

INSCRIPTIONS ON AZERBAIJANI METAL VESSELS

Fragment of a bronze vessel with inscriptions. 12th century. Azerbaijan National History Museum (ANHM)



Ancient inscriptions on rocks, rare architectural pearls dating back to different periods of history, samples of ceramic and carving art, refined metal items, glassware, world-famous miniature works, a variety of abundant and multi-colored carpets, silk fabrics that have fascinated medieval merchants and travelers, embroidery, “shebeke” applied on wood and delicate jewelry – all these are samples of cultural heritage that have promoted the recognition and fame of Azerbaijan and its people worldwide (1, p. 84; 2, p. 22-23, 24-29, etc).

Azerbaijani craftsmen manufactured delicate metal items of various colors in the Middle Ages using the techniques of casting, hot and cold hammering, bonding, welding, cutting, carving, engraving, enamelling, as well as other methods (3, p. 82-87; 4, p. 112-123; 5, p. 61-87).

Samples of metalware discovered during archaeological excavations, including metal vessels used in domestic life, large three-legged boilers used in households in the 11th-13th centuries, three-legged lamps, candlesticks and henna-dyed vessels, mortar and pestle, bowls, rhinoceros-shaped figures slated for storing keys, reflect the history of the development of metalworking art in Azerbaijan and the high skills of the craftsmen engaged in this field (2, p. 32-33; 6, p. 136-137; 7, p. 80-87).

The ornaments on metal items dating back to the 11th-13th centuries mainly featured geometrical and vegetational patterns, while images of wildlife were rather sparse (8, p. 357). Calligraphy, which was the most widespread type of writing in this period, was engraved with lines of the Arabic alphabet. Kufic inscriptions were initially made by craftsmen in elegant straight lines, while in the later time periods they were more schematized. Inscriptions on architectural monuments and ancient Arabic manuscripts were made in Kufic script (9, p. 32-34).

The mortar and pestle in Kufic script stored at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan is interesting from the epigraphical point of view. The thick-layer item, which was made with the use of bronze casting (EF No. 9346) was delivered from Nakhchivan. The rim of the item has vegetational, twisted leaf-shaped edging from the outside; there are vegetational patterns as well as Kufic inscriptions below the border in separate cartouches and an image of a bird inside made using the hammering technique. As is known, mortar and pestle is widely used in households to prepare various spices. One of its special features is the fact that it has wise inscriptions in Arabic over it written in Kufic script: **لكم إلى الله**



Bronze vessel with inscriptions. 12th century. ANHM

- Allah is the protector for all, **الله ولا حول له** - Allah is very powerful, **الحلى يا و الى** - اسئلو بالوالو الدها - the Father is just, **الف الف الف** - احسانا و الف الف - “Praise be a thousand times!” The mortar and pestle is attributed to the 11th-13th centuries given its writing and artistic composition.

Another exhibit (EF No. 9338), which has engraved verses from the Holy Quran, is interesting from the scientific viewpoint. A basin made of bronze stands out among other such items for its size. This rare basin is decorated very delicately with vegetational patterns. Inside the basin, there are nastaliq inscriptions engraved with the use of hammering in Arabic, which were repeated at the edges, along with vegetational patterns. In the middle section, the word **«الله»** was engraved with a nastaliq line on the medallion over a dome-shaped protrusion.

The inscriptions engraved inside the edges of the mentioned basin were repeated eleven times: **«هذا من فضل ربي»** - “This is from the virtue of my Lord (the



highest virtues of Allah, which are courtesy and science). Another geometrical edge reflects the following words: *إن الله على كل شيء قدير* – “Allah is capable of everything indeed». It is also noteworthy that this is one of the most common expressions in Verses 20 and 259 of the Surah al-Baqarah (the Cow) of the Quran, as well as in the last sentence of the verses in other Surahs.

The above-mentioned basin could be traced back to the 16th-17th centuries, considering its inscriptions and artistic composition. It was used by people who sought to save themselves from malign forces.

