



BRAZIER

METALWORKS FROM THE NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM, PRAGUE

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Brazier. Iran. (Pl. 1)

Cast brass, modern manufacture ?

High: 24 cm.

Diameter: 48 cm

Trellis: 11,5 x 16 cm.

Acquisition number: NpM A 21 270.

Acquisition: unknown²

Condition: Fair; Only small sections of

merlons on three trellises are chipped off, in case of the trellis equipped with one of the handles the upper fillet has been broken off, probably due to the careless manipulation. Patina is mat blackish, only the finials and the inner sides of the trellises keep the goldish appearance of brass.

Unpublished.

Metalworks in the households

Most of the items of everyday use were melted in the course of centuries to be recycled in shape of other pieces of art and craft. Made of common metals, usually of brass, they were not preserved with such a care like the objects made of precious metals the value of which gave them a rare position in between other items in the royal or princely household. When we look at the abundance of metal items depicted on the Persian and Indian miniature paintings, we must accept the fact that the survived pieces cannot be more than a small fraction of the vast output of metalworks. In spite of the fact that the metal items were regularly melted, most of them survived until present days. Objects made of more fragile material did not succeed to such an extent.

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² In the course of time, especially in the 1950s, many objects came to the Museum from local museums and were accompanied with no adequate documentation on the bases of which we could trace down the original owners. They were both either private persons, including aristocrats, or institutions, e.g. convents and monasteries, the property of which was transferred under the state control after World War II as a result of post-war conventions or later on in 1948 as a result of the communist coup.

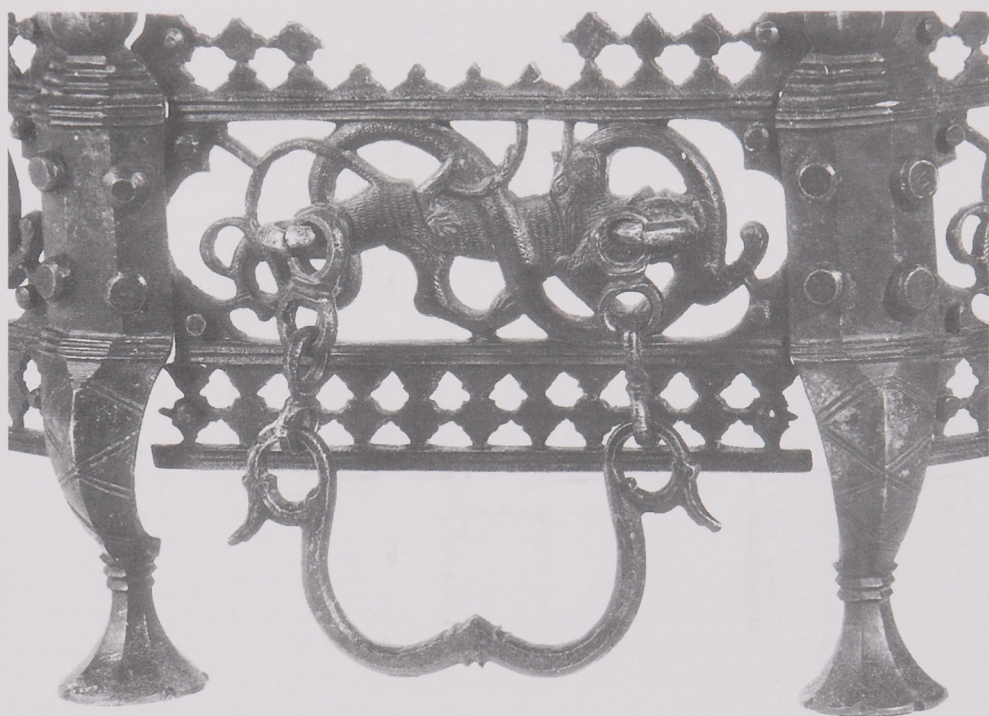


Pl. 1. Brazier

Braziers intended for roasting birds, as well as the closely related objects like incense burners, belonged to the equipment of royal households as presented on e.g. an unfinished painting from Herat of the 15th century depicting the king's servants in the garden³. But it was utilized also for other purposes. The perched bud-shaped finials „actually perform the function of conducting the heat to the tray resting upon them“⁴. During cool days it kept water in bottles on the tray warm. The open-work cast of these objects permitted the escape of smoke. Sometimes it is difficult to differ incense burner from brazier because their function was very similar. Incense burners were cast in one or in pieces and even though comparable in shape with braziers but they were usually smaller in size. The shape of braziers or related object like incense burners resemble some elements of Islamic architecture, especially tombs. Various individual details of the brazier under the description also have their parallels in the architecture. The rows of merlons above and below the main ornament resemble one of the typical motive we can see in architecture, ceramics and metalworks in Iran and India as well. Festoons of trilobed cusped lotus-shaped flowers belonged to the regular design vocabulary of architecture and decorative art objects in Deccan, in the South Indian sultanates where the Iranian influence was strong.

