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Mamluk Underglaze-Painted Pottery: Foundations for Future Study

When Mamluk pottery is mentioned, the type most often conjured up is the very well known so-called Mamluk sgraffito ware, which is discussed in this volume by George Scanlon. However, there is another large and important category of pottery from this period, an underglaze-painted ware, painted in black, turquoise, and cobalt in various combinations or alone under a transparent clear or turquoise glaze.

In spite of the importance and size of this category, the history of Islamic ceramics can, up to now, boast of no single class of Mamluk underglaze-painted pottery the profile of which has been fully drawn including its source or sources of inspiration, the dates of its production, and the country or countries of its manufacture. Such essential information has always been a matter of speculation or mystery.¹

As nothing conclusive has so far been put forth regarding this large category of pottery, it is my intention to lay a series of foundations on which others, as well as I myself, can build. These foundations will consist solely of “materials” that are totally verifiable by either neutron-activation analysis, actual dates on objects, in-situ evidence, or contemporary texts. There will be no speculation or interpretation in the presentation that might contaminate otherwise pure foundations which can and, I hope, will serve as the basis on which to build a history of this little-known but vast category, containing relatively few complete pieces but an immense number of fragments.²

Eighty-seven whole or fragmentary objects from the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Madina Collection were subjected to neutron-activation analysis,³ and fifty-one from among these, which form three separate and distinct groups, are of interest here (fig. 1).

The first group has been code-named “Syria” as no further precision is possible at this point in our knowledge (plates 1–8b). This group is by far the largest formed by those objects subjected to neutron-activation analysis, and it makes such a tightly knit group—that is, the concentration levels of the trace elements tested are found to be so similar in each object—that on the basis of the testing one can state not only that all the members of the group must come from the same area in Syria but that they must have been made from a common clay source. Therefore, all of the objects in