According to observations, the craftsmen who applied Arabic writing containing Kufic lines on domestic vessels in the 11th-13th centuries began focusing on

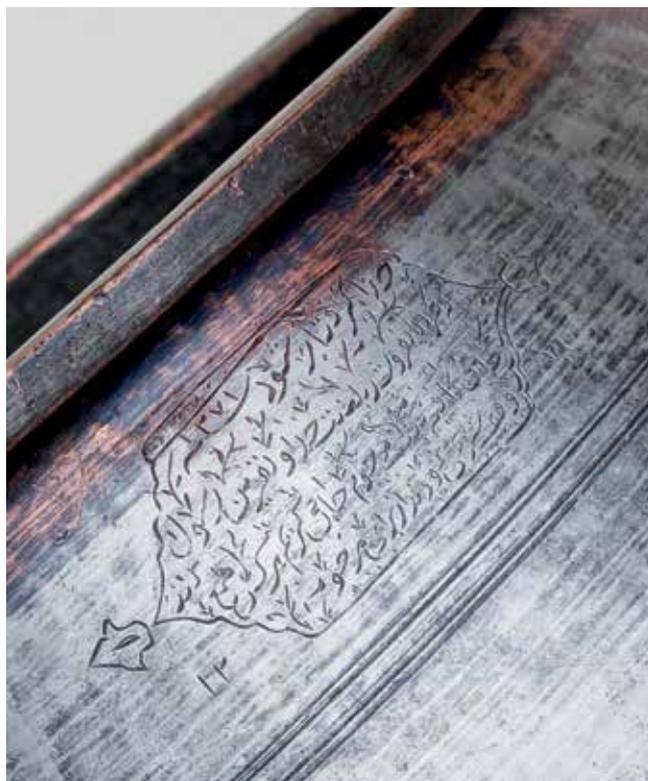
Large copper cauldron with inscriptions. 19th century. ANHM



making those in Persian, using nastaliq, Suls and Naskh lines, from the 14th century. Calligraphers who used medieval, classical Oriental poets' pieces written in Persian definitely had to refer to the popular works of that period (11, p.12, 66).

Research shows that the text of the inscriptions found on certain items mostly stood out in terms of their intended purpose. Verses and prayers from the Quran inspiring the fighter to defeat the enemy in battles, urging him to be resilient and heroic, and persevere, as well as verses noting that Allah the Almighty defends the entire universe, epithets of Allah and words of wisdom, were engraved upon combat, defensive weapons and Oriental firearms. In contrast, mostly ghazals and rubais of such classical poets of that period as Nizami Ganjavi (1141-1209), Omar Khayyam (1048-1131), Saadi Shirazi (1184-1291/2), Khosrow Dehlavi (1253-1325), Hafiz Shirazi (1320-1390), and Muhtasham Kashani (died in 1587) were engraved on domestic vessels (12, p. 45-111).

Fragment of a large copper cauldron with inscriptions. 19th century. ANHM





As is known, many domestic vessels made from metal were used at religious ceremonies (13, p. 137-139). Verses 255, 256 and 257 of Surah al-Baqarah of the Quran, epithets of Allah, Allah's greetings to Prophet Muhammad, five names (Muhammad, his daughter Fatimah, Imam Ali, the Prophet's grandchildren, Hasan and Huseyn), as well as Arabic proverbs, were reflected by skilful craftsmen in Arabic on this type of metal items.

