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ÖZEN TOK

Memories of the Past?

The 'Classical' or 'Sunni Revival' in Architecture and Art in Syria between the Mediterranean and Iran in the 12th and 13th centuries

Stefan Heidemann*

1. Introduction¹

“The past will be remembered only to the extent to which it is used and how it is filled with meaning and importance, thus how it is semiotised”.

—Jan Assmann²

In Europe the Classical Antiquity was one of the most powerful traditions in art and in political representation. For a long time it was a source of orientation and identity. Rulers with a universal claim, such as Charlemagne, Frederick the Second, and Napoleon, depicted themselves as Roman emperors. In the Middle East we have certain periods of intensive use of pre-Islamic imagery but often its semiotic meaning remains a question of debate.

Islamic civilization is based on a revealed text, the Qur'an. Islam as a religion perceives all periods prior to the divine revelation as less worthy of knowledge and study and calls it *jahiliyya*, the period of ignorance. Objects, monuments and poetry, however, tell a different story. According to Jan Assmann, the memory of a symbol creates an orientation within the collective and creates an identity for the individual. It is not the past as a whole that remains in the memory of a society but only those parts which the society reconstructs within its frame of reference or identity—meaning a past which the society deems to be useful. The memory changes progressively as the

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1 This study presents preliminary results of the ongoing research project 'The Middle Islamic Period: Social, Economic and Cultural Transformations in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia', (<http://www.uni-jena.de/transformations.html>)

2 Assmann, Jan (1992): *Das kulturelle Gedächtnis. Schrift, Erinnerung und Politische Identität in frühen Hochkulturen*, München. p. 292: "Erinnert wird die Vergangenheit nur in dem Maße, wie sie gebraucht wird, und sie mit Sinn und Bedeutung erfüllt, also semiotisiert ist".

present proceeds. The cultural memory can be transmitted by tradition and ritual or by a written text.

As for memories of the past in the 12th and 13th century I will look at how pre-Islamic imagery is treated. I emphasize representations of royalty and princes, because luxury ware and architecture are often sponsored by them. The first part deals with some of the preconditions: the genesis of the princely image in Early Islam and the first recourse to pre-Islamic Sasanian culture in the 10th and 11th centuries. The second part surveys the appropriation and translation of Greek, Roman and Byzantine material forms in Syria and northern Mesopotamia during the 12th and 13th centuries: the new imagery on coins and objects, the classicizing architecture, the image of Alexander and of the orb as a new attribute of royalty in Islamic iconography. In the third part I discuss the selected sources under the aspect of cultural memory, and identity.

2. Some Pre-Conditions

2. 1. The Genesis of the Princely Image



III 01: Presentation medallion,
Coin Cabinet Berlin, 8.60 g, 28mm, war loss.

After the apogee of the Abbasid Empire in the Samarra period in the middle of the tenth century, the caliph al-Muqtadir billah (r. 295-320/908-932), was the last caliph with real power. He commissioned a medallion for courtly purposes. For the first time we encounter the later standard image of the princely cycle in 'Islamic Art' on a dated object. The 'princely cycle' consists of images of princes and courtiers engaged in various entertainments and courtly activities widely used in the decorative arts in Islam. On the one side we see the caliph, on the other a courtier playing the *ud*, an Oriental form of guitar. The ruler sits in Turkish fashion, which reflects the cultural influence of the Turkish military tradition imported from Central Asia, by now a mark of the empire for about a century. Before the formation of the Turkish guards

this way of sitting was uncommon in Western Asia.³ The caliph wears an unremarkable hair dress and holds a cup of wine in one hand and a *mandil*, or napkin, in the other.

In Sasanian Iran the cup is seen as a symbol for the sun, *jamshid*, the sun cup, and the cupbearer appeared as the universal sun king. The pre-Islamic Central Asian and Iranian interpretation obviously remained intact and was widely known. Ceremonial drinking, however, is very often mentioned in the historical and literary sources of early Islam. In the 3rd/9th century the image of the royal cup bearer sitting in the Turkish fashion became the archetypal image of the universal ruler in Islam disseminated throughout the Islamic empire and beyond by the Turkish guards and Samarran style. We find its ubiquitous use on Iraqi ceramics and other materials. The ruler's attributes can vary. The *mandil*-napkin is often replaced by a branch symbolizing fertility and shadow.⁴ We find this type of image on Samanid buffware in Nishapur in the East and on an Umayyad ivory casket from Cordoba in the West where the branch is replaced by the more appropriate image of Mediterranean grapes and the left knee is placed in a forward position.

2. 1. Sasanian Imagery for the Iranian People

The century from the middle of the 4th/10th century to the middle of the 5th/11th century saw a new desire to recall a glorious Sasanian past. After a long erosion of the economic and military power of the Islamic empire, the claim of the Abbasids to rule was challenged on all sides. The Buyids from Daylam on the Caspian Sea managed to bring Western Iran and the Iraq under their military sway. The courtly art of the time became strongly influenced by Sasanian iconography. Several objects from the Ghaznavid, Buyid period show a ruler seated in Sasanian fashion, but sitting in the Turkish way.⁵ The wine bowl in the hand of the ruler symbolizes divine rule.

Winged headgear imitates Sasanian crowns. Elaborate winged crowns symbolize the god Ahuramazda and belong to the standard ornament of Sasanian royalty. Before the Buyids such crowns did not belong to the royal iconography of Islamic caliphs and rulers. The Buyids took conscious recourse

³ Otto-Dorn, Katharina (1990): "Das islamische Herrscherbild im frühen Mittelalter (8.-11. Jahrhundert)", in: Martin Kraatz - Jürg Meyer zur Capellen - Dietrich Seckel (eds.): *Das Bildnis in der Kunst des Orients*, Stuttgart, pp. 61-78, here p. 64.

⁴ Daneshvari, Abbas (1988): "Cup, Branch, Bird and Fish: An Iconographical Study of the Figure Holding a Cup and a Branch Flanked by a Bird and a Fish", in: Bernard O'Kane (ed.): *Studies in the Iconography of Islamic Art*, Edinburgh, pp. 103-126.

⁵ Grube (1966): *The World of Islam*, New York, p. 41 fig. 17.

to the memory of the Sasanian *shahanshahs* and presented themselves as Sasanian emperors restoring those glorious days. They failed ultimately because they could not keep the promises associated with its memory. The eastern Iranian Samanids and Ghaznavids, however, were more successful in promoting the cultural memory and Iranian identity. At around the year 1000, the well-known pre-Islamic history of Iran was re-composed as a poetic epic of unrivalled magnitude in the form of the *Shahnamah*, the “book of the king”. It is the first literary work written in Persian with Arabic script and constitutes the beginning of the new Persian literature.

The *Shahnamah* formulates the foundation myth of the Iranian people and has served right up to the present day to build an Iranian identity in opposition to the dominant Arabic-Islamic culture. In the Islamic period we find the earliest images of stories from the *Shahnamah* on Saljuq *mina'i*-ware from the 6th/12th century, proving the dissemination of the stories in the West.⁶ Book illuminations are known only from the period after the Mongol invasion in the 13th century. In the middle of the 5th/11th century Turkic Saljuqs from Central Asia conquered the Middle East and set up an empire which brought all Asian territories of the Abbasids under the control of a family confederation. With the Saljuqs came a renewal of cities and urban culture. At the same time they fostered a revival of Sunni theology. With the transfer of a Persian princely elite, Iranian culture arrived in the West bringing with it the appreciation of the *Shahnama*; in decorative arts the *muqarnas* and the geometrical star pattern was introduced in the West.

3. The Appropriation of the Past in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia

3. 1. The New Imagery

The appropriation of classicizing forms in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia was promoted by the ruling dynasties of the Saljuqs and their successors, most prominent among them being the Artuqids, Zangids and Ayyubids. The Saljuqs laid the foundations for a period of prosperity but the flowering in architecture and material culture did not occur until 60 years later in the middle of the 6th/12th century.

In the 17th century scholarship in the field of Islamic Art began with the examination of classicizing numismatic imagery. In 542/1148 a series of coinage reforms created large copper coins allowing an elaborate design. These images fell roughly into four groups; dividing lines, however, are fluid.

⁶ Simpson, Marianne Shreve (1981): “The Narrative Structure of a Medieval Iranian Beaker”, in: *Ars Orientalis*, v. 12, pp. 15-24.

First, images on coins imitated the whole range of historical designs, Hellenistic, Roman and Byzantine. Some of them are close -almost instantly recognizable- copies. Others have a recognizable model, but were altered - seemingly deliberately- in a way deviating from it. We are not, however, able to decipher all these signs. These explicit coin images were not transferred into any other media such as architecture or ceramics.

Secondly, zodiacal star allegories had by now become common. Persian astrology and cosmological events constituted a vital part of the lives of the Persianate elite and their decision making. Cosmological allegories were translated into all forms of decorative arts in the Western Islamic world, such as coins, ceramics, metalwork and architecture. Astrological allegories form the second great repository of images after the so-called princely cycle.

The third group of imagery consisted of apotropaic, royal and cosmological bestiary. We find dragons, lions, and eagles, both single and double-headed, in all the media.

The fourth group comprises innovative new images of ruling princes, to which I will later return. With a few exceptions in 13th century book painting individual portraits of rulers were not carried over into any other media.

Imitations of historical coin designs



Greek



Roman



Byzantine



Sagittarius



Mars



Moon



dragon



double headed eagle



lion



3. 2. Classical Antiquity: Architectural models

Despite the abundant coin imagery, the ‘classical revival’ of the 12th and 13th centuries is mostly discussed in terms of architectural decoration.⁷ There are three principal buildings usually discussed, but if we look at architectural details more buildings can be seen to include classicizing features. The three principal buildings are the congregational Mosque in Amid, present-day Diyarbakir in south-eastern Turkey, the *madrasa* and *qastal* (fountain) al-Shu‘aybiyya in Aleppo, and the third is the congregational mosque in Harran, the most elaborate and outstanding example of this group.



Amid (Diyarbakir), Ulu Camii, Western Facade

The congregational mosque in Amid is of the conventional Syrian courtyard type. The western façade of the courtyard was constructed in 511/1117-8 and 518/1124-5 with reused Roman decorative elements including all of its entablatures and columns. It was first examined by Josef Strzygowski and Max von Berchem. A distinguishing feature lies in the intricate use of the spolia; the architect and his royal sponsor had a taste not only for the beauty of the honey-colored limestone but also for the beauty of the third century masonry. The inscriptions are set in a matching floral *kufic*-script. It runs below the entablature and behind the capitals.

About forty years later, in 559/1163-4, a matching eastern courtyard façade was constructed without spolia and with new masonry. The architectural language of the third century masons was firmly adopted by their Muslim disciples.

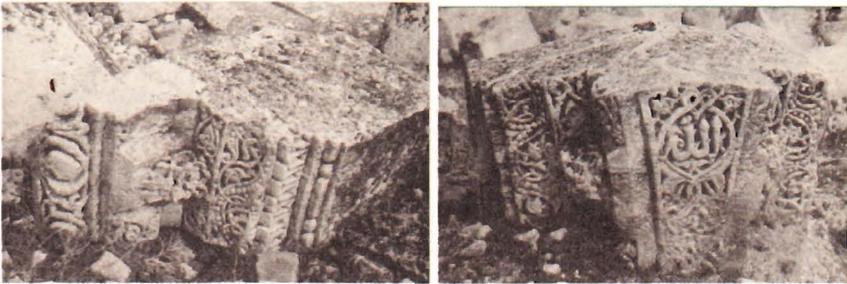


(photo SH, 1985)

The second principal building in Aleppo survived only in part. The existing classicizing entablature belongs to the fountain, *qastal*, of the *madrasa* named al-Shu‘aybiyya. Nur al-Din Mahmud

⁷ Tabbaa, Yasser (1993): “Survivals and Archaisms in the Architecture of Northern Syria, ca. 1080-ca. 1150”. *Muqarnas*, v. 10, pp.29-41.

commissioned this complex in 545/1150. Nur al-Din initiated a vast building program in Syria which included even medium-sized cities and small towns. The Madrasa al-Shu'aybiyya was built intra-muros—facing the city gate, the Bab Antakya. In 16/637 it witnessed the entry of the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab and the foundation of the first mosque in Aleppo. The *qastal* with the pointed arch is of the conventional stone architecture of the time, whereas the entablature is in the classicizing style. It included a floriate *kufic* inscription mentioning 'Umar. The nearly contemporary author Ibn al-'Adim describes this building, but he does not refer to the extraordinary entablature. He tells us, however, that at least until 420/1029-3 an 'arch' (*qantara*), with a probably Greek inscription, stood at the Antioch gate, probably outside. The classical architecture thus stood side by side with the Shu'aybiyya *madrasa*. The new *madrasa*, the fountain, the early Byzantine gate and the arch may well have formed a matching building ensemble; much like the eastern façade in Amid matched the western façade.⁸



Much less examined, but undoubtedly the most amazing building in this style is the congregational mosque of Harran, 150 km west of Aleppo. According to an inscription it was completed one year after Nur al-Din's death in 570/1174. It was excavated in the 1950s by D. S. Rice. No report was published. The mosque is also of the standard Syrian courtyard type.⁹ The decoration is executed in the classicizing style. We find egg and dart friezes, vine leaves, scrolling foliage and a classical composition of the entablature in which even the word *Allah* blends in perfectly. Although all the scrolling foliage is in line with the classical composition, it is conventional in its decorative elements for

⁸ Ibn al-'Adim: *Zubdat al-Halab min tārikh Halab*, ed. Sāmī ad-Dahhān, Damascus 1951-1968, vol. I pp. 14-15; Ibn Shaddād, *Al-A'lāq al-khatira fi dhikr umarā' al-Shām wa'l-Jazīra*, ed. Dominique Sourdel, Damascus 1953, pp. 12, 22, 28, 44, 105-106.

⁹ Allen (1986).

the time and region - as, for example, in comparison with the contemporary pulpit from Hamah which was basically decorated with a geometrical star pattern and some scrolling foliage.¹⁰ In 580/1184, the Spanish traveler Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) visited and produced a description of the mosque in Harran. He was much taken by the beauty of its architecture. He did not, however, comment on the Hellenistic architectural decoration.¹¹ Classicizing elements and the conscious re-employment of antique architectural decoration are also found on other buildings and artefacts. The architects of the time seem to have a preference for the style of the Roman Imperial period of the early third century.

3. 3. The Memory of Alexander the Great



Another link to pre-Islamic memory is the figure of Alexander the Great (r. 336-323 BC). The first known appearance of Alexander in the visual/material culture of the Islamic world occurs on the so called Innsbruck bowl¹² of the Artuqid prince of Hisn Kayfa in Northern Mesopotamia 508-539/1114-1144. This ruler also commissioned the above-mentioned classicizing mosque

in Amid. In its workmanship the Innsbruck bowl, a copper bowl decorated with cloisonné and champlevé polychrome enamel, is unique in Islamic art. There has been a long debate about the craftsmanship as to whether it is of Byzantine, Georgian or southern Italian origin. The central medallion shows the apotheosis of Alexander, standing in a chariot drawn by griffins. Within the Islamic context we have a similar image only on a cast mirror in the collection of the University Museum in Ann Arbor.¹³ It also originates probably from northern Mesopotamia from about the same date. The depiction of Alexander has, as Thomas Steppan and recently Martina Müller-Wiener¹⁴ have argued,

¹⁰ The pulpit is now in the Museum of Hamah.

¹¹ Ibn Jubayr, *Rihla*, ed. William Wright, *The Travels of Ibn Jubair*, (revised by Michael Jan de Goeje), Leiden, London 1907, pp. 246-7.

¹² Steppan, Thomas (1995): "Die Artuqidenschale" in: Thomas Steppan (ed.): *Die Artuqidenschale im Tiroler Landesmuseum Ferdinandeum Innsbruck*, Munich, pp. 13-38, here pp. 15-33.

¹³ University Museum Ann Arbor. Inv. no. 1959/1. 115.

¹⁴ Müller-Wiener, Martina (2008): *Im Kontext gesehen – "Die Artuqidenschale und das .classical*

its firm roots in Mediterranean iconography. Similar images of Alexander are to be found at St. Marco in Venice, in Byzantium and elsewhere. Not until the 7th/14th century do we have images of Alexander in the book illuminations of the *Shahnamah*. But they always show him as Iranian-Islamic ruler in the conventional fashion of the princely cycle.

What were the sources for the memory of the pre-Islamic ruler Alexander? How was the image understood in an Islamic context? Alexander the Great was always admired as an ideal ruler and conqueror, although a short-lived hero. The Qurʾān (Q. 18: 83–101) refers to him as *dhu l-qarnayn*, the two-horned. In the Islamic world the *dhu l-qarnayn* was given power on earth, and made his way to the furthest west and the furthest east. He was accepted as believer and Muslim, but it was disputed whether he was a prophet. The Arabs had known the Alexander Romance of pseudo-Callisthenes since the Arab translation movement in the 3rd/9th century.

Around the year 1000 the *Shahnamah* by Firdawsi (d. 411/1020) in Iranian Central Asia makes Iskandar (Chapter 20) an exemplary figure as a hero in battles and as a sage. With the Saljuq conquest of Western Asia, this Alexander image was brought to the Mediterranean and merged with the western branch of the Alexander tradition. After about 1193 the poet Nizami of Ganja authored a further Alexander romance which further increased the interest in the topic of Alexander. It was dedicated to the Zangid ruler of Mosul, a clear indication of the popularity of Alexander in the Northern Mesopotamian courts. Despite the Iranian origin and understanding of the Alexander tradition, the imagery of the Innsbruck bowl and the Ann Arbor mirror is clearly Mediterranean.

3. 4. The Globe as Symbol of Universal Rule

Further symbols at this time point to a Mediterranean approach in the attributes of the ruler - that is, the use of the globe or orb as a symbol of universal rule. The Artuqid dynasty of Hisn Kayfa and Amid in northern Mesopotamia was probably also here the innovator. Since the Hellenistic antiquity the globe symbolized



Archangel Michael
Date 1250–1300
Constantinople
Metropolitan Museum



Northern Mesopotamia,
Artuqids, Qara Arslan,
Hisn Kayfa, 556/1160

revival" in Nordsyrien und der Ġazira" in: Ulrike Koenen – Martina Müller-Wiener (eds): *Grenzgänge im östlichen Mittelmeerraum, Byzanz und die islamische Welt vom 9. -13. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, pp. 147-168.

the orb of the world and was, at least on coins, the most ubiquitous of all Byzantine symbols of rule.

The earliest portrait of 556/1160 of an Islamic ruler with an orb still seems to be dependent on Christian models, probably the archangel Michael with the tunic and the curled hair dress as Estelle Whelan could show him,¹⁵ while a later variant of this type in 594/1197 shows the ruler in a contemporary garment with a fur cap.¹⁶ From the 1180s on the globe became a frequent attribute of the ruler's portrait on coins, supplanting the Sasanian wine bowl, beaker or cup. The general composition of the ruler's image, however, still followed the princely style, a prince sitting in the Turkish fashion with a royal *mandil*, a napkin, in his hand.



As for the portrait on coins of Saladin,¹⁷ the champion of Sunni Islam, the wine symbolism may have seemed inappropriate for a pious ruler who devoted his life to the *jihād* and enforced the Sunni ideological revival. Quite likely the orb was here used as a symbol of

universal hegemony. Here the globe coincides with the Alexander iconography. Both draw on an almost common Mediterranean stock of imagery.

4. Memories of the Past in Material Culture?

The written form of cultural memory -as in Assmann's cases of the Egyptian and Jewish cultures- is crucial for civilizations based on the sacred scriptures. In the Arab-Persian Islamic civilization, a cultural tradition of such importance must necessarily be in written form. Two instances are prominent. The tradition of the Qur'an, God's revelation to Muhammad, gives direction to the Muslim *umma*, and identity to the individual, in the same way as the *Shahname* constitutes Iranian identity.

The Arabic written tradition of the Greek and Roman past is slim. Although the earliest historical books of authors such as Dinawari (d. 281/894-5 or

¹⁵ Spengler, William, F. –Sayles, Wayne G. (1992): *Turkoman Figural Bronze Coins and Their Iconography*, pp. 15-16, type 4; Whelan, Estelle J. (2006): *The Public Figure. Political Iconography in Medieval Mesopotamia*, London, pp. 146-186.

¹⁶ Spengler – Sayles (1992), pp. 39-40, type 14.

¹⁷ Balog, Paul (1980): *The Coinage of the Ayyūbids*, London, p. 103, no. 182.

282/895-6 but certainly before 290/902-3), Yaqubi (d. 284/897), al-Masudi (d. 345/956) and al-Tabari (d. 310/923) all have extensive chapters on pre-Islamic history and almost all of them deal with the Persian-Sasanian past. In the printed edition of the history of Tabari from the early 10th century, for example, Persian-Sasanian history extends to 262 pages while the Greek-Roman history is covered in just four.

Knowledge of the Greek and Latin languages was lost in the 6th/12th century in Syria and northern Mesopotamia, including the Christian mostly Aramaic speaking population. This is evident, for example, in Ibn al-Adim's history of Aleppo. He repeatedly asked Christian priests to read ancient inscriptions and quoted their responses. Because we are now fully acquainted with the formulae of Hellenistic and Roman inscriptions, we know that the priests and monks failed. There was no one left who felt connected with any of the traditional figures of the pre-Islamic Hellenistic past except for the Qur'anic and Iranian hero Alexander. The 'classical revival', as Terry Allen had postulated it, never took place in the written tradition.

On the other hand, Yasser Tabbaa stresses the strong ideological understanding of the arts during the period of Sunni revival. According to him, this movement finds its decorative expression in the new abstract, almost celestial, geometrical star pattern and spherical *muqarnas*. He denies a 'classical revival' and sees the phenomena as exceptions or as local traditions, without explaining them further and almost entirely ignoring the rich numismatic evidence.¹⁸ Neither approach would appear to be satisfactory. For an answer we have to return to an examination of the material world.

After the turn of the 4th/10th century and the downfall of the Abbasid Empire we find almost no major construction activity in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia until the advent of the Saljuqs. From the descriptions of cities given in the chronicles, it would appear that Nur al-Din and other Syrian princes inherited cityscapes which looked much like the late antique cities, but in a declined and altered state. In about the 1150s, Nur al-Din initiated a vast building program to renovate and develop cities and towns which gave room for architectural experimentation. The monuments in classicizing style rivaled and complemented the old cityscapes, probably reflecting the still surviving Hellenistic-Roman architecture. Thus, because the classical style was common in the streets, to the authors it was not worth mentioning. This

18 Tabbaa, Yasser (1993): "Survivals and Archaisms in the Architecture of Northern Syria, ca. 1080-ca. 1150", in: *Muqarnas*, v. 10, v. 10, pp. 29-41. Tabbaa, Yasser (2001): *The Transformation of Islamic Art during the Sunni Revival*, Seattle and London.

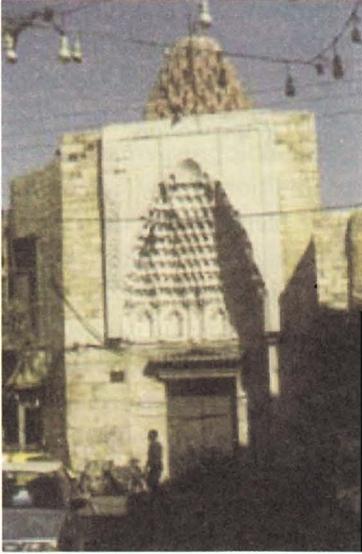
does not explain, however, the taste for the classicizing style in the portable arts and royal representations. Only from the middle of the 6th/12th century on, we can identify Syrian luxury ware. Evidence is almost entirely lacking of how the material world appeared previously. In the 5th/11th century Syrian luxury ware was dominated by Fatimid Egypt before the Saljuqs from Iran turned the political tide. But let us look at the Egyptian development.

In the 4th/10th century, when Abbasid Iraq fell into chaos, production of luster-painted ware began in Egypt, probably as a result of migrant craftsmen. Whereas Iraq produced designs with abstract images and a limited repertoire, in Egypt the imagery on luster-painted ware was in the local, more classical, tradition with a far larger repertoire. Ernst Grube worked on the so-called realism of Fatimid luster-painted ware. Grube came to the conclusion that some images continued late antique traditions and imagery into the 6th/12th century.¹⁹ Eva Hofmann worked on Egyptian Mamluk book illumination. She also found certain visual conventions and techniques dating back to late antiquity - not least through Coptic art.²⁰ Egypt fell into decline in the middle of the 5th/11th century and workshops for luster painted ware probably moved to Syria in the later 6th/12th century. We can conclude that a similar taste or fashion for the Fatimid classicizing style existed in Syria even before the time of Nur al-Din Mahmud. But how did the classicizing style go together with the art of "Sunni rival" and the supposedly abstract *muqarnas* and geometrical star pattern which entered Syria at the same time? The classicizing style - as we have concluded - was not coded as a memory of classical antiquity or a remote past as Terry Allen supposed. If we look at the cityscapes on the portable arts and on coins, then a regional classicizing eastern Mediterranean style seemed to be current and well represented. After centuries, this Mediterranean style and taste materialized in Syria, because the Syrian elite had previously lacked the financial resources of a blossoming economy and thus the sponsorship of architecture and art. This might be the reason why, for us, the classicizing style appears so suddenly, almost without regional precedent. This regional style created identity within the community.

For any scriptural society, such as the Islamic civilization, we need written proof for the use of style as a traditional factor in urban identity. Under Nur

19 Grube, Ernst (1962): "Studies in the Survival and Continuity of Pre-Muslim Traditions in Egyptian Islamic Art". In: *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt*, v. 1 (1962), pp. 75-97. Grube, Ernst (1984): "Realism and Formalism, Notes on Some Fatimid Lustre-Painted Ceramic Vessels". In: Renato Traini (ed.): *Studi in Ornati di Francesco Bagrieli nel Suo Ottantesimo Compleanno*, Rome, pp. 423-432.

20 Hofman, Eva R. (1993): "The Author Portrait in Thirteenth-Century Arabic Manuscripts: A New Islamic Context for a Late-Antique Tradition", in: *Muqarnas* 10, pp. 6-20.



Damascus, the Bimaristan al-Nuri (photo SH 1985)

al-Din we can observe a renaissance of historical writing in Syria. For Damascus we have the works of Ibn al-Qalanisi and the monumental achievement of Ibn 'Asakir with 80 volumes in the printed edition; for Aleppo that of Ibn al-'Adim and for Hamah that of several members of the royal family of the Ayyubids. *Muqarnas* and the geometrical star-pattern arrived from the east to become a predominant interregional decorative style which blended into the regional classicizing Mediterranean style. We see it at the Bimaristan al-Nuri, the Hospital of Nur al-Din Mahmud, and in Damascus, where we have a sugar cone *muqarnas* dome and a classical pediment above the entrance.

5. Summary



**Fritware bowl,
decorated with luster
Syria, Tell Minis type
Syria; c. 1150
h. 7; d. 20.5 cm**

**David Collection
Copenhagen**

A bowl in the David Collection in Copenhagen is a perfect representation of this merger of Iranian and classicizing Mediterranean culture at the beginning of the Middle Islamic period. The luster-painted dish was made in Syria in the

1150s. In the 4th/10th century Syria and northern Mesopotamia had been an economically impoverished backwater of the Abbasid Empire. Language and discourse in the decorative arts were formulated in Iraq, Iran and Central Asia. At least since the 4th/10th century the standard image of a ruler became the prince sitting in Turkish fashion and having a wine bowl or beaker in his hand as a symbol of universal rule.

In the Samarra period the image of the princely figure with the wine bowl in one hand spread all over the Islamic world. The *Shahnamah* of Firdawsi related the mythical origins of the Iranian people in the Persian language and

thus created a communal memory of Iranian identity. With the success of the Saljuqs in unifying the Asian part of the Abbasid Empire, the Iranian approach to the decorative arts spread to the West. This consisted of the Alexander tradition on the one hand and the *muqarnas* and the geometrical star-pattern on the other. In the middle of the 12th century, economic prosperity suddenly led to the re-emergence of the lingering regional tradition in new architecture and portable objects. The classicizing architecture blended with the existing late antique cityscapes and thus served the growing urban pride. Fatimid Egypt preserved a classicizing style in some of its arts. With the decline of the Fatimids and the rise of Zangid Syria, workshops for luster-painted ware moved to Syria, where this bowl of the David collection was pottered. The little ball in the other hand - misinterpreted by the cataloguer of the David Collection as perhaps a fruit - adds the Mediterranean globe or orb as a symbol for universal rule. The Mediterranean and classicizing style of objects and architecture served the regional identity. The rising identity of the city and its inhabitants is reflected in the blossoming of historical writing and the praise of the glory of the cities.

