

## MEDIEVAL ISLAMIC GLASS WEIGHTS AND TOKENS IN THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF DECORATIVE ARTS IN PRAGUE

Vlastimil Novák<sup>†</sup>

Small glass artifacts (*vitra*, sg. *vitrum* in professional literature) stored in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague belong to the category of Islamic numismatic material.<sup>1</sup> The characteristics of these objects as Islamic are based on their features that are typical for this origin. The small glass discs are covered only with inscriptions in Arabic; the legends contain religious (*Qurānic*) expressions and their content refers to individuals, time, and Middle Eastern locations influenced by the predominantly Islamic culture of the medieval time (8<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> century in this specific case). In Islam, glass served not only for practical everyday use (such as containers, fillings, ornaments, and coverings) but also had metrological, economic, and verification significance. The nature of the material prevents modifications to finished products that would not be visible. Any reduction, enlargement, or mechanical damage was clearly noticeable. It comes as no surprise, therefore, that based on Roman, Byzantine, or Persian models, weights, tokens, coin weight patterns, credit tokens, or container seals indicating the content, quantity, and signifying the person or date were made of glass. During the early (Umayyad and ʿAbbāsīd) periods of Islam, the preserved material predominantly consisted of weights, coin standards, and container seals. In the later (Fāṭimid and Mamlūk) periods, glass tokens were added to the mentioned assortment. These tokens accurately replicated the weight of the coinage system (*dīnār/dirham*). From the quantity of documented pieces (thousands of preserved glass tokens compared to a similar quantity of mostly gold coins), it is believed that these tokens served as a type of credit medium. For economic reasons, unofficial imitations of Fāṭimid tokens existed with notably degraded inscriptions. During the Mamlūk period, in addition to inscriptions, various ornaments and designs (hexagons, flowers, line grids) also appeared on the tokens.

The collection of Islamic glassware at the Prague Museum of Decorative Arts originated from the deposit of the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment

1 The author prepared this text for publication in a comprehensive catalogue of ancient glass from the Museum of Decorative Arts collections (Sedláčková 2020), where it was intended to be included as a brief accompanying evaluation of other objects from the same set that were being processed for publication in this catalogue (Sedláčková 2020, p. 231, Cat. No. AL-26/1). The manuscript was provided to the editorial staff by the catalogue editor Hedvika Sedláčková. The author continued to work on a more detailed processing of the described collection, which unfortunately remained unfinished due to his passing. The manuscript was revised under the supervision of Hedvika Sedláčková, Jiří Militký, and Matěj Stahl. For Islamic *vitra* in Czech collections see also Novák 1997; Novák 2006. Novák 2006.

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in Prague (deposited in 1938). This deposit included a collection from the renowned orientalist Adolf Grohmann (1 March 1887, Graz – 21 September 1977, Innsbruck).<sup>2</sup> Grohmann was a recognised authority in the field of South Arabian and Arabic papyrology. From 1923 to 1945, he was a professor of Semitic philology at the Faculty of Arts of the German University in Prague. Between 1930 and 1939, he travelled to Egypt annually to work on Arabic papyri. The aforementioned collection from the deposit is deemed to be a collection from Faiyūm and Fustāt. In addition to *vitra*, it included ancient, medieval, and contemporary Islamic artifacts (accession no. UPM 1156, dated 4 November 1938).

The glass ‘pastes’, as described in the accession book (1156/43-44) [Pls. 1–2], clearly originated from Grohmann’s papyrological practice in Egypt (1930–1939) and represented the weights of the early periods of Islam, as well as Fāṭimid and Mamlūk tokens. Amongst them, there is a *dīnār* standard of the Umayyad governor in Egypt, Qurra ibn Sharīk (AH 90–96/ 709–714 CE), and a *fals* (pl. *fulūs* – small copper coin) standard weighing 30 *kharrūba* of another Umayyad Egyptian financial administrator and governor, ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Marwān (AH 131–133/ 749–750 CE). Also noteworthy are the *fals* standard weighing 24 *kharrūba*, issued by the ‘Abbāsīd financial administrator and governor in Egypt, ‘Abd al-Malik ibn Yazīd (AH 133–141/ 751–758 CE), and the half-*dīnār* coin weight issued by another ‘Abbāsīd Egyptian governor, Muḥammad ibn Sa‘īd (AH 152–157/ 769–773 CE). The collection also contains glass tokens of the following Fāṭimid rulers: al-Ḥākīm (AH 386–411/ 996–1021 CE) – 5 pieces, al-Zāhir (AH 411–427/ 1021–1036 CE) – 4 pieces, al-Mustansīr (AH 427–487/ 1036–1094 CE) – 10 pieces, al-Musta‘lī (AH 487–495/ 1094–1101 CE) – 1 piece, and al-Fā‘iz (AH 549–555/ 1154–1160 CE) – 2 pieces. There is also one imitation of a Fāṭimid token and one anonymous Mamlūk token in the collection.

## Acknowledgements

Photographs by Gabriel Urbánek.<sup>3</sup>

## Literature:

Adolf Grohmann (Arabist) (*n.d.*) [online] *Wikipedia Die freie Enzyklopädie*. Available at: [https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf\\_Grohmann\\_\(Arabist\)](https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adolf_Grohmann_(Arabist)) [accessed 20.4.2023].

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<sup>2</sup> See also Adolf Grohmann (Arabist), *n.d.*

<sup>3</sup> Pl. 1 was taken over from Sedláčková 2020, Cat. No. AL-26/1.