³ Pope, A. U., 1939, Vol. V., pl. 889.

⁴ Zebrowski, M., 1997, p. 125.



Pl. 2. Handle, a detail of the brazier.

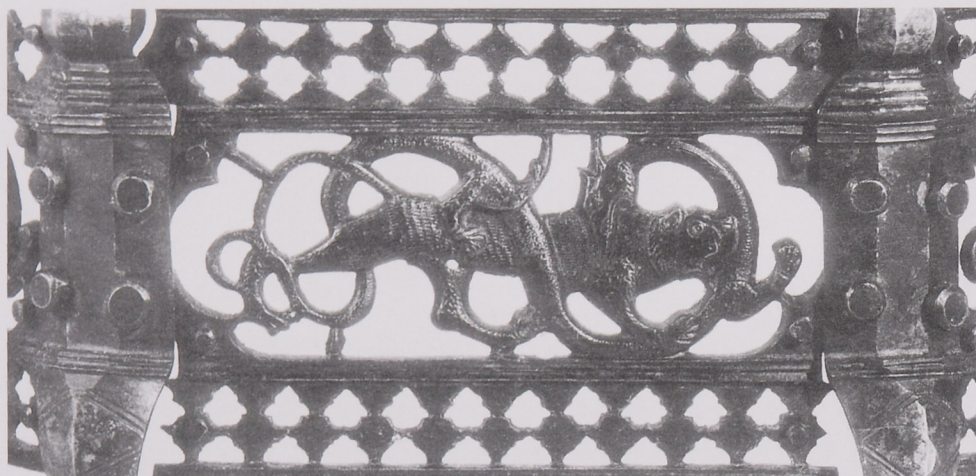
Description

The brazier under the description is polygonal in plan and it is cast in pieces. It is carefully designed and consists of six plaques – trellises decorated with the design of two animals in combat. Two of the opposite plaques carry handles attached by chains to metal rings joined to the plaques. (see pl. 2) The plaques are linked to eight columns at the corners. Projections on the inner side of plaques, fixed on the upper fillet between the band of merlons and the ornament, evoke the lost roof supporting the detachable dome.⁵ In the middle of each trellis on the upper fillet there are two peacock's heads and bodies with no tails made in mirror composition depicted as if sitting on the merlon. In case of two trellises the peacocks are broken off. The brazier stands on little curved feet decorated with three rings above the circular base. Each of the middle section, in between the foot and the finial, is equipped with four massive rivets keeping the individual elements of the brazier together. Bud-shaped finials with conical body decorated with collar made of three rings are cast in one with the feet.

Decoration theme

Animal designs belong to the countless motives of the Islamic art and most of them speak to us by the vital and lively language of the ancient times when the pre-historical

⁵ See e.g. Zebrowski, M., 1997, p. 121, pl. 139.



Pl. 3. Trellis, a detail of the animals in combat.

people created their first artistic objects. The repeating theme of the animals in combat depicted on the plaques of the brazier under the description, introduces the lion, goring a biting and clawing dragon with the snake body swirling around the lion's body. (see pl. 3) The lion runs in the counterclockwise direction which is a question of convention in reading decoration depicted on the Islamic art objects when they are made in the round. The lion along with the eagle and the hawk belongs to the animals representing royalty, victory, strength and good wishes, symbols going back to the pre-Islamic periods.⁶ But its popularity in Iranian art goes back to the first millennium B.C. Its depiction in combat strengthens its leading role providing a parallel between the animal and the emperor's power. Animals denoting the imperial themes became a part of the decorative vocabulary formulated during the classical age of the Islamic art between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries. Many items of this period including household pieces depict the lion.⁷ Lion carries also its astrological implications as the personification of Leo, a sign of the zodiac, the theme that was second in popularity to imperial subjects.⁸

The dragon, another of the depicted animals in combat, belongs to the wave of Chinese fashion in the Iranian art, which started late in the 13th century.⁹ The dragon in China protects life since its birth. The tiger (not lion, because it came to China from Iran only in the 3rd century A.D.) on the other side represents death and it protects people against the evil and demons. The animals, if depicted are in opposition but never in combat. These motifs go back to the 5th millennium B.C. They were closely related to the shamanism and its practices.¹⁰ In case of our plaque, we can see a death struggle of two animals described by

⁶ More on the theme of animals depicted on the ancient bronzes of the Asian grasslands see Bunker, E. C., 1997.

