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## THE ORIGINS OF YEMEN'S TRADITIONAL SILVER JEWELLERY

Yemen's silver jewellery is the most intricate and technically accomplished jewellery beyond European traditions. In short: the most beautiful. This judgment refers to what this article defines as the "classic" Yemeni style, i.e. the jewellery produced primarily in Sanaa by mostly Jewish craftsmen, during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>.

Until now, nothing was known of the earlier periods. Earlier pieces did not seem to exist. This was explained with the (assumed) custom of melting down broken, older, or unfashionable silver, in order to create new pieces. While this was undoubtedly quite commonly practised, it was not exclusive either. Bracelets, anklets, ear pendants, and especially scabbards for daggers were treasured as highly thought of heirlooms, for both their connection with the family, and for their material value.

There was another idea, which went together with the assumption that no older pieces were extant; this was the conviction that time had stood still in fairytale Yemen, and that this would of course have applied to jewellery. It must have remained immutable through the millennia, must have been always identical with the classic style.

However, this is not so. The present article examines seven pieces that are older, and that differ in style and technique from similar classic objects. These are four scabbards for the Yemeni dagger (*janbīya*), a pair of anklets, and a bracelet. Six of them are stamped with a dated Imamic hallmark, and signed, in Hebrew, by their maker. They date to the 18<sup>th</sup> century. The seventh piece, one of these four scabbards, belongs to the Rasūlid period, possibly the 14<sup>th</sup> century. All these objects (and others seen by this author) are identical in form with the classic period, but fundamentally different in style and technique.

The article then scrutinizes one of the most extraordinary economic documents of the Islamic world, the recently discovered and magnificently edited tax and production statistics of the Yemen under the Rasūlid Sultan Yūsuf (al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf), covering the early 90s of the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD.

This unique document provides detailed insight into the metal industries (iron, bronze, brass, gold and silver) of Rasūlid Yemen. It shows that most of the production was centred in Sanaa. The jewellery artisans were Jewish and Muslim. They produced everyday adornment, but also highly valuable and

spectacular objects for the court. The names of the various types of jewellery are largely identical with those of the classic period, and of today. We thus have continuity in form and terminology, but not in the decorative style, and its techniques. Clearly, what is so specific to the classic style — granulation and filigree — is a 19<sup>th</sup> century innovation.

We do not find the words “janbīya”, “thūma” etc. (today’s common terms for the dagger and its sheath) in the Rasūlid text. The fact that one of our objects (a thūma) dates to the Rasūlid period (plus some other arguments) are however proof that the janbīya and its typical scabbards existed at this time, and that we have to understand the tax assessments for the “Arab dagger” as referring to what is today called “janbīya”.

Where did the stylistic innovations that characterize the classic Yemeni silver come from? They originate in the “sunken down” court and church European filigree gold — and silversmithing of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. As it regularly happens when a style is no longer used for high-class production, it sinks down to the popular level. This happened in 18<sup>th</sup> century Europe with filigree, which found new fortunes in folk jewellery. This highly appealing new style was readily adopted in the Balkans, and soon spread all over the Ottoman Empire. Some 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish finger-rings from Hungary / Siebenbürgen are so similar to classic Yemeni silverwork that they could be mistaken for it.

*Key words:* Yemen, silver jewellery, dagger



Carsten Niebuhr, wearing the costume and the dagger (thuma) given to him by the Imam. Bronze statue in Lüdingworth, his birthplace. Artist: Frijo Müller-Belecke. Photograph: Tönjes Reyels

## The “classic” style of Yemen’s traditional jewellery

Traditional silver jewellery from Yemen is widely regarded as the most beautiful, most accomplished, most intricate and technically complex jewellery from anywhere beyond European artistic traditions. It is very beautiful indeed, and it is unique. These judgments refer to what is considered as the epitome amongst the many regional styles of Yemeni jewellery: the objects made by mostly Jewish craftsmen in Sanaa (and to a lesser extent in Şa’da and other places in the highlands) during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. In this paper, I will refer to this as the “classic” Yemeni style.