Boilers are among the main domestic utensils stored at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan. One of the boilers (EF No. 1514) is distinguished from other such items due to its artistic composition and abundant writing style. The copper-made boiler's rim is bent side-way and has edging with an "Arabic Eslimi" pattern. Inside another edge, the calligrapher engraved Allah's blessing for the Prophet in naskh Arabic lines, which also had Sils elements, using the hammering technique: اللهم صل على المصطفى محمد المرتضى على البتول فاطمه السبطين الحسن و الحسين و صل على زين العابدين وعلى الباقر محمد و الصادق الحسن العسكري و جعفر و الكاظم موسى الرضا على محمد النبي - Let Allah bless Muhammad al-Mustafa, Ali al-Murtuza, his daughter Fatimah, (the Prophet's) grandchildren al-Hasan and al-Huseyn; may

your blessings also be bestowed upon Zeyn al-Abdin and Muhammad al-Baghir and Jafari as-Sadiq, Museyi al-Kazim, Ali ar-Rza and Muhammad at-Taghi, and Ali an-Naghi, Hasan al-Asgari and Muhammad al-Mehdi".

A ghazal in Persian by Saadi Shirazi was engraved in the middle section upon the octagonal edges on most domestic vessels:

“ألهي عاقبت معمور [د] كردان
هر كه در مطبخ اخلاص خاص محبت است
هر چه همكي دار د طبق اخلاص است
اندرين باغ كسب محرم خاص اخلاص است
كه كل و مي بقدر بدار طبق اخلاص است
Allah, make the end (outcome) happy,
Whoever is bound with cuisine and linked to it spiri-
tually,
Any community is based on sincere accord,
Take flowers and wine sincerely and as much as
needed,
Whichever friend is present in this garden is pure in
heart.

Scenes with images of people and animals on the large edges follow the poem, while the above-men-

*Suspended bronze lamp with inscriptions.
16th century ANHM*

tioned inscription saying "Allah, make the end happy..." - *الهي عاقبت معمور [د] كردان* is repeated at the bottom edges.

The boiler's lid is dome-shaped, while its handle is made of a conic copper piece with inflated tips and is decorated with geometrical and vegetational ornaments. The craftsman repeated the Persian-language inscription written on the boiler's body at the lid edge: "Allah, make the end happy..." - *الهي عاقبت معمور [د] كردان*. Based on the artistic composition and writing style, the boiler and its lid may be attributed to the 18th century.

Coppersmiths in Shamakhi, Ganja, Nakhchivan, Tabriz and other cities, considered the centers of Azerbaijani metalworking art, made traditional sarpushes (copper dish covers) using artistic compositions and different writing samples to meet people's needs (14, p. 45, 51 and 63). The miniatures reflected over the sarpushes, scenes of hunting and weddings, geometrical and vegetational patterns and inscriptions in Arabic indicate that chronologically these items date back to the Middle Ages. Most likely, sarpushes were usually used to keep the served food hot.

A sarpush stored at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (EF No.7380) is decorated on its edge with geometrical ornaments and the following inscription is engraved in Persian with Nastaliq lines upon the medallions in the lower part:

اي انكه بز ادست جهان هوش
در صحبت اهل بزم ميكوش
بر دار ز روزي قاب سربوش
تا يار كند طعامرا نوش
سربوش يقاب شد با هم اعوش
يكاحكه عمش شد فراموش
امروز جو ر سيد بر ين لب قاب
از نعمت نوش باد شد خاموش

"A wise man was born to this world,
He is trying to converse while hosting visitors.
If you take the cover off the sarpush,
Friends will enjoy the meal.
After the sarpush embraces the vessel,
It makes people somewhat forget their grief.
Let your vessel cater to the mouth today,
Calming down while enjoying the blessings."

The owner's name is indicated on the small medal-



lion at the edge and an inscription is engraved further on the upper edge:

صاحبه اقا / غرض نقشيبست كه از ما باز ماند
كه هستي را نمي بينم بقاني
مكر صاحبدلي روزي برحمت
كند در حق درويشان دعائي

"Master, our intent is to leave behind good memories about ourselves,
Because I don't see eternal life in (a person's) wealth,
If one day wisdom comes to you in paradise,
Would you pray about the dervishes?"

