

Introduction

The impetus for researching zoomorphic incense burners, hereafter referred to as ‘ZIBs’, was provided by a visit to the enchanting 2015 exhibition in Copenhagen’s David Collection: *Sensual delights. Incense burners and rosewater sprinklers from the world of Islam*. In the exhibition the museum showcased its collection of incense paraphernalia, including a smellscape platform of aromatic materials and its own ZIB (shown in Figs 1.1A and 1.1B). The splendid exhibition catalogue written by Joachim Meyer, the exhibition’s curator, provided a concise foundation for further investigations into these enigmatic objects and inspired my research.

The ZIBs produced in medieval Khurasan are part of a corpus of metalwork produced that can be dated to between the 5th/11th century and the late 6th/12th century. As yet little is known about them, since these modest, domestic objects have generally been overshadowed by other more illustrious, contemporary metalwork – the Tbilisi ewer and the Bobribsky bucket – for which medieval Khurasan is renowned. While a number of scholars have examined Khurasan metalwork and included some ZIBs in their research, there has not, until now, been a systematic analysis of them as a distinct category or group. This study aims to fill that gap by conducting a thorough art-historical analysis of the objects, concentrating on their forms, whether feline or other contrived varieties of animals. The challenge was to investigate the origin of Khurasani ZIBs, the people involved in their production, the contexts in which they functioned and their stylistic affiliations. Though it concentrates on a discrete field of artistic production, this book will also contribute to an improved understanding of Islamic metalwork as a genre.

Documentary sources on ZIBs are limited. Archival notes and records of provenance, both inside and in collections beyond the region, are generally short and shallow, while archaeological and historical sources are lacking almost entirely, with some passing references made to the devastation wrought by the Mongols when they invaded Khurasan from the 616/1220s. To address this dearth of information, a detailed database was created to facilitate research, comprised of 17 ZIBs selected from museums and private collections selected only if their authenticity had been vetted before they were procured (Figs 4.3A to 4.3Q). In comparison with this relatively small number, website searches for ZIB can pull up many anomalous varieties, too good to be true. For example, such incense burners feature styles and motifs apparently justifying a specious chronological morphology that has been contrived to demonstrate a ‘missing link’ between individual objects. Furthermore, several sources preferred that their ZIB was not included in the database.

The analysis undertaken focused on the objects themselves, examining, analysing and comparing their typology¹ and style,² their iconography³ and iconology⁴ with the intention of contextualising them within the wider corpus of Islamic metalwork.

Distinctive in both time and place, the ZIBs were designed for use with aromatic materials, which were everyday commodities for this multi-cultural and religiously diverse region. They were produced by the lost-wax casting technique their hollow, perforated bodies were constructed to hold aromatic materials. Their design might have determined their function as either incense burners or pomanders, or, perhaps in some instances, they could be used as both.

A comparison of their physical characteristics reveals that ZIBs developed stylistically in the timeframe of 118

¹ A typology is the classification of a general type. The term originated from the Greek word ‘typos’, which means an impression, a model or a cast (<https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/art-and-architecture/architecture/typologies#A> accessed 8 November 2019), while the root word, ‘type’ means a group of ‘things that share similar characteristics and form a smaller division of a larger set’ (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/type> accessed 8 November 2019). Classifying an object’s characteristics ‘creates order out of the potential of chaos’, and enables an observer to predict relationships between one object and another even when there are no obvious connections between them. <https://www.encyclopedia.com/literature-and-arts/art-and-architecture/architecture/typologies#A> accessed 8 November 2019.