This limitation in time was warranted by the material record of pieces in museum collections and with private collectors; no older objects (i.e. *before* the classic style) were known. The quality judgment about this “classic” style had as its corollary the express idea that it was representative for the fine or citadine Yemeni silver jewellery as such, and that the observable objects were but the last exemplars of a very long unbroken tradition that might possibly go back to the pre-Islamic period. It was also expressly assumed by all those who had written about the subject that the non-existence of older pieces was due to the fact that damaged or unfashionable jewellery was not preserved, but brought to the Sūq for being melted down and fashioned into new objects.

Both opinions (unchanged over time, and the regular melting down) grew out from the fact that no pieces earlier than roughly 1900 were known, with one singular exception (and therefore unfit for generalization), Carsten Niebuhr’s dagger in Copenhagen.

All those who wrote about Yemeni silver, including this author, shared these two assumptions. Nevertheless, this view is wrong. In the present paper, we will see that there was something before, and that it was quite different. We will try to find out what it was, and how the changes occurred.

This paper explores uncharted territory. It introduces new and unknown material; it is not a re-interpretation of previous publications. What follows is based on objects from my collection, and on the written sources.

## The main regional styles of Yemeni silver

The best-known group of Yemeni silver is the classic jewellery that was made in Sanaa from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. The artisans were almost exclusively Jewish Yemenis. One identical style was practised in Sanaa and the surrounding highlands, as well as in the North in Ṣāda and 'Asīr; most of the industry was however in Sanaa itself. Apart from the Sanaani/highlands group, other distinctive regional styles existed: the Tihāma, the Ḥaḍramaut, the Southern littoral from Aden to Ḥaḍramaut, and, finally, what is being called the Mashreq, i.e. the regions east of Sanaa/Ta'izz, stretching to Mārib and Jūba, and extending into the mountain ridge of the former South Yemen (Yāfi', 'Audhalī, 'Aulaqī). Of course can some sub-regions be identified within these larger groups.

## Mikhail Rodionov's groundbreaking studies on Ḥaḍramī silversmiths and their production

Only one of these regions has been researched in the full meaning of the term: Ḥaḍramaut. We owe these magisterial studies to Mikhail Rodionov. Not only has he done unique fieldwork, virtually catching the last moments of when the craft, and its masters, were still active; he has also been able to contextualise the social reality of adornment in his and Hanne Schönig's groundbreaking edition of documents from Ḥaḍramaut archives (reviewed by Daum, 2013). These texts deal to quite an extent with regulations against the conspicuous display of wealth through jewellery, trying to combat female "extravagance", the age old human inclination for glitter and glitz. It was of course the social relevance, the transgression of borders that motivated the desire of the guardians of society's rules to define licit and illicit adornment, in order to control the female in general. No wonder, these rulings and injunctions are patently similar to Renaissance and early modern European regulations and sanctions on dressing and jewellery. These texts thus provide us with good terminology for female jewellery in traditional Ḥaḍramaut. It will be interesting to see further research comparing Rodionov's terminology with the one from the highlands, as well as both with the terms found in the Nūr al-ma'ārif (the 13<sup>th</sup> century Yemeni tax register discussed extensively in this paper) and in the Geniza. I am extremely delighted and very proud to be able to offer

the present paper as a highlands' complement to Mikhail Rodionov's pioneering studies on Ḥaḍramaut. I would however not wish not to also mention Mikhail's other studies where our interests meet, and, what is more, where our research has reached the same conclusions: I mean the ritual hunt, and Mikhail's insight that the return of the hunters symbolizes a marriage procession — a sacred marriage of pre-Islamic inspiration, as I would formulate it.

## **What was Yemeni jewellery like before the 19th century?**

We will answer this question through an analysis of 7 objects. Four are dagger sheaths, two (a pair) are anklets, and one is a bracelet (of what originally was a pair).

The following is the first comprehensive study of such objects; it owes much to three papers by count Bothmer (for a discussion of these see below) who was the first person to write about the subject. The discovery of the very existence of this whole category of pre-classic jewellery is however due to Aḥmad Rassām, the current 'āqil of the silver Sūq in Sanaa, and his brother 'Abdullāh. Both (as well as their brother Yaḥyā) had learned the trade from their father Muḥammad who had preceded Aḥmad as 'āqil. From him, 'Abdullāh and Aḥmad had acquired the eye for the unusual; in the 1980s, they realized all of a sudden that there existed this older and plainer jewellery, and how important the novelty of an historic approach was. Their generosity in sharing their knowledge is unique. Much of this paper, and of course also the stimulus for Bothmer's articles is to be credited to them. Some half digested information harvested from them also found its way into a recently published coffee table book on Yemeni jewellery that the reader will recognize from its not being mentioned in our bibliography. The Rassām brothers are also at the origin of all four collections of pre-classic Yemeni silver, of which I am going to speak now.

