

MEMORIES OF THE PAST ?

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

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Abstract

The 12th century saw a revival of Sunni Islam in the cities of Syria and northern Mesopotamia. It is also the period of *muqarnas* and geometrical star-pattern in Islamic art. Seemingly contradictory at the same time, Turkish princes adopted classical decorative forms in northern Mesopotamia and Syria; we find Greek, Roman, and Byzantine figural images on coins and decorative arts. Do we have a 'Classical Revival' (Terry Allen) or a proto-Renaissance comparable to Southern Italy and Sicily? What role do these images play in the cultural memory (Jan Assmann) and who is addressed? We do not find, however, any reference to the classicizing style in contemporary literature nor are there any people who seem to feel connected with classical antiquity. Other explanations have to be explored. With the economic blossoming in the middle decades of the 12th century, common Mediterranean forms and architectural decorations surfaced again. A continuity of classical forms is most visible in Fatimid Egypt. *Muqarnas* and geometrical star pattern arrived with the Iranian Saljuq elite in the Mediterranean. The new economic blossoming allowed a revitalization of regional classicizing traditions which can be interpreted as a renewal of urban pride which is obvious in the contemporary historical writings.

1. Introduction¹

„The past will be only remembered in that extent in which it is used, and how it is filled with meaning and importance, thus how it is semiotised.“
(Jan Assmann)²

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

In Europe the Classical Antiquity was one of the most powerful memories in art and in political representation. It gave for a long time orientation and identity. Rulers with a universal claim, such as Charlemagne, Frederick the Second, and Napoleon depicted their selves 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.

The Islamic civilization is built on a revealed text in written form, the Qur'an. Islam as a religion perceives all periods prior to the divine revelation as less worth of knowing and studying, and calls it *jahiliyya*, the period of ignorance. Objects, monuments, and poetry, however, tell a different narrative. According to Jan Assmann, the memory of a symbol creates orientation within the collective and creates identity for the individual. Not the past as such 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 present proceeds. The cultural memory can be transmitted by tradition and ritual, or by a written text.

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 on 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 the 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 the orb as new attribute of royalty in Islamic iconography. In the third part I, discuss the surveyed sources under the aspect of cultural memory, and identity.

2. *Some Pre-Conditions*

2.1. *The Genesis of the Princely Image*

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.“



Ill. 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 side a courtier playing the <ud, an Oriental form of guitar. The ruler sits in Turkish fashion, which reflects the cultural influence of his Turkish military imported from Central Asia, and being in service of the empire for now about a century. Before the formation of Turkish guards this way of sitting was uncommon in Western Asia.³ The caliph wears no remarkable hair dress and holds a cup of wine in one hand and a *mandil*, a napkin, in his other hand.

In Sasanian Iran the cup reads as the symbol for the sun, *jamshid*, the sun-cup, and the cupbearer appeared as the universal sun king. The pre-Islamic Central Asian and Iranian reading remained obviously intact and was widely remembered. Ceremonial drinking, however, is abundantly 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 spreading with Turkish guards and Samarra style all over the Islamic empire and beyond. We find its ubiquitous use on Iraqi ceramics and other material. The ruler's attributes can vary. The *mandil*-napkin is often replaced by a branch symbolizing fertility and shadow.⁴ We find this

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* (Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 50,1), Stuttgart, pp. 61-78, here p. 64.

⁴ Daneshvari, Abbas (1988): Cup, Branch, Bird and Fish: An Iconographical Study of the

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 more suitable Mediterranean grapes and the left knee is put 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 remember a glorious Sasanian past. After a long erosion of the power of the Islamic empire in economic and military regards, the claim of the Abbasids to rule was challenged from all sides. The Buyids coming from Daylam at the Caspian Sea managed to bring Western Iran and the Iraq under their military sway. The courtly art of this 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 symbolises divine rulership. Winged headgears imitate Sasanian crowns. Elaborate winged crowns symbolize the god Ahuramazda and belonged to the standard ornate 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 to the memory of the Sasanian *shahanshahs* and staged themselves as being Sasanian emperors bringing back those glorious days. They failed ultimately because they could not keep the promises connected 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 meanwhile well known pre-Islamic history of Iran was re-composed into a poetic epic of unrivalled magnitude the *Shahnamah*, the “book of the king”. It is the first literary work written in Persian language with Arabic script. It is the beginning of the new Persian literature.