The metal items widely used in households during the Middle Ages included dishes. Dishes were usually made of copper and silver in different sizes. Plates, which differed from other metal items in terms of their artistic composition and writing samples upon them, were interesting from the epigraphic point of view. The edge of a dish kept in a privately owned collection is decorated with vegetational ornaments, and a nastaliq inscription, as well as the vessel's manufacture date, were engraved in Arabic in the middle section:

مي حرلا نم حرلا لئلا مسب
الحمد لله كما هله هو مستهقه
الحمد لله رب العلمين

- In the name of the kind and merciful God. Praise be to Allah and his loved ones, he is just. Praise be to the Heaven of all worlds." The edges of the dish are decorated with vegetational patterns, and the vessel owner's name and the manufacture date are engraved inside the edging: "صابه حاجي إسماعيل / سنة ١٢٧٢ هـ - The owner is Haji Ismayil and the date is h. 1278 = m. 2681". This expression is frequently seen over dishes and copper trays.

A dish stored at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (EF No. 9630) is interesting from the epigraphic point of view. Thus, vegetational patterns were applied in the background of the octagon decorated with geometrical ornaments inside the panel in the center of the round-shaped dish and an epithet of Allah was engraved in Arabic in Naskh lines with large Suls elements, using the hammering method: "يا قاضي الحاجات / ٢٠٣١ - The provider of all needs! 1302=m. 1884/85". The names of the craftsman and the person who ordered the item were engraved on the small medallions on the side of the panel: "فرمايش سليم" - Ordered by Salim" and "عمل مجيد" - made by Majid".

Basins with epigraphic writing over them are metal items widely used at gatherings. According to mediaeval sources, basins made of copper, silver and gold were common both in households and religious ceremonies. The ghazals of classical poet Hafiz Shirazi, who reflects the entire subtlety of the Persian language in his writing, have drawn the attention of mediaeval craftsmen. Two basins kept at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (EF No. 2088 and 2089) are interesting in this regard. Hafiz Shirazi's ghazals were engraved over the basins with Suls lines in Persian:

"ساقی به نور باده بر افروز جام ما
مطرب بکوکه کار جهان شد به کام ما
ما در پیاله عکس رخ یار دیده ایم
ای بیجبرز لذت شرب مدام ما
جندان بود که شمه و ناز سهی قدان
کاید به جلوه سر و صنوبر خارا ما (غزلهای، ١٧٣١، ١٠٠)

"The wine scooper basin's light encourages us.

Singer, say that the world's affairs corresponded to our wishes.

We've seen a reflection (picture) of a friend's face in a bowl.

You're unaware of the enjoyment from our drink,
The fancy of a cypress's gracefulness is so great
That Sanubar would flirtatiously come around to
see us."

Observations show that this ghazal by Hafiz Shirazi is encountered in the inscriptions upon trays, including copper-made ones, boilers, desks, sarpushes, as well as other metal-made domestic vessels (12, p. 19, 40, 41, 52, 65, 67, etc.)

A bowl stored at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (EF No. 9344) stands out due to its inscription. The bowl's side has vegetational patterns on the edge, while on the separate edges of its lower part there is a hammered inscription in Persian in Naskh script. The name of the vessel's owner is written inside a separate medallion: "صاحبيه رحمان" ("Owned by Rahman"). The inscription is followed by gentle geometrical patterns on the edges extending all the way to the vessel's base. The manufacture date and a rubai are engraved half-way on the edges of the vessel:

اي صاحب جام غم فراموشت باد
بيوسته مراد دل اغوشت باد
ايم کاست و کامراني
ساقی بده آب زنده کاني
در سبزه خوش اسب جام و باده
با لاله رخان ار غواني
/ سنة ١٦٨٠١ /

Basin owner, may your grief be forgotten,
May wishes be always cherished in your heart.
Laugh, and it's time for our dreams to come true,
Hey, wine-scooper, give us a glass of life-giving water.

It's pleasant to drink wine on a field with tulips. Date: 1076 /m. 1665/66."