Apart from the pieces discussed by von Bothmer, there are four major collections with such older objects. It is to be hoped that they will be published in the future. About two dozens such pieces are in the Rassām family collection in Sanaa; another app. two dozens are in a collection jointly owned by the Walters Art Museum in Baltimore, and the Israel Museum. My own collection comprises 34 pieces (including those studied in this article); 11 of them bear Hebrew

signatures. The “Schenkung Daum” (for which see the PS) contains 21 such older pieces, of which 4 with signatures in Hebrew.

## Description of the seven illustrated objects

Let us begin with the anklets (ḥijl) stamped al-Mahdī 1233. Their form (intertwined snakes, hence: Abū Ḥanash, “in snake form”) recalls ancient Hellenistic models (in gold), but the style here is quite different. They are made from silver; the ornamentation is enamel, the dark red “stones” are glass. This is interesting, as the stones of another similar pair (Bothmer 2000, p. 21) have gone missing. In a piece of Yemeni jewellery, and such a sumptuous one by that, one would expect agates, and not glass which we would think of as a cheaper substitute. This was obviously not so: agates, for which Yemen has been famous from the pre-Islamic period to this very day, agates were available in quantity in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and rather cheaply, just as they are today, but close examination of our anklets shows that the glass is original, and the settings made for them.

With a valuable piece of jewellery such as these bangles, glass must therefore have been esteemed more than the beautiful locally available agates. We find the explanation in Niebuhr (p. 420) who mentions the few rare and small coloured glass panes in Sanaa, “welche sie von Venedig erhalten.” The Nūr al-ma‘ārif had however noted glass production in al-Mahjam and in Zabīd, the main items being lamps, mosque lamps (including for export to Mecca), bottles and table ware.

The two anklets bear the stamped hallmark al-Mahdī, with the year 1233. This refers to Imām al-Mahdī ‘Abdullāh who ruled from 1231 to 1251 (he died on the 6th of Sha‘bān 1251). The year 1233 corresponds to AD Nov. 11, 1817 to Oct. 31, 1818. One of the bangles has the maker’s signature in Hebrew letters “Sh ‘Adanī”.

This point is the occasion to say how pleased I am to express my gratitude to Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper, Curator (rtd) of Jewish Ethnography, The Israel Museum. Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper is the world’s foremost authority on the material culture of the Yemeni Jews. She has investigated the difficult Hebrew writing on this and the following objects, and discussed it with those very few silversmiths from Yemen who are still active in Jerusalem. The readings given in this paper are hers. She also noted that the names of these 18<sup>th</sup> century Jewish silversmiths still resonated with her informants of today:

all those names were known as families of Yemeni silversmiths whom the informants remembered as active artisans of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## A bracelet dated 1231

This is a bracelet (one of a pair of course) of *miska* (also *massak*) type (pl.: *missāk*). Its more formal name is *siwār*, but the common popular name today is *ṭaffaya*, *ash-tray*. Its characteristic domed (*qubba*) decoration gives it its trade name *ṭaffaya muqabbaba*. It was cast in two halves which were then rolled into form. Some granulated and other decoration was added by the silversmith. Our piece is hallmarked for this same al-Mahdī, this time for the year 1231 (Dec. 3, 1815 to Nov. 21, 1816). The signature of its maker — in Hebrew — is so worn out that I discovered it only when examining the piece for photography. It was then too late for having it examined by Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper. I leave it to the reader to try his or her skills in deciphering these ancient Hebrew letters! This type of bracelet has almost perfect parallels all over the former Ottoman/Persian region, from the West Balkans to Azerbaijan. Its form (the elevated bosses) has remained in favour with Yemeni women to this day.