The *Shahnamah* formulates the foundation myth of the Iranian people and served the contemporaries until the present to build an Iranian identity in opposition to the dominating 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 movement of the stories to the West.⁶

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.

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

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. They fostered a revival of Sunni theology. With the transfer of a Persianate princely elite, Iranian culture arrived in with West and with them the appreciation of the *Shahnama*; in decorative arts *muqarnas* and geometrical star pattern flowed to the West.

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

3.1. The New Imagery

Protagonists of the appropriation of classicizing forms in Syria and Northern Mesopotamia were governor dynasties of the Saljuqs and their successors; most prominent among them are the Artuqids, Zangids and Ayyubids. The Saljuqs laid the foundation for a period of prosperity. But the blossoming 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 of Islamic Art began with the examination of classicizing numismatic imagery. In 542/1148 a series of coinage reforms created large size copper coins allowing an elaborate design. These images fell roughly into four groups; dividing lines, however, are fluid.

Imitations of historical coin designs



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



Secondly, zodiacal star allegories became common by now. Persian astrology and cosmological events constituted a vital part of the live 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, cosmological bestiary. We find dragons, lions, and eagles, single and double headed, in all media.



The fourth group are innovative new images of ruling princes, to which I will come back later. Individual portraits of rulers were not translated into any other media with few exceptions in 13th century book painting.

3.2. *Classical Antiquity Architectural models*

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



Amid, Ulu Camii, Western Façade (photo SH 1982)

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. The point lies in the intricate use of these spoils; the architect and his royal sponsor had not only a taste for the beauty of the honey coloured 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 spoils and with new masonry. The architectural language of the third century masons was firmly adopted by their Muslim disciples.



(al-Shu'aybiyya, photo SH, 1985)

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

The second principal building survived only in part in Aleppo. The existing classicizing entablature belongs to the fountain, *qastal*, of the *madrassa* called al-Shu'aybiyya. In 545/1150 Nur al-Din Mahmud commissioned this complex. Nur al-Din initiated a vast building program in Syria which included even middle sized cities and small towns. The Madrasa al-Shu'aybiyya was built intra muros—facing the city's gate, the Bab Antakya. In 16/637 it saw the caliph 'Umar ibn al-Khattab entering and the foundation of the first mosque in Aleppo. The entrance situation of the *qastal* with the pointed arch is of conventional stone architecture of the time, whereas the entablature however is of classicizing style. It included a floriated *kufic* inscription mentioning 'Umar. The nearly contemporary author Ibn al-'Adim describes this building, but he did 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. Thus classical architecture stood close to the Shu'aybiyya *madrassa*. Thus it might be that the new *madrassa*, the fountain, the early Byzantine gate and the arch formed a matching building ensemble; much like the eastern façade in Amid matched the western façade.⁸



Much less examined, but for sure the most amazing building in this style is 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. A report was never 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, wine leaves, scrolling foliage and a classical composition of the entablature in which even the word *Allah* blends perfectly in. Although all the scrolling foliage is in line with the classical composition, it is however conventional in its decorative elements for the time and region—as for example in comparison to the

⁸ Ibn al-'Adīm, *Zubda: Kamāl ad-Dīn Abū l-Qāsim 'Umar ibn Aḥmad ibn Hibat Allāh ibn al-'Adīm* (d. 660/1262): *Zubdat al-ḥalab min tārikh Ḥalab*, ed. Sāmī ad-Dahhān: *Histoire d'Alep*, 3 vols., Damascus 1951-1968., here vol. I pp. 14-15. Ibn Shaddād, (d. 684/1285), *Al-A'lāq al-khaṭīra fī dhikr umarā' al-Shām wal-Jazīra*. Ed. Dominique Sourdel: *La Description d'Alep d'Ibn Šaddād*, Damascus 1953, pp. 12, 22, 28, 44, 105-106.

⁹ Allen (1986)

contemporary pulpit from Hamah which was basically decorated with geometrical star pattern and some scrolling foliage.¹⁰ In 580/1184, the Spanish traveller Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217) visited and described 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 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 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 ruling between 508 (?)/1114 and 539/1144. This ruler also commissioned the mentioned classicizing mosque in Amid. The Innsbruck bowl is unique in its workmanship in Islamic art, a copper bowl decorated with cloisonné and champlevé polychrome enamel. There is a long debate about the craftsmanship, whether it is of Byzantine, Georgian or southern Italian origins. The central medallion shows the apotheosis of Alexander, standing in a chariot drawn by griffins. Within the Islamic context we have only a similar image on a cast mirror in the collection of the University Museum in Ann Arbor.¹³ It originates probably also from northern Mesopotamia from about the same time. The depiction of Alexander has, as Thomas Steppan and recently Martina Müller-

¹⁰ The pulpit is now in the Museum of Hamah.