A chandelier stored at the National Museum of History of Azerbaijan (EF No. 2467) was made from thin-layer yellow copper by means of slicing. The chandelier, which consists of three parts, is decorated on the surface with Naskh lines with vegetational patterns and beautiful thuluth elements. A well-known Arabic proverb is engraved in Naskh script with Suls elements using the slicing method on the edge over the dome-shaped upper part of the item in the background of vegetational patterns: "سلامت الإنسان في حفظ اللسان" "A man's well-being dwells upon (tranquil) preservation of the language." The rich composition of the chandelier indicates that it

*Fragment of a copper hookah with inscriptions.
18th century. ANHM*

belonged to people of the upper class. The item could be attributed to the 16th-17th centuries given its artistic composition and writing style. Water pitchers used while having a snack, whose body is usually made of copper, silver and other materials, have been used in Oriental countries since the ancient times under the name "tangerine". The lower surface of the base of the can-shaped water pitcher (EF. 2555) is decorated with Eslimi patterns on the edge. Hammered images of people were applied upon the medallions on the surface. An inscription was engraved with Suls lines in Arabic upon the edge, comprised of geometrical and vegetational ornaments: "السلطان بن السلطان شاه عباس صفوي" - "Sultan oghlu Sultan Shah Abbas Safavid."

Water pipes are typically used at weddings and parties to entertain people.

The names of Safavid Shahs are also encountered upon weapons and household items.

The above-mentioned samples of coppersmith art indicate that calligraphers succeeded in creating amazing masterpieces, using classical poetry, words of wisdom and religious verses, in accordance with the intended use of the vessels.

Thus, the fact that inscriptions with different content were used by Azerbaijani craftsmen as decorative elements upon metal items, in addition to ornamental compositions, once again shows that metalworking and fine art were highly developed here in the Middle Ages. ✨

References:

1. Sadıqzadə Ş.H. Qədim Azərbaycan bəzəkləri. Bakı, 1971
2. Kərimov K.C., Əfəndiyev R.S., Rzayev H.İ., Həbibov N.D. Azərbaycan incəsənəti. Bakı, 1992
3. Osmanov F.L. Mollaisaqlıda antik dövrə aid yeni arxeoloji tapıntılar.// Azərbaycan Maddi Mədəniyyəti. IX cild, 1980
4. Кошкарлы К.О. Античная и раннесредневековая торевтика из Азербайджана. Баку, 1984
5. İbrahimov F.Ə. Azərbaycanın orta əsr şəhərlərində metalışləmə sənəti (XI-XIII əsrlər). Bakı, 1988
6. Халилов Д.А. Материальная культура Кавказской Албании. Баку, 1994
7. Avşarova İ.N. Xocalı-Gədəbəy mədəniyyəti tayfalarının bədi tunc məmulatı (e.ə. XVI-VII əsrlər). Bakı, 2007
8. Мец А. Мусульманский Ренессанс. М., 1973
9. Бретаницкий Л. Архитектурные школы средневекового Азербайджана (XII - XV вв.) / Искусство Азербайджана. Баку, 1949
10. Ювелирные изделия Востока (Древний, средневековый период) // Коллекция Особой кладовой отдела Востока Государственного Эрмитажа. Каталог. М., 1984
11. Rasim Əfəndi. Azərbaycanın dekorativ-tətbiqi sənətləri (orta əsrlər). Bakı, 1976
12. Nemət M.S. Azərbaycanın epiqrafik abidələri toplusu. Mis qablar, silahlar, bayraqlar üzərindəki ərəb-fars dilində olan kitabələ VII- XVIII əsrlər (VI cild). Bakı, 2011
13. Rəcəbova B. Azərbaycanın ənənəvi sənətkarlıq məmulatı və istehsalı tarixindən (IV- XVII əsrlər). Bakı, 2009
14. Сумбатзаде А.С. Промышленность Азербайджана в XIX веке. Б., 1964
15. غزلهای حافظ. استاد محمد سلحشور، تهران : آذرماه ۱۷، ۳۱، ص. ۴۳۴