⁷ Atil, E., 1985, p. 72.

⁸ Atil, E., 1985, p. 23.

⁹ Melichian-Chirvani, A. S., 1982, p. 204.

¹⁰ My gratitude for this information belongs to Zlata Černá, the curator of the Chinese collections of the Náprstek Museum, Prague.

Ralph Harari like “a fight between a lion and a dragon, the two beasts locked in a death struggle and tearing at each other gripping jaws.”¹¹ Having in mind the lion, a representative of victory and good wishes and of the Sun planet that Leo personifies, it is not surprising that we find this kind of theme on the items connected with light and fire. The lion’s struggle with the dragon evokes the fight of light and darkness. Dragon as a monster representing evil belongs to the illustration repertoire of the Islamic manuscripts where heroes fight dragons.¹²

The third animal depicted on the brazier is a bird. The double peacock bust in mirror composition situated in the middle of the plaque above the main theme of the combat represents both, ill-omened events and the paradisiac phenomena as well.¹³ If we accept the arguments for double role of the peacock representing on one side the darker features of the human soul and on the other side excellence and royalty, then we can recognize the same theme in the combat of the two animals depicted on the plaque.

Technical Notes

The brazier was cast in pieces as described above and then finished. All chamfers appears to have been executed or at least accentuated by tooling after casting. Holes for ribbons were executed with drills. The geometrical design on the curved feet was incised. The chain joined to the handle is attached to the rings soldered to the plaques at two places, at the lion’s head and at one of its back legs. The alloy is brass containing 80 % of copper, about 15 % of zinc and a small amount, about 4 % of tin. (For more details see the table below) There is no lead in the alloy. Lead is considered to be one of the metals of the alloy used for casting. In case of the alloy used for hammering it is not present because it makes the object more fragile.

Table : Technical Analyses¹⁴

	Copper	Zinc	Tin	Silver	Arsenic	Gold	Cobalt	Nickel	Antimon
Trellis	80.3	15.87	3.15	0.078	0.405	0.002	0.012	0.084	0.136
Foot	80.7	14.56	3.97	0.023	0.445	0.002	0.062	0.090	0.130

Dating

If we compare the brazier with the similar one published by Pope,¹⁵ we could easily date it into the 14th century. But when we observe the object in details we must state that it does not look like a 14th century item. It was never used, the only wearing out was prob-

¹¹ Harari, Ralph, 1939, Vol. III, p. 2487.

¹² Melichian-Chirvani, A. S., 1982, p. 204.

¹³ More on the iconography of the peacock see Daneshvari, A., 1982.

¹⁴ The composition of the alloy was tested by Jaroslav Frana at the Nuclers Physics Institute, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic. He tested two samples (see the table) by the method of Instrumental Neutron Activation Analysis (INAA). On the method see more in: Frana, J. and Reguigui, N., Element Composition of Bidri Articles, Annals of the Náprstek Museum, No. 22, 2001, pp. 26–28.

¹⁵ A comparable item, almost identical, was published by Pope, A. U., 1939, Vol. VI, Pl. 1379 B; He dated the brazier to the 14th century. Another comparable item, a fragment of the brazier, one of the trellises, dated to the 13th–14th century, is in the Copenhagen National Museum and was published by Kjeld von Folsach, 1990, p. 197.

ably caused by careless manipulation, the feet are almost intact, as well as the chamfers carry no traces of damages. The alloy including no lead seems to indicate more present work. We have not many laboratory tests of Islamic metals to compare, but most of the cast metalworks, particularly the earlier pieces published in the course of the last twenty years, contain lead.¹⁶ All these facts indicate the object made on the basis of the older model probably in the 18th or 19th century.

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¹⁶ See e.g. Atil, E., 1985.