## Dagger sheaths: *thūmas*

We will now move to scabbards — the main item where a man can display wealth, taste, and individual preference. Yemeni men, with very few exceptions (the Sufi-Saiyids in the Ḥaḍramaut), wear (wore) a dagger in or on their belt. The sheaths are made from wood. Most Yemenis have their scabbard simply covered with leather, but class or region may warrant an elaborate silver sheath. The largest regional group of silver scabbards does again come from the highlands, and here almost exclusively from Sanaa. There are two main forms, the tribesman's *ʿasīb*, and the *thūma* (plural *thūwam*), the sheath worn by the representatives of the two (former) leading classes, the Saiyids and the Qadis. Saiyids relate their genealogy back to the prophet Muḥammad. Qadis (in the class sense) have nothing to do with “judges”; they are the descendants of the pre-Islamic ruling class. (In the Ḥaḍramaut, the two groups are called Saiyids and Sheikhs, *mashāyikh*. The latter again have nothing to do with tribal Sheikhs.) Both groups are highly respected socially, very often they are scholars. We might mention that the dagger itself

is the same for a tribesman and a Saiyid/Qadi: only the scabbards are different.

I do not have an etymology for the word “thūma”. The word *‘asīb* does however have an explanation: Behnstedt, the authority on Yemeni dialects, notes a number of cases where the Yemeni word has a “b” instead of classical “m”, such as *ṣarama* (Yemen: *ṣaraba*), to cut corn, to harvest. In this line, he connects *‘asīb* with *‘asima*, “to have a crooked hand”. The etymology is convincing.

The *‘asīb* is worn in the middle of one’s body, while the *thūma* is worn to the right of it (which makes it almost useless as a weapon).

The dagger itself (*janbīya*: we will propose an etymology later) visibly denotes the free man; it is a symbol of manliness and masculinity; it symbolizes the tribesman’s belonging (*qabyala*) to his social unit that would protect him, and for which’s interests he would also be prepared to give his life. It is thus not surprising that the scabbards of both the *‘asīb* and the *thūma* are of what can only be understood as phallic forms. The end piece of a *thūma* has a name with explicit sexual connotation in the local parlance.

## Description of three 18<sup>th</sup> century thūmas

We will now discuss some *thūmas* in detail. The first one is a marvellous piece of silverwork, gilt, in perfect condition, despite its age. It is stamped al-Mahdī 1120, and signed by its maker, Sa’īd Sabatani, in Hebrew. The ruler’s *laqab* refers to the Imām al-Mahdī Muḥammad, born on the 7th of Jumāda II, 1047, a most interesting figure who was Imām when the famous French commercial delegation (“the coffee delegation”) visited him in February/March 1712 in his newly built capital al-Mauwāhib (between Radā’ and Dhamār).

The French delegation belonged to the second expedition of St. Malo merchants to Mokha. After a successful first voyage, which had lasted from 1708 to 1710, the St. Malo merchant company decided to repeat the venture. They rigged two of their best ships, the *Diligent*, 50 cannons, and the lead ship, the *Paix*, which must have been even more powerfully armed. The aim of the journey was buying coffee, combining such commercial venture with the noble art of privateering. In this, they were equally successful, seizing a Dutchman off the Cape of Good Hope, and two English merchantmen off Ceylon. Thirteen months after their departure from St. Malo, the French finally landed

at Mokha, on the 14<sup>th</sup> of February 1712. Here, they were told that the Imām was suffering from an abscess in the ear, and that they should see him in al-Mauwāhib, with their medicus. The embassy was led by Monsieur de La Grelaudière and included the deputy doctor of the expedition. Fortunately, *le sieur Barbier, habile chirurgien du vaisseau le Diligent*, was able to cure the Imām (de La Roque, p. 193-226). De La Roque's account (based on oral information from de La Grelaudière, and on Barbier's notes) is highly interesting; not least for the fact that we learn that Jiddah somehow belonged to the Imām's reign: shortly before their visit, a rebellion had broken out there which — as de La Roque writes — the Imām quelled with a force of 3000.

This al-Mahdī (full name: Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Ḥasan b. al-Qāsim b. Muḥammad) is known in the history of Yemen as the *ṣāhib al-da'wāt al-thalātha*, the lord of the three throne names, a thing quite unique not only in Yemen, but in Islamic history as such. Muḥammad's first *laqab* was al-Nāṣir (until 1107), he then took the *laqab* al-Hādī; in 1109, he changed again, this time to al-Mahdī. He died on the 5<sup>th</sup> of Ramaḍān 1130, after over 30 years of reign, from 1097 to 1130. Our scabbard therefore, bearing the hallmark al-Mahdī 1120, was made in or after the year 1120 (= 23 March 1708 to 12 March 1709).