¹¹ Ibn Jubayr (d. 614/1217), *Rihla*. Ed. William Wright: *The Travels of Ibn Jubair* (E. J. W. Gibb Memorial Series 5), 2. edited 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. Mittelalterliche Emailkunst zwischen Orient und Occident*, Munich, pp. 13-38, here pp. 15-33.

¹³ University Museum Ann Arbor. Inv. no. 1959/1.115.

Wiener¹⁴ have argued, its firm roots in Mediterranean iconography. Similar images of Alexander we do find at St. Marco in Venice, in Byzantium and elsewhere. Not until the 7th/14th century, we have images of Alexander in book illuminations of the *Shahnamah*. But they just repeat to show him always 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 ideal ruler and conqueror, although a short-lived hero. The Qur'ān (Q. 18:83–101) refers to him as *dhu l-qarnayn*, the two horned. In the Islamic world *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 or not. The Arabs did know 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 hero in battles and as sage. With the Saljuq conquest of Western Asia, this Alexander was brought to the Mediterranean and merged with the western branch of Alexander's memory. After about 1193 the poet Nizami of Ganja authored a further Alexander romance which increased even the interest into the Alexander topic. It was dedicated to the Zangid ruler of Mosul, a clear reference to the popularity of Alexander in Northern Mesopotamian courts. Despite the Iranian origin and understanding of the Alexander, the imagery of the Innsbruck bowl and the Ann Arbor mirror is Mediterranean.

3.4. The Globe as Symbol of Universal Rulership

Further symbols at this time point to a Mediterranean outlook in the imagery of rulers—that is the use of the globe or orb as symbol of universal rulership. The Artuqid dynasty of Hisn Kayfa and Amid in northern Mesopotamia was probably also here the innovator. Since the Hellenistic antiquity the globe symbolizes the orb of the world and was at least on coins, the most ubiquitous of all Byzantine symbols of rule.

¹⁴ Müller-Wiener, Martina (2008): Im Kontext gesehen – Die Artuqidenschale und das „classical revival“ in Nordsyrien und der Ġazīra. In: Ulrike Koenen – Martina Müller-Wiener (eds): *Grenzgänge im östlichen Mittelmeerraum. Byzanz und die islamische Welt vom 9.-13. Jahrhundert*, Wiesbaden, pp. 147-168.



Archangel Michael
Date 1250–1300
Constantinople
Metropolitan Museum



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

The earliest portrait of 556/1160 of an Islamic ruler with an orb seems still to be dependent on Christian models, probably the archangel Michael with the tunic and the curled hair dress as Estelle Whelan could show¹⁵, 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, followed still the princely cycle, a prince sitting in the Turkish fashion with a royal *mandil*, a napkin, in his hand.



For the portrait of Saladin on coins¹⁷, the champion of Sunni Islam, the wine symbolism might have deemed inappropriate for a pious ruler who devoted his life to the *jihad* and enforced the Sunni ideological revival. Quite likely the orb was here used as a symbol of universal rulership. The globe meets here 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

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 Ayyubids* (Royal Numismatic Society Special Publications No. 12), London, p. 103, no. 182.

and Jewish cultures—is crucial for civilizations based on holy scriptures. In the Arab-Persian Islamic civilization, cultural memory of such an importance has necessarily also to be in the written form. Two instances are prominent. The memory of the God's revelation to Muhammad, the Qur'an, gives orientation to the Muslim *umma*, and identity to the individual, as does the *Shahname* constitute Iranian identity.

The Arabic written memory of the Greek and Roman past is slim. The earliest historical books of authors such as Dinawari (d. 281/894-5 or 282/895-6, but before 290/902-3), Ya'qubi (d. 284/897), al-Mas'udi (d. 345/956) and al-Tabari (d. 310/923) have all extensive chapters on pre-Islamic history, however, 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 is told on 262 pages while the Greek-Roman history covers just four.

The knowledge of Greek and Latin language has been 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 asked and cited several times Christian priests to read ancient inscriptions. Because we know well today the formulae of Hellenistic and Roman inscriptions, we know that the priests and monks have failed. There were no people left who felt connected with the memory figures of the pre-Islamic Hellenistic past, except the Qur'anic and Iranian hero Alexander. The 'classical revival', as Terry Allen had postulated it, never happened in the written memory.

On the opposite, Yasser Tabbaa advocates the strong ideological notion of the arts during the period of Sunni revival. This movement finds—according to him—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 ignoring the rich numismatic evidence.¹⁸ Neither approach seems to be satisfactory. For an answer we have to go back to examine the material world.

After the turn to 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. Reading the descriptions of cities

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

in chronicles, it seems that Nur al-Din and other Syrian princes inherited cityscapes which looked much like late antique cities, certainly evolved, but in a declined and altered state. In about the 1150s, Nur al-Din initiated a vast building program to renew and develop cities and towns which gave room for architectural experimentations. The monuments in classicizing style rivalled and just complemented the old cityscapes, probably reflecting the still existing Hellenistic-Roman architecture. Thus the classical style, because it was common in the streets, not worth mentioning by the authors. This does not explain, however, the taste for classicizing style in portable arts and royal representations. Only from the middle of the 6th/12th century on, we can identify Syrian luxury ware. Evidence is almost lacking of how the material world looked like before. 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 lustre-painted ware began in Egypt, probably as a result of migrating craftsmen. Whereas Iraq produced designs with rather abstract images and a limited repertoire, in Egypt the imagery on lustre-painted ware stood in the local more classical tradition with a far larger repertoire. Ernst Grube worked on the so called realism of Fatimid lustre-painted ware. Grube came to the conclusion that some images continue late antique traditions and imagery into the 6th/12th century.¹⁹ Eva Hofmann worked on Egyptian Mamluk book painting. She also found certain visual conventions and techniques going back to late antiquity - not at least through Coptic art.²⁰ Egypt declined in the middle of the 5th/11th century and workshops for lustre painted ware moved probably in the later 6th/12th century to Syria. We can conclude that a similar taste or fashion for Fatimid classicising style existed in Syria even before the period of Nur al-Din Mahmud. But how did the classicizing style go together with the art of “Sunni rival” and its supposedly abstract *muqarnas* and geometrical star pattern which enter 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

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* 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.

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 before, the Syrian elite lacked the financial resources of a blossoming economy and thus sponsorship of architecture and art. This might be the reason why for us, the classicizing style appears so sudden almost without regional precedent. This regional style created identity within the community.



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

For any scriptural society, such as the Islamic civilization, we need written proof for the use of style as memory figure for urban identity. In the period of Nur al-Din we have a renaissance of historical writing in Syria. For Damascus the works of Ibn al-Qalanisi and the monumental achievement Ibn al-Asakir with 80 volumes in print edition, for Aleppo of Ibn al-Adim, for Hamah of several members the royal family of the Ayyubids. *Muqarnas* and the geometrical star-pattern arrived from the east. These became a dominating 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, 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 represents perfectly this merger of Iranian and classicizing Mediterranean culture at the beginning of the

Middle Islamic period.²¹ The lustre-painted dish was made in Syria in about the 1150s. In the 4th/10th century Syria and northern Mesopotamia had been the economically impoverished backwater of Abbasid Empire. Language and grammar 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 symbol of universal royalty.

In the Samarra period the image of the princely figure with the wine bowl in one hand spread all over Islamic world. The *Shahnamah* of Firdawsi, remembered the mythical origins of the Iranian people in Persian language, and thus created the communal memory for the Iranian identity. With the success of the Saljuqs to unify the Asian part of the Abbasid Empire, Iranian ideas of decorative arts spread to the West. This was on the one hand the idea of Alexander and on the other hand *Muqarnas* and *geometrical* star-pattern.

In the middle of the 12th century, the economic prosperity suddenly made the lingering regional tradition visible in new architecture and portable objects. The classicizing architecture matched 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 lustre-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 symbol for universal rulership. The Mediterranean and classicizing style of objects and architecture served the regional identity. The rising urban identity and its inhabitants is reflected in the blossoming of historical writing and the praise of the glory of the cities.

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²¹ David Collection, Copenhagen, inv no. Isl 195.
(<http://www.davidmus.dk/en/collections/islamic/materials/ceramics>; Sept. 16, 2010).