² An object’s style is its design; Style is a vague word according to Alfred Gell for its use can differ. Gell 1998, 155; Generally, an object’s style implies a ‘distinctive appearance, typically determined by the principles according to which something is designed’ (<https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/style> accessed 3 August 2017), which enables objects to be compared, like with like. According to Meyer Schapiro, style consistently represents an individual’s or group’s artwork and reflects their culture (Schapiro 1994, 51). To an art historian style is invaluable in the investigation of an object’s date, place of origin, and for ‘tracing relationships between schools of art’ (Schapiro 1994, 51); However, ‘style cannot be strictly defined, because its characteristics vary and change continuously and consequently, resist a systematic classification into distinct groups (Schapiro 1994, 53). Style may have further cultural implications, for it may be used as a means of communication, negotiation or to reinforce ethnicity or identities (Conkey in Tilley, Keane, Kuechler-Fogden, Rowlands and Spyer 2006, 359), while Gell notes that there are two types of style; individual and general, which is a ‘universal style’ and not culturally or historically specific (in reference to Wollheim (1987) in Gell 1998, 156).

³ Iconography synthesises two Greek words: icon meaning ‘image’ (Mitchell in Roberts and Shiff 2003, 53) and graphy meaning ‘writing’. D’Alleva 2005, 22; It is the study of images and symbols that represent an object and aims ‘to retrieve the symbolic and allegorical meanings contained in works of art’. D’Alleva 2005, 23; Iconographic analysis occurs when the viewer applies their understanding and knowledge to the object through associating stories or recognisable characters to it. D’Alleva 2005, 22; However, if a viewer has gaps in their knowledge base, their understanding of the object may be compromised.

⁴ Iconology synthesises two Greek words: icon means ‘image’ while logos means word. Mitchell in Roberts and Shiff 2003, 53; It is the study of images or objects in an effort to interpret their symbolism, for ‘iconological interpretation investigates the meaning of motifs, symbols, and allegories in their cultural context’. D’Alleva 2005, 23.



smellscape platform

Figure 1.1A. David ZIB, on exhibition. Copper-alloy. 5th–6th/11th–12th century, Eastern Iran or Afghanistan. H: 24.5; L: 29.5 cm No: 48/1981, DCC.

Figure 1.1B. Scenes from *Sensual delights. Incense burners and rosewater sprinklers from the world of Islam*. March until December 2015, DCC.

Photos: E. C. Kelly, 30 March 2015.

years between the earliest and latest studied (Figs 5.13A to 5.13B), a development which parallels that observed in other contemporary metalwork objects. The assay results of these two ZIBs allowed for a more exact range of production dates to be considered: 456–461/1064–68 or 577/1182, the former date being determined by excavation and the latter inscribed on the object. The dates of two other ZIBs have also been determined as lying within that timeframe. These ZIBs provide a benchmark for the examination and analysis of the stylistic characteristics of the remaining ZIBs in the database. On this basis it was possible to develop a tentative chronology for their production of all 17 objects (Figs 5.14A to 5.14Q).

Chapter 2. Khurasan: land of the rising sun gives an historical and social survey of medieval Khurasan. The production of ZIBs was influenced by the tastes of the region's expanding middle class whose increasing prosperity was brought about by the trade routes traversing the region which facilitated commerce, an exchange of ideas and the development of a new aesthetic. As a consequence, the consumption of incense is likely to have increased, together with the production of its associated paraphernalia.

Chapter 3. Some significant metalwork objects of medieval Khurasan briefly introduces metalwork that preceded the Islamisation of Khurasan, considers some of the remarkable pieces produced during the medieval period contemporary with ZIB production and concludes by shedding light on the development that metalwork took thereafter. After the medieval period the aesthetic for metalwork changed irrevocably, an evolution that can mainly be attributed to difficulties in sourcing an adequate supply of silver. The decorative style also evolved as inlaid decoration became increasing intense, reflecting transcultural appropriation.

Chapter 4. The physical characteristics of ZIBs explores what constitutes a ZIBs and examines the physical characteristics of the 17 examples that are the subject of this book. The 17 are divided into four types according to their cavity openings, as this key feature is likely to have impacted on their function. The influence of size on their role is also assessed. Other significant physical characteristics (facial features, ears with and without knobs, feet, paws or hooves, and tails) are considered in an attempt to explore their feline identity. Different combinations of these physical characteristics are assessed to determine if they have any associations with contemporary vogue for fantastical creatures, whether in the military world or the Princely cycle themed around the courtly pursuits of 'feasting and fighting'.⁵ The physical characteristics of the ZIBs outlined in this chapter provide the basis for a systematic classification of the objects

that underpins the argument for their military association which is presented in Chapter 8.

Chapter 5. Metalwork techniques used in the production of ZIBs assesses the methods involved in the production of ZIBs. It provides a description and illustrative diagrams of the lost-wax method of casting. It also considers the decorative techniques – engraving, chasing, openwork and the inlay or glass enamelling – adopted to embellish on a few ZIBs.

A chronology was developed as a consequence of the research, using the early excavated ZIB and the later, date-inscribed ZIB. These two objects framed a timeline extending over 118 years with these two positioned alongside those with metal assay results, which provided indicative dates. The remaining ZIBs were then situated along this timeline according to a comparative analysis of their decoration and epigraphy. Dating was more problematic for the few that are more individualistic in style; provisional dates have been allocated in the anticipation that with further research will provide more certain dates.

Chapter 6. Where in medieval Khurasan were ZIBs made? examines the evidence for where ZIBs might have been produced, taking into account the existing scholarship on the subject. Archival documentation in regard to findspots or provenance is unfortunately either limited or unavailable. Six cities – Gurgan, Nishapur, Hulbuk, Ghazni, Herat and Taybad – are considered, chosen according to criteria already developed to identify their potential as metalworking centres. The decorative style of architecture and artefacts associated with these places is also drawn on to compare with the design of the ZIBs studied. The chapter also examines the role played by tributes and gift-giving in relocating objects and disseminating an artistic aesthetic.

Chapter 7. The literary sources on ZIBs reviews the medieval Khurasani penchant for fantastical and chimeric creatures as they appear in contemporary historiography and its illustrations and in extant artefacts. The question is how ZIBs relate to these unusual and curious creatures, and how they incorporate classical motifs, such as astrological associations, *farr*, the cintamani (three-dot motif) and the seven-dot motif, all of which have connotations of magical and imperial power.

Chapter 8. Incense use in medieval Khurasan examines the relationship of ZIBs with the use of incense and non-zoomorphic incense burners. The iconography of the hybrid type connects them to the military since their lion motif represented power and was used as a metaphor for warriors, the lion-warriors, while the ZIBs' hooves and caparison or amour suggested war-horses. The five-lobed palmette is ubiquitous, the main decorative motif on the surface of ZIBs. It is believed to represent Khurasan's *esfand* plant, which with its psychotropic effects and heavenly association, was used to augment a warrior's

⁵ Scenes of 'fighting and feasting', *bazm* and *razm*, often decorate artwork of the period depicting musicians, dancers, enthronements and hunting scenes (cf. Figs 2.5A and 3.5B).

bravery, through imbibing and inhalation. *Esfand* and other aromatics were also connected with martyrdom and were used in funerary practices. All these design elements are combined on the hybrid ZIBs examined.

Chapter 9. General conclusion.

The Catalogue presents the database of the 17 ZIBs selected from museums and private collections widely dispersed throughout the world. According to the author's research, this group comprises the first large collation of ZIBs gathered to facilitate a more detailed analysis of type and style. The ZIBs are divided into either the primary or the secondary group, a division based on their authentication. They comprise:

- 1) a primary group of four ZIBs authenticated by dated inscription, excavation or metal assay. These can be used with confidence for comparative analysis with other contemporary artefacts and architectural edifices and
- 2) a secondary group of 13 ZIBs chosen for their prominence in a renowned collection, which has dated and catalogued them as incense burners.

Every attempt was made to ensure that the database was comprehensive, using online sources, publications and museum searches. Nevertheless, it is likely that there are other important ZIBs in existence but not in the public domain. It has not been possible to identify any of these.

Disembodied heads that recall those of complete ZIBs were not included in the database.⁶

There follow four appendices.

⁶ While there are several disembodied feline heads, comparable torsos are rare. Only one bronze oil lamp with tubular spouts was discovered in the NMAK: bronze oil lamp with eight spouts in the shape of an animal. 5th–7th/11th–13th century. NMAK.