The next thūma is also gilt. It is stamped al-Manṣūr 1198 (= 26 Nov. 1783 - 14 Nov. 1784). This is al-Manṣūr 'Alī, born in 1150 or 1151, ruled 19 Rajab 1189 to 1224. Our piece is signed by the silversmith, *Maswarī*. Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper would not wish to pronounce herself definitely for the reading of the (abbreviated) personal name of the silversmith, but I would see it as a slightly sloppy realization of "Sh".

The third thūma is very similar in style and motives to the aforementioned two, but its workmanship is less intricate, and not à jour. It is also not gilt. The upper part which had not been covered by the belt is rubbed. This thūma is hallmarked al-Manṣūr 1211 (7 July 1796 to 26 June 1797); the Hebrew of the master's signature says "Sh Maswarī". Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper adds a note of caution ("nicht ganz eindeutig"), but I have no doubt about the reading.

## A unique very early thūma

Our last piece is not hallmarked, and not signed. It is also not made of silver, but of iron or possibly steel. It is however the most interesting amongst the objects presented in this article. This type of iron/steel

*thūma* is known among the great families of Sanaa, and among traditional Yemeni scholars as *ʿamal al-ghassāsina*, work of the ghassāsina. Qāḍī Ismāʿīl al-Akwaʿ has confirmed to me that “Ghassāsina” (at least in Sanaani parlance, I am not cognizant about the word in the wider Arabic literary tradition) refers to the Rasūlid dynasty of Yemen. I have since found that the *qurra al-ʿuyūn* uses the term (p. 359). The word *ghassāsina* is said to be derived from Ghassān, or rather the Ghassanid dynasty of early North Western Arabia, to whom the — originally Turcoman — Rasūlids constructed their fictitious Arab genealogy. Today, in modern Yemeni historical writing, the term Ghassāsina is no longer used, but Ghassanids (ghassāniy) instead.

I have had so much trustworthy confirmation for the attribution of this kind of *thūma* to the Rasūlid period that I have no doubt about this Yemeni oral tradition being correct. The present piece provides additional and independent proof: the writing and the decoration are interspersed with the Rasūlid coat of arms, the five-petalled rosette. This particular *thūma* must therefore have belonged to a member of the royal family or to one of the great dignitaries or feudatories. I have a few other *thūmas* of ghassāsina style (and of the same quality of decoration) that do not bear the rosette, but should equally be assigned to the Rasūlid period, on stylistic and material grounds. As we shall see soon, these scabbards were not made in workshops attached to the court (i.e. in Taʿizz or al-Mahjam), as one would presume, but in Sanaa.

The writing on the sheath is a poem, in a good Mamluk hand which I would date rather to the later part of the Rasūlid reign, but I am not sure about this. I intend to discuss the object in the future with a scholar specialising in the field in order to have a more precise opinion. The poem goes as follows:

al-thauwāb ʿalā rabbak  
 al-sāʿda yā (?)  
 al-hidāya ʿalā rabbak  
 wa al-sāʿda fī al-janna

Good deeds — your Lord will reward them  
 Happiness is (?)  
 Guidance comes from the Lord  
 And so will happiness in paradise.

There is one more important observation to be made here: the incised decoration was gilt; the gilding is still preserved to some extent. Originally, it highlighted all of the ornament, the calligraphy, and the rosettes.

## Is there literary documentation for jewellery and janbīya making?

Yes — and for the Rasūlid period by that.

I am referring here to a most extraordinary source for the economic history of the mediaeval Islamic world, the *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, a unique compilation dating to the last few years of the reign of the Rasūlid Sultan al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Shams al-Dīn Yūsuf b. 'Umar b. 'Alī b. Rasūl who ruled Yemen for the half century between 647 and 694 AH (= 1249-1295 AD). It was under Sultan Yūsuf that the Rasūlid kingdom saw its greatest extension, from Aden to Najrān, and further north up to Yanbu', and in a west-east direction from the Tihāma to southern Oman, with of course certain regions owing allegiance to tribal or rival authorities, or indeed of mixed allegiance, most prominently the Zaydī Imāms. In fact, the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* also contains the texts of two cease-fire agreements with the Zaydis, unique documents for the mediaeval Islamic world (not least for the respect they show each side had for its adversary). In fact, Sanaa belonged firmly to the Rasūlid domain only under al-Muẓaffar; the territories to the north of it were in the hand of the Zaydī Imams, even if al-Muẓaffar was able to mount several short lived expeditions to Ṣā'da. In a somewhat not clearly definable way, Mecca can also be said as having belonged to the Rasūlid sphere, especially under al-Muẓaffar. The first Rasūlid Sultan al-Manṣūr 'Umar had already struck Dirhams at Minā (the valley near Mecca); he also sent silver and gold lamps to Mecca for the adornment of the Ḥarām. In Muḥarram 667 AH = September 1268 AD, his successor, Yūsuf, ("our Royal Highness, *maulānā*") "ordered the door of the glorious (mu'azzama) Ka'ba to be ornamented with gold and silver by the hand of Najm al-Dīn Ḥasan b. al-Ta'izzī" (al-simṭ al-ghālī, p. 377 s.). The *ghāya al-amānī* (p. 454) gives the year 666, but the briefness of its entry makes it clear that this is a slip in its author's notes. Most of the Rasūlids endowed Mecca with madrassas, above all al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf. The Rasūlids also founded madrassas in Medina and in al-Ṭā'if, and of course everywhere in Yemen. Al-Malik al-Muẓaffar Yūsuf also per-

formed what has always been the formal act of asserting sovereignty over the holy places, namely the covering of the Ka'ba with the "kiswa". The first one to do this had been the Yemeni Himyaritic king Abīkarib As'ad (in Arabic: Abūkarib As'ad), late 4<sup>th</sup> / early 5<sup>th</sup> century AD, practising with this a well established South Arabian pre-Islamic religious rite.

It was under Sultan Yūsuf that the kingdom reached the apogee of its economic development and wealth, and its intellectual flourish also, which it maintained for at least another century. The seat of power and of the court ("al-bāb al-sharīf") was in the south, centring on Ta'izz, Aden, Zabīd and al-Mahjam, the main residence being Ta'izz.

The Nūr al-ma'ārif has been described as a tax-register (which it is), but I would also qualify it as a kind of statistical yearbook that lists in the greatest detail all the productions (plus income, taxes etc) of the country, be they industrial/artisanal, or agricultural. Extremely important and providing unique insight into 13<sup>th</sup> century world trade are the lists of products and taxes for imports into and exports from Aden, the port situated at the crossroads of trade between Egypt (including European goods, such as swords or certain textiles) and India. This unique material has been made available to scholarship in a masterly study by Eric Vallet (2010). As to the industrial productions, they were of course compiled for tax purposes, but sometimes they only list the price for a specific item.

The importance of the Nūr al-ma'ārif for the study of the economic history of the Islamic world can not be overstated (Daum 2006); it can only be compared with the Cairo Geniza. Unfortunately, scholars of Islamic history do not seem to be interested in studying it. It is of course much easier to theorize about our contemporary fashionables, or to deal with Syrian principalities of the 13<sup>th</sup> century for which every relevant document is available in translation into one of the Indo-Germanic dialects. The usefulness of the Nūr al-ma'ārif is enormously facilitated by the editor's copious notes. They provide unique explanation for difficult words or terms and their meanings. Without these notes, I would not have understood the text, although I do of course — as we shall see — sometimes disagree with Muḥammad Jāzim.

## What does the Nūr al-ma'ārif say about jewellery?

As we said above, the Nūr al-ma'ārif provides (among innumerable other things) detailed accounts of the artisanal production in Yemen in the early 90s of the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Sometimes, it reads like the broken down to factory level accounts of former Five-Year-Plans!