![Figure 1. Islamic composite ware.](image-url)
PLATE 2. "SYRIA" GROUP. Underglaze-painted tile panel and bowl fragments: a, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1923, 23.12.2a-f; b, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1908, 08.256.212; c, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1908, 08.184.54; d, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1907, 07.238.58.
PLATE 8. "SYRIA" GROUP. Underglaze-painted bowl fragment and glazed and luster-painted bowl fragment: 
a, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1908, 08.256.357; b, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, gift of Rafael Guastavino, 1928, 28.89.3. "DAMASCUS" GROUP. Underglaze-painted bowl and bowl fragment: 
this group were made in the same center. That Damascus is the place of manufacture is suggested by the fact that the group includes two bowl fragments luster-painted on a cobalt-blue glaze (plates 5d and 8b) which are of the same type as the complete vase in the Kuwait National Museum which bears two inscriptions stating that it was made in Damascus for Asad al-Iskadärî." In addition, another, complete object in the group, a tile in the Madina Collection (plate 7c), is of a type that is found gracing the saḫn walls in the Darwishiyce Mosque in Damascus. However, as a Damascus attribution has not been verified by the neutron-activation analysis undertaken in connection with this paper, I will simply call the group "Syria" for now. The fact that the tests did not determine that these objects belong to the group to be discussed next—which is definitely of Damascus manufacture—does not preclude the "Syria" group's having been made in Damascus. It could simply have been made from a different clay source. The second group (plates 8c–10b) has been named "Damascus," since one of its members is a stater in the Metropolitan's collection (plate 9c, d) that was "found in an old cemetery on the outskirts of Damascus." The third group is called "Fustat" (plates 10c–13e), so named because three of its members are wasters from that site (plates 11a; 12c, d, e, f), two generously provided for my research by George Scanlon, the other forming part of the Metropolitan's collection. Using whole or fragmentary objects from among each of the groups discussed and illustrated above, I will attempt to draw the profiles of the three classes of objects. Each of these is quite precisely datable and has a well-defined provenance and a definable prototype; therefore these profiles can, I hope, serve as firm bases on which ultimately to build the history of the whole category of Mamluk underglaze-painted pottery. There is a class of objects within the "Syria" group that bears a radiating interior design, the individual sections of which are decorated with a series of dots (usually arranged in groups of four), vine scrolls on a hatched ground, and actual or pseudoinscriptions on a dotted ground. The same designs may also be present within a freer layout. This class can be dated because a fragment with both a radiating design and the same decoration within the compartments exists in the Islamic Museum in Cairo; it bears in the central interior roundel the phrase sanat khamsa wa-arba'în, that is, the year a.H. 45. As the word representing the hundreds is lacking, speculation as to the century could ensue, were it not for an albara'ello in the Museo di Capodimonte in Naples which fits very well into this class and which is dated, in numerals, 717/1317. In view of the date on the albara'ello, the Cairo fragment must be dated 745/1345 or twenty-eight hijra years after the albara'ello. Thus, we are in the presence of a class of underglaze-painted pottery that was produced somewhere in Syria during the first half of the fourteenth century. The prototype for this class is Iranian. We know from neutron-activation analysis that the bowl in plate 14 as well as another in the Metropolitan were both made from the same clay source and that therefore the one in plate 14 was made in exactly the same center as that illustrated by Dimand, which all Islamic art historians would or could call "Sultanabad." Let us now move approximately one hundred years later in Syria and consider our "Damascus" group. One of the pieces in this group is a hexagonal tile in the Madina Collection (plate 9b), which is very similar to the most common type decorating the tomb and mosque of Ghars al-Dîn Khalîl al-Tawrîzî al-Dasârî in Damascus. Thus, our neutron-activation analysis securely places the execution of the tile decoration of the complex in Damascus, and the similarity of the tested tile to those in situ allows us also to be quite sure of when the manufacture took place. We know according to the chronicle of al-Asâdî that Ghars al-Dîn died in 826/1424 and that his complex was completed the previous year; in June of that year the first prayer was performed in the mosque. Thus, we can safely state that the decoration of this complex was executed in the second or third decade of the fifteenth century. The designs on these tiles bear no resemblance whatever to those on the century-earlier class previously discussed, and therefore we must look elsewhere for the source of their inspiration. The clue to this source has lain hidden in this long-famous tomb and mosque for half a millennium. Among the tiles in the mosque area of the complex is a rectangular panel composed of six tiles decorated with a mosque lamp suspended in a lobed niche above a rahle holding a book. To the right of this stand is the artist's signature, 'Amal Ghaybî Tawrîzî. This inscription (the reading of which is mine) allows us to place Ghaybî in Damascus in the second or third decade of the fifteenth century. It is quite probable that he was at the head of the
PLATE 12. "FUSTAT" GROUP. Underglaze-painted bowl fragments and waster fragments: a, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1907, 07.238.13; b, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1908, 08.256.77; c, d, provided by George T. Scanlon; e, f, provided by George T. Scanlon.
atelier that executed the decoration of this complex for the Mamluk vizier of Damascus, since his is the only signature on the vast amount of ceramic architectural decoration in the complex. In addition, his signature specifically informs us that he belonged to or was connected with Tabriz.20

An analogous situation is to be found in contemporary Turkey. Not long after the completion of the Ghars al-Din complex in Damascus, artisans from Tabriz completed and signed the Yeshil Jami' in Bursa: "made [by] the masters from Tabriz."21 Although the technique is different, one is struck by the similarities of the niche contour and the lamp shape in a panel from the Yeshil Turbeh in Bursa22 and the same features on the panel from the Ghars al-Din mosque.

The other rectangular, but now quite garbled, tile panel in the mosque area of the Ghars al-Din complex23 bears close affinities to the waster in our "Damascus" group (plate 9c, d). The two teardrop-shaped configurations with a basket-weave pattern on the panel relate closely to the pattern on the two larger bowls of the waster set, thus placing the waster also in the second or third decade of the fifteenth century. John Carswell, who first published both of the rectangular panels in this mosque, has already presented the iconography of the 1,362 hexagonal tiles in the complex that fit securely in this class, therefore obviating the need to do so again.

Thus, we are here in the presence of a class of underglaze-painted pottery that was produced in Damascus during the second or third decade of the fifteenth century and whose most immediate prototype appears to have been a not yet identified Persian one (perhaps from the Tabriz area).

Let us finally consider the Fustat group. First of all this group contains a fragment signed Ghaybi (plate 10c, d) and one signed Ghaybi al-Shami (plate 13b, c). Thus neutron-activation analysis has provided concrete proof of a second foreign sojourn of this illustrious potter, this time in Fustat. A corollary to this fact is that these objects must have been made after 1423, but presumably not much later. Ghaybi's fame in Damascus is proven by his use of the nisba al-Shami when working in Fustat. However, a square tile in the Islamic Museum in Cairo, which was brought there from the mosque of al-Sayyida Nafisa, bearing the signature Ibn Ghaybi al-Tawrizi,24 shows that
Ghaybi's Tabriz origins were still important in fifteenth-century Cairo. That at least some of the work by Ghaybi and his son was contemporary is proved by a fragment in the Metropolitan's collection (plate 15a, b) that bears in an interior cartouche the inscription 'Amal ibn Ghaybi and on the bottom a countersignature Ghaybi, which is incidentally also indicative of an atelier headed by Ghaybi.

There is a fragment in the Islamic Museum in Cairo which makes it possible to broaden this class of objects considerably. It is the bottom of a bowl signed Ghaybi and decorated with a radial design emanating from a roundel. There were originally six sections, separated by hatched rays bordered by plain areas, containing three different designs: a fretwork composed of a series of Y shapes, a floral scroll on a dotted ground, and a stylized palmette design also on a dotted ground. This design must be a refinement of, as well as the successor to, that on the popular Syrian class of the first half of the fourteenth century already discussed.

This identical design is also found on objects signed by al-Ustādī al-Miṣrī, Ghazzāl (plate 15c, d) or al-Ghazzālī, and al-Barrānī (plate 15e, f). Thus all the bowls signed by these artists as well as by Ghaybi or Ghaybi's son must form part of this Fustat class dating to the second quarter of the fifteenth century or slightly later.

The square tile signed Ibn Ghaybi al-Tawrīzī illustrates Syrian stylistic influence on Fustat production at this time in the manner in which a white design outlined in black is silhouetted on a blue ground, as seen on the rectangular tile with teardrop-shaped configurations in the Ghars al-Din complex. An example of iconographic influence moving in the same direction can be seen in the adaptation of the basket-weave design first seen on the latter tile to a shard in the Fustat group (plate 12b).

Thus we are here in the presence of a class of underglaze-painted pottery that was produced in Fustat during the second quarter of the fifteenth century or slightly later by ceramists, at least one of whom emigrated from Damascus, who used earlier as well as contemporary Syrian designs as prototypes.

Finally, as a postscript, let us turn now to five tiles or groups of tiles that we were unable to test but that are datable, by means of the inscriptions they bear or the buildings they decorated, to the very end of the Mamluk period and that, in addition, continue traditions first seen in the square tile signed Ibn Ghaybi al-Tawrīzī. Two of these are round tiles, each bearing the name Qāytbāy (r. 1468–96), one being in the Islamic Museum in Cairo and the other in the Kuwait National Museum. Each of these has a white inscription, outlined in black, silhouetted on a blue ground, and is thus related stylistically to the field of the Ibn Ghaybi tile. A third object, in the form of a lunette consisting of five tiles, bears the name of the same sultan and was taken from a sabīl built by him in 1495–96. Another very similar lunette bearing the name of Sultan Jānbalāt (1500–01) was taken from his madrasa. Both of the latter are now in the Islamic Museum in Cairo and are blue underglaze-painted on a white ground and are thus stylistically related to the border of the Ibn Ghaybi tile. These and the large inscriptive tiles that originally encircled the dome of the tomb of Sultan Qānṣūh al-Ghawri, which was completed in 1503–04, consist of white letters with a thin black border on a blue ground.

May these foundations, as well as the incomplete picture given of the end of the period, serve as the bases on which ultimately to build a history of this little known but important category of Mamluk pottery.

NOTES

1. A typical statement is that of the late Arthur Lane: "In Syria fragments of the blue-and-black class have been found in the site of the potter's quarter at Damascus, at Baalbek and at Hama; but they are also very well represented at Fustat, where [it is] almost impossible to distinguish between local Egyptian wares and those imported from Syria . . . and their general finish is more careless than that of the contemporary Persian Sultanabad types' from which they evidently derived" (Later Islamic Pottery [London, 1957], pp. 17–18).

2. I would like to thank my collaborators, Dr. Pieter Meyers and Mrs. Lore Holmes of the Metropolitan Museum's research laboratory, as well as those private collectors, directors and curators of public collections, and scholars here and abroad who made their objects or their photographic archives available. I am especially grateful to Muhammad Kholy, Dr. Michael Rogers, Dr. Oliver Watson, and Dr. 'Abd al-Ra'ūf 'Ali Yuṣuf for allowing me to photograph objects and to Professor Maan Madina for allowing samples to be taken from objects in the Madina Collection.

3. Neutron-activation analysis provides the elemental composition of the tested material. Statistical treatment of the analytical data gives indication only of provenance and not of age. Therefore, those within the
groups discussed are not necessarily contemporary, nor were they originally thought to be.


5. Karl Wulzinger and Carl Watzinger, Damaskus, die islamische Stadt (Berlin, 1924), pl. 38a.

6. Listed in the order in which they occur on the dendrogram of the neutron-activation analysis in fig. 1, the complete or fragmentary objects falling into the "Syria" group are as follows: nos. 25, 46, plate 1a; no. 12, plate 1b; no. 44, Metropolitan Museum of Art 91.1.130, Ernst Kühnel, Islamic Arts (London, 1970), fig. 89; no. 30, plate 1c; no. 89, plate 2a; no. 16, plate 2b; no. 18, plate 2c; no. 5, plate 2d; no. 13, plate 3a; no. 20, plate 3b; no. 23, plate 3c; no. 7, plate 3d; no. 29, plate 4a; no. 34, plate 4b; no. 60, mistakenly numbered 50 on dendrogram, plate 4c; no. 8, plate 4d; no. 28, plate 2c; no. 21, plate 5a; no. 82, plate 5b; no. 83, plate 5c; no. 93, plate 5d; no. 26, plate 6a; no. 27, plate 6b; no. 42, Metropolitan Museum of Art 41.165.45, Marilyn Jenkins, J. Meech-Pekarik, and S. Valenstein, Oriental Ceramics: The World's Great Collections, vol. 12, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Tokyo, 1977), pl. 263; no. 22, plate 3c; no. 95, plate 6c; no. 14, plate 6d; no. 15, plate 7a; no. 66, plate 7b; no. 90, plate 7c; no. 61, plate 7d; no. 85, plate 8a; no. 88, plate 8b.

Three additional facts further corroborate a Syrian, as opposed to an Egyptian, provenance for this group and suggest that objects of this type found in Egypt were imported: (1) George T. Scanlon's statistics for Fustat, as enumerated in his "Fustat Mounds: A Shard Count, 1968," Archaeology 24, no. 3 (June 1971): 225, show that between 1,200 and 1,400 black-and-blue underglaze-painted wares ranked fifth in popularity (his daily count yielding only 400 shards of this type versus 6,900 imitation celadon shards, 6,200 yellow-brown sgrafitto shards, 1,700 green sgrafitto shards, and 500 yellow-brown slip-painted shards); (2) the largest number of objects fitting into this group was found in Fustat, but none of the many such objects tested fit in our Fustat group; and (3) decoration found in this group was copied in the sgrafitto technique in Egypt; see, for example, Ernst Grube, Islamic Pottery of the Eighth to the Fifteenth Century in the Keir Collection (London, 1976), no. 227.

7. Listed in the order in which they occur on the dendrogram of the neutron-activation analysis in fig. 1, the complete or fragmentary objects falling into the Damascus group are as follows: no. 43, plate 8e; no. 76, plate 8d, e; no. 35, plate 9a; nos. 63, 62, plate 9b; no. 37, plate 9c, d; no. 91, plate 10a; no. 39, plate 10b.


9. Listed in the order in which they occur on the dendrogram of the neutron-activation analysis in fig. 1, the complete or fragmentary objects falling in the Fustat group are as follows: no. 70, plate 10c, d; no. 75, plate 11a; no. 11, plate 11b; no. 74, plate 11a; no. 94, plate 11c; no. 79, plate 11d; no. 6, plate 12a; no. 17, plate 12b; no. 3, plate 12e; f; no. 2, plate 12e, d; no. 4, plate 12e, f; no. 10, plate 13a; no. 1, plate 12e, d; no. 73, plate 13b, c; no. 78, plate 13d, e.

10. Priscilla P. Soucek, Islamic Art from the University of Michigan Collections (Ann Arbor, 1978), no. 20; and Esin Atıll, Renaissance of Islam: Art of the Manlüks (Washington, D.C., 1981), no. 81. Actual or pseudo-inscriptions on a dotted ground are frequently found on Syrian pottery of the Ayyubid period.

11. Aly Bey Bahgat and Felix Massoul, La céramique musulmane de l'Égypte ( Cairo, 1930), pl. L, 86. Although other fragments bearing this phrase are known, this is the only one I know of combining the phrase with this particular radiating design.

12. Marco Spallanzani, Ceramiche orientali a Firenze nel Rinascimento (Florence, 1978), pl. 11. The part of its calligraphic decoration that can be seen in the illustration, as read by Professor Maan Z. Madina, Columbia University, may be either indicative of its use, or allegorical, or both: "If you squander musk in the land of camphor you will surely be ostracized."

13. Plate 14 is Metropolitan Museum of Art 10.44.5, Rogers Fund, 1910. The other bowl referred to is illustrated in M. S. Dimand, Metropolitan Museum of Art: A Picture Book. Islamic Pottery of the Near East (New York, 1936), fig. 14.

14. Bertold Spuler, Die Goldene Horde (Leipzig, 1943), p. 95. Nāṣir al-Dīn Muḥammad concluded peace with the Ikhkānīd in 1323. It is not impossible that, after the conclusion of this peace treaty or during the breakdown of Ikhkānīd rule, Persian potters moved to Syrian cities and continued their work there in a very similar style and/or trained local potters.

15. See also Atıl, Renaissance, no. 85.


17. Wulzinger and Watzinger, Damaskus, die islamische Stadt, p. 91. Michael Meinecke, in the lecture discussed in note 20, agrees with the inauguration date of the complex but further states on the authority of al-Nuʿāmī's Al-Dāris fi Tārīkh al-Madāris that the mosque was endowed in 823/1420 when the mausoleum was already completed. Thus, one can place the production of the building's tile decoration in the second or third decade of the fifteenth century.


19. Ibid., p. 100; and Atıl, Renaissance, p. 151.

20. A movement of artists from Iran to Syria, similar to that suggested in n. 14, seems also to have been taking place a hundred years later. Michael Meinecke, in a lecture at the World Conference on Arab-Islamic Civilization in Damascus in April 1981, suggested that Ghaybi and his workshop moved from Iran to Egypt and from there to Syria and then to Turkey. My contention that the movement was from Iran to Syria and from there to Egypt is confirmed by Ghaybi's use of the word al-shāmī after his name on a fragment we know that he made in Egypt (plate 13b, c). We know from the Ghars
al-Din complex that Ghaybi was from Tabriz; thus, unless he had worked in Syria and achieved fame there before emigrating to Egypt he would have had no reason to use the epithet al-shamī. Dr. Meinecke kindly provided me with a copy of his lecture, in which he independently arrived at some of the conclusions presented here.

The situation in fifteenth-century Damascus, when a Tabrizi artisan was called to decorate a building for an important Mamluk official, was in fact parallel to that in Cairo a hundred years earlier. Maqrizi discusses the Cairene commission regarding the building of the Friday Mosque of Amir Qawṣūn in 730/1330: "the building of both minarets was entrusted to a man from the area of Tabriz who was brought by Amir Aitmish al-Muhammadi from there. He built them according to the prototype of the minarets of Tabriz." Michael Meinecke, "Die mamlukischen Fayencemosaikdekorationen: Eine Werkstätte aus Tabriz in Kairo (1330–1350)," Kunst des Orients 11, nos. 1–2 (1976–77): 91. Dr. Meinecke has shown that this commission was the beginning of a series of works by this anonymous Tabrizi architect and his atelier, which continued until 1348, when they returned to Iran and continued to work in Kirman and Isfahan.

21. R. M. Riefstahl, "Early Turkish Tile Revetments in Edirne," Ars Islamica 4 (1937): 252. Although the building was completed in 822/1419 or 1420, the tile cycle was not completed until some time later. J. D. Hoag, Islamic Architecture (New York, 1977), p. 312, gives the year 1424 for its completion, and Meinecke, in the above-mentioned lecture, suggests 1428.


24. Riefstahl, "Early Turkish Tile Revetments," fig. 28. I think the previous reading of this signature as Gheybi ibn al-Tawrizi is incorrect, because the two upper squares should be read from bottom to top as are the two lower squares. No whole or fragmentary objects are known to me that mention Gheybi in conjunction with his father.

27. Armand Abel, Ghaiibī et les grands faïenciers égyptiens de l'époque mamoulke (Cairo, 1930), pl. 1.
28. Riefstahl, "Early Turkish Tile Revetments," p. 276, says that faience was unknown on Egyptian architecture between 1348 and 1495. Perhaps the tile signed by Gheybi's son should be placed in the second half of the century at the earliest.
29. Gaston Wiet, Album du musée arabe du Caire (Cairo, 1930), pl. 69; and Islamic Art in the Kuwait National Museum, ed. Jenkins, p. 85.