was published by Helen Philon (1980: 204, fig. 420, inv.no. 11472).

Fortunately the Tareq Rajab Museum's jar, which is comparatively large, is complete. It measures 30.5 cm in height, its top diameter is 10 cm and the base is 11 cm. The vessel is made of buff earthenware and is covered by a green glaze which stops short of the base. The decoration was painted probably in olive green luster over the glaze. Its colour cannot exactly be determined, as it is partly affected by the coloured glaze and partly because something went wrong during firing, since the colour appears to be too dark. In spite of that the decoration is clearly visible and it presents

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<sup>1</sup> Inv.no. CER1760TSR.

<sup>2</sup> Yūsuf 1956:97, plates 18-19, fig. 3 on plate, showing the section of this dish; also Yūsuf, 1958:175-176, figs. 2/a-b.

three human figures, each placed within a large oval. The shape of this vessel is somewhat unusual when compared to other contemporary jars. It is considerably slender, but has a broad sloping shoulder, tapering downward, resting on an everted flat base and is provided with three small loop handles. These handles are too small and too light to be functional. Most likely they served as a decoration, filling the spaces between the ovals.

Although large number of Fāṭimid jars are known and published, but most of them have different shapes from the Museum's example. Their bodies are considerably wider, they are more globular, their necks are taller and have everted lips. Furthermore, almost all them lack any handles. Such an early Fāṭimid jar, a so-called "Fayyūm" ware, dated to the late 10th - early 11th century, was exhibited during the World of Islam Festival in the Hayward Gallery<sup>3</sup>. An early lustre-painted version, showing a Coptic priest with a rosary on one side, and two birds on the other, is in the Freer Gallery in Washington<sup>4</sup>. The fragmentary jar in the Museum of Islamic Art in Cairo, which bears Bayṭār's name, is similar to this last example, but its body is decorated with large crosshatchings, formed by wavy lines and the spaces between are filled by heavy almond-shaped patterns, a few of them showing attached small offshoots<sup>5</sup>. A lustrepainted jar in the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, comes perhaps closest to the Tareq Rajab Museum's example. It has three small non-functional handles. Furthermore, its decoration suggests an early Fāṭimid period date, which is the same as that of the Kuwait vessel (Caiger-Smith 1985: fig. 16).

The decoration of the Tareq Rajab Museum's jar, as has already been mentioned, depicts three human figures, each set in a large oval. These ovals are placed in the spaces between the handles. The three figures look almost identical, but they are presented in different functions. In all three instances the figure is surrounded by a contour panel, which is typical of early monochrome lustre vessels. The bodies and heads of the figures are always depicted in frontal position, while the legs are in profile. The facial features are simple and naive, as they are known from contemporary Iraqi and early Fāṭimid objects, but here they differ in two small details: they eyes are shown as circles, unlike on many others where they are elongated or almond-shaped; the eyebrows and the nose were drawn in one single stroke with a sharp turn on top. A third interesting point is that the head is shown directly on the top of the body without any indication of a neck. Most contemporary figural representations display at least a short neck and, in case of female figures, are decorated with a necklace. No details are shown of the garments, but there is a straight white line in the middle of the *salvar*.

<sup>3</sup> *Arts* 222, no. 277. It is also illustrated in Soustiel 1985:111, fig. 123.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Atil 1973: no.4. Also illustrated in Caiger-Smith 1985: colour plate III.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Yūsuf 1956, plates 22-23, also 1958, fig.3.

The variation, which prevents monotony, is in the presentation of different functions of the three figures. In the first oval (fig. 1) the figure holds a cup in his right hand while his left hand is not clearly visible. Behind the figure's head to the right there is a word written in simple foliated Kufic: *'amilahu*, "made by...". To the left of his face there is another word, which is the signature of the artist: Bayṭār. The background space within all three ovals is dotted. In the second oval (fig. 2) the figure holds a flag with both hands. Unfortunately here the surface of the vessel is slightly damaged, thus part of the figure's face and upper part of the body is missing. Nevertheless it is clear that on the flag there is again the word *'amilahu*, "made by...", while the potter's name appears below to the right behind the figure. In the third oval (fig. 3) the figure holds a long widening club in his right hand and a drum in his left. Behind him to the right is a word which may be read as *ḥilm*, "patience"? The areas outside the ovals are filled by heavy dots and strokes.

A very similar, if not an identical human figure, also a flag-bearer, can be observed on a dish which is in the Keir collection, Richmond (fig. 4)<sup>6</sup>. The provenance of the dish is given as Mesopotamia and dated to the 10th century. The function and position of the figure, the facial features, the white line in the middle of the *salvar* are exactly the same as can be observed on the Tareq Rajab Museum's jar. It seems that the figure holds an almond-shaped object in his left hand, although it is possible that it is not connected to his hand. Behind the figure there is a three-lobed semi-palmette, hanging upside-down. The figure and all the decorative details are surrounded by contour lines. The everted, almost flat wide rim carries two lobed cartouches on the sides and on top three rounders, all with inscriptions, written in foliated Kufic. The inscriptions in the cartouches repeat the phrase: *baraka li-ṣāhibihi*, "blessing to the owner". The writing on top is divided into the three rounders. According to Watson in the first one it says: *'amilahu*, "made it", while for the other two he suggested the reading as *baraka*, "blessing". It is very unlikely that the word *'amilahu* would be followed by *baraka*. Furthermore, when we compare the writings in the three rounders with those of the Tareq Rajab Museum's jar, we immediately recognise the close similarity of the style and therefore we should read it as *'amilahu / Bay- / ṭār*, "made by Bayṭār". The close affinity of the two flagbearers, i.e., on the Museum's jar and on the Keir collection dish offers further support to this reading. The empty spaces on the Keir collection dish are filled by short and simple strokes, while the rim is decorated with a series of lunettes, surrounded by a contour line. The reverse of the vessel is glazed only under the flat rim, while the foot-ring and the base are unglazed. Indeed, that is the case on most contemporary Iraqi vessels. The glazed part is decorated with six heavy circles with a dotted roundel inside each, while the areas between are filled by heavy dots and strokes.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Watson, 1988:146-148, C4i. Diameter 25.7 cm; ht. 3 cm.

An almost identically shaped dish, but slightly larger, is in the Tareq Rajab Museum (fig. 5)<sup>7</sup>. Although its major decorative design is different, showing a walking large peacock some of the details reveal the hands of the same artist who was responsible for the jar and for the Keir dish. The major designs, as was customary on contemporary lustre-painted wares, is again surrounded by contour lines. The peacock's large tail has an irregular roundel filled with "peacock-eye" motifs. On the bird's body there is a roundel reserved in white with a simple Kufic word in it. It can equally be read either as *baraka* or *Bayṭār*. It is possible that the potter exploited the possibility these two words offer, to sign his name in a hidden form. In front of the bird there is a five-lobed semi-palmette, which recalls that on the Keir dish. The everted flat rim, carries a number of almond-shaped patterns, not unlike that on the previous example, next to the flag-bearer's left hand. Similarly the rim carries the lunettes with contour lines, while the empty spaces, are filled by similar short strokes.

The Tareq Rajab Museum dish on the back displays the same decoration under the rim what we have seen on the Keir collection piece. The central part is also unglazed. It is beyond any doubt that this two dishes have not only the same provenance and the same dates, i.e. Iraq and, most likely the second half of the 10th century, but they are also the products of the same artist.

There are two more dishes which are related in shape and somewhat in their decoration to the last example. Both of them are decorated with a large peacock (*Treasures* 211-212, nos. 199-200.). The first dish also has an inscription, namely above the back of the bird there is the word *'amila*, while behind and below its feet *baraka li-ṣā/ḥibibi* (*Treasures* 211, no. 199). The second example is different in shape and in its decoration. It has a much wider everted rim which is decorated with a series of almond-shaped patterns, identified in the caption as 'lotus buds' on "stippled ground". The bird is considerably smaller and, unlike the previous and the Tareq Rajab Museum's dish, it faces to the right and holds a 'lotus bud' in its beak (*Treasures* 212, no. 200).

Bayṭār's name and works are not so well-known as those of *Ibrāhīm* or *Sa'd*, whose names are closely associated with the Fāṭimid period of Egypt. Yet, until recently Bayṭār was also considered to be an Egyptian potter, who was active during the late 10th and early 11th century. At the same time the two dishes which are discussed here, were made, beyond any doubt, in Iraq. Therefore the question arises whether was Bayṭār originally and Iraqi artist, who later immigrated to Egypt? This would not be surprising, since it is well-known, that in the late 9th and 10th centuries there was considerable upheaval in Iraq and due to this the pottery centres of Baṣra and Kūfa declined. Furthermore, the rising power of the Fāṭimids promised un-

<sup>7</sup> Inv. no. CER1526TSR. Diameter 27 cm; ht. 4.5 cm.

limited patronage to all kinds of craftsmen and artists, among them to potters. Bayṭār may have started his trade in Baṣra or Kūfa, where he could have spent his apprenticeship. His signatures on some of the examples are rather timid. It is hidden behind or, in the word *baraka*. Soon, however, he gained confidence and by the time he was an accepted and most likely respected artists in Egypt, his signature, as one can judge from the Cairo, the Tareq Rajab Museum's jar and the Benaki Museum's examples, his name is clearly readable. In connection with the different signatures of one of the most famous potters of the period, namely Muslim ibn Dahhān, Philon remarks, that it does not mean that we are dealing with different artists, but rather the very same one, only representing different period of his works (Philon 1980:167).

There is another interesting problem concerning Bayṭār's signature: on the Benaki Museum fragment next to his signature there is another word which was read as *ṣahḥa*. The same word occurs with signatures of other artists as well, namely with that of Ibrāhīm. According to 'Abdarra'ūf Yūsuf, it meant that the piece was "ready for firing" (Yūsuf 1956:100). Bahgat and Massoul (1930:22) interpreted it as "I have succeeded". Both suggestions are plausible. In any case the word means that the artist was satisfied with his own work and such satisfaction could be expected only from an artist who was already well established with a considerable reputation.

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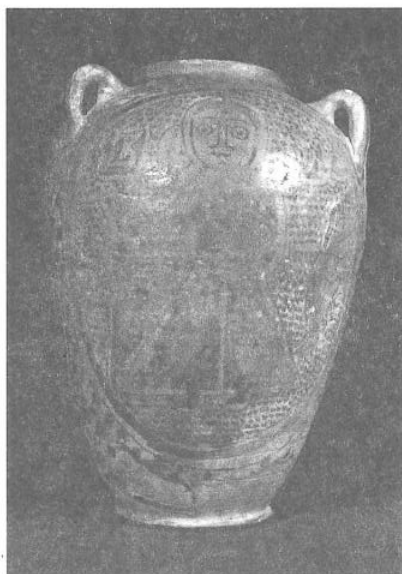


fig. 1 CER1760TSR

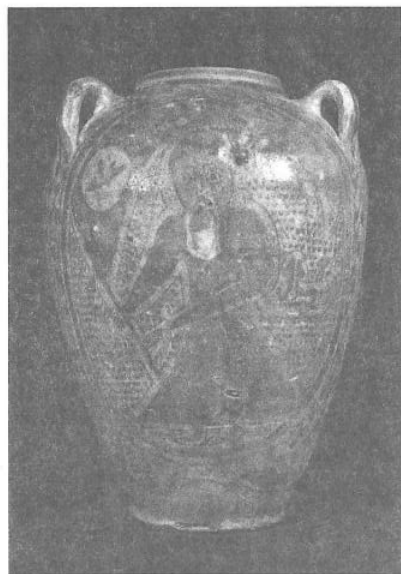


fig. 2 CER1760TSR

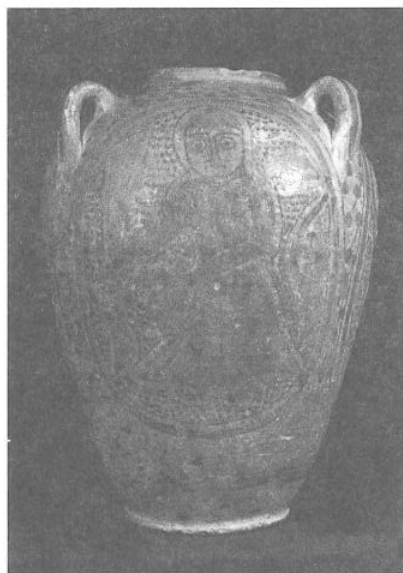


fig. 3 CER1760TSR



fig. 4 Keir collection, Richmond, Surrey, no. C4i



fig. 5 CER1526TSR