It is obvious that our extant unique and only copy of these statistics does not reproduce and summarize all the material that was available and collected (on purpose) in the royal chancellery in Ta'izz. On the other hand, it seems quite complete for the manufacturing industries that interest us in the present paper. While the Nūr al-ma'ārif localizes most of the iron, gold and silver manufacturing in Sanaa, the document also mentions Dhamār, Ta'izz and al-Mahjam where productions are however marginal, compared with Sanaa. This makes it clear that the manuscript is not *deficient* as far as metal production is concerned, but that it reflects the reality of the industry. On the whole, the impression we gain from the Nūr al-ma'ārif is that there was no significant metal production in Ta'izz, Aden or in most Tihama towns, but that 90% of metal working (in particular goldsmithing and silversmithing) was in Sanaa, exactly as it was in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The impression of the manuscript's completeness (for these sectors) is also supported by the substance of the industries listed, i.e. the weight of the luxury manufacturing. For the late 13<sup>th</sup> century, the Nūr al-ma'ārif provides indeed so much detail about the production of luxury items (including leather and trappings for horses) in Sanaa, that much of it must have been destined to the court (in Ta'izz) and the aristocracy. This reinforces our impression of the manufacturing industries being centred in Sanaa.

## Jewellery and decorated weapons in 13<sup>th</sup> century Sanaa

We will now examine the relevant passages from the Nūr al-ma'ārif. A first reading leaves us with a big deception: we would have hoped to find the terms *janbīya*, *thūma*, or *ʿasīb*, but they are not there. As we shall however see in a moment, the *objects* themselves are there. This leads us to the conclusion that the *names* came up only at a later period.

Volume I of the Nūr al-ma'ārif deals extensively with jewellery. The information has been assembled under the heading “on gold- and silversmithing”, *al-ḥadīth ʿalā al-ṣiyāghāt min al-dhahab wa al-fīḍa*

(note the colloquial un-grammatical non-genitive style!). The statistics begin with gold jewellery. The listings are extremely detailed. A considerable number of terms continue to be used to this day; in these cases, the continuity must of course also refer to the objects. To give a few examples: *‘iṣāba* (also: *‘uṣāba* or *ma‘ṣaba*), a broad “woven” band worn on the forehead; *duqqa*, meaning both the very large hollow silver beads of globular form, and the necklace composed of them; *lāzim*, a broadish necklace with many decorative strings hanging from a broad upper band; *qubla* and *shammās*, the centre-piece and the two end pieces of a *lāzim*'s upper band; *siwār* (pl.: *aswira*), bracelets; *khalā-khil* (sg.: *khilkhal*), anklets; *ḥijl* (pl.: *aḥjāl*), the larger form of anklets; *khurṣ* (pl.: *akhrās*), ear pendants, etc.

Then come mostly the same objects in silver (*ashghāl al-fiḍḍa*, p. 158 ss), but also, for instance, such still everyday objects as containers for *kohl* (*makhḥala*, *Jāzim* vocalizes *makhḥala*), and, funnily, amulets for children (*al-qīṭa’ li-al-ṣughār*).

Then comes an interesting subchapter: *al-ajr ‘alā al-ashghāl min al dhahab wa al-fiḍḍa min imlā’ ‘Abd al-Salām al-Isrā’īlī*. His productions are divided into (first) gold, and (second) silver. The first item is a “kullaband”, a word not known to *Jāzim* or to me, but which is described in another source as a highly valuable piece in the treasury of a later *Rasūlid* king, decorated with pearls and precious stones, such as rubies and emeralds.

We take this and similar exquisite objects as yet another confirmation that the *Sanaa* artisans and jewellers were the leading craftsmen of the kingdom, providing not only the aristocracy at large with jewelled objects, but also the ruler (in *Ta‘izz*) — which means that there was no significant quality production in *Ta‘izz* itself.

The listing for *‘Abd al-Salām al-Isrā’īlī* continues with the well known staples of Yemeni jewellery, such as *ḥijl*, *khurṣ*, *siwār*, *khauwātīm* (sg: *khātīm*, Ring), *lāzim*, *zayn al-khidd* (cheek-hangers, still common in the 20th century), or golden belts. These items are then followed by those same objects in silver.

One single person can not have such a broad range of objects on offer, in both gold and silver, for all and sundry, from the ordinary citizen to the ruler himself. It must have been a rather large workshop, with a number of family and relatives working for the firm's head. Also, the length and detail of this entry for just one jeweller (with very few others being named individually) can only mean that he was the

foremost producer of these items. We must therefore see in ‘Abd al-Salām al-Isrā’īlī the head of a large workshop, a production “firm” where a considerable number of workmen must have been employed under his supervision. This conclusion is all the more plausible as it was repeated (or *still* practised!?) in the 20th century with the workshops of Bausānī and Badīhī and the large high quality output that went under those names and their hallmark.

But who was ‘Abd al-Salām al-Isrā’īlī? Muḥammad Jāzim is of the opinion that he was Muslim. He feels that a Jew would never have such a typical Muslim name as is ‘Abd al-Salām. Muḥammad Jāzim, very much aware of the historical importance of the question (as shedding light on the history of the astonishing Jewish predominance in jewellery making in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) says that he had expressly travelled to Rayda and Ṣa’da in order to discuss this with members of the Jewish communities. They had told him that it was unimaginable for a Jew to have such a distinctively Muslim name. Muḥammad Jāzim therefore comes to the conclusion, that ‘Abd al-Salām al-Isrā’īlī was Muslim. I do not share Jāzim’s conclusion. It may well be true that in recent centuries Jews would not have such specifically Muslim names, but the characterization of a person as “al-Isrā’īlī” (which is not a nisba) can not have any other meaning than pointing to his religion/personal statute. This I find supported by the fact that no patronym is given — a thing to be expected in the case of a Muslim.

We have thus here the proof that already in Rasūlid times gold- and silversmithing was extensively practiced by Jewish craftsmen, and that the 20<sup>th</sup> century situation was not really different from what we can say for the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Then, after an insert concerning the prices for hammering gold come two more expressly named artisans (p. 163 ss.): al-Shaykh Ḥasan al-Ajrī, and Yūsuf al-Isrā’īlī al-Wāthiqī, “for the year 692”, i.e. that the data were collected in 692 AH = 12 December 1292 to 1 December 1293 AD.

Two more craftsmen, again of course heads of large family production units, one Muslim, and the other one Jew. For the latter, the three-tiered linguistic make up of his name — again without patronym — leaves no doubt as to his religion/personal status. Summing it up, we note that only three manufacturers are mentioned by name. There must have been small single owner workshops which the Nūr

al-ma'arif does not list expressly, but the bulk of the production (of the tax worthy production of course) came from three workshops. They provided much of the jewellery for the large Rasūlid kingdom, the ruler, his court, the aristocracy, and the ordinary citizen, for both male and female adornment.

## The products made by the two aforementioned businesses

We will again limit our presentation to some selected items. The first one I want to discuss are *al-aswira qubūr al-'ushshāq*, the “tomb” bracelets. These bracelets continued to be produced into the 20<sup>th</sup> century where they constituted one of the summits of the Jewish Yemeni jeweller's art (a beautiful pair is reproduced in Muchawsky-Schnapper 2000, p. 142 s.). Their name also has maintained itself to this day — with a small but significant change: in fact, today they are simply called “qubūr”; another name is Abū sundūq (“with boxes”). They were worn by both Jewish and Muslim women of higher social standing. It is interesting to find their full name in the Nūr al-ma'arif: this dispels the oddity of the somewhat somber connection with tombs which does not fit a jewel — after all, isn't the word *jewel* derived from Italian *gioia*, joy! The full name, “the lovers' tombs” would therefore mean “I would die for our love” as Jāzim notes. What a lovely name for a beautiful piece of art!

The next type which I would like to pick up also continued to this day. It is all the more interesting in the context of the present article as we have already discussed a real pair: it is the “snake anklets”, stamped al-Mahdī 1233. They were already manufactured in 13<sup>th</sup> century Sanaa. The Nūr al-ma'arif distinguishes three types, Abū Zurūq, then a model with two snake heads, and finally a snake form without heads. I may add that 'Abd al-Salām al-Isrā'īli also had silver snake anklets (al-ḥijl alladhī bi-thu'bān) in his production programme (p. 162).

## Metalwork decorated with calligraphy

The next paragraph deals with an extremely important subject for the history of Islamic metalwork: “work with decorative / engraved

calligraphy”, *ashghāl al-mukattaba al-manqūsha*. I will translate the passage in full (the text is difficult, and I hope to have grasped it), but before coming to the substance I want to share my impression that the text also allows for a pleasant insight into the mentality or rather the work ethos of the inspector who was charged, 700 years ago, with assessing the craft and its taxation: the keenness of his observation and his interest in the technical process are quite obvious, well beyond the strict necessity of establishing a tax basis.

### “Section on engraved calligraphy”, *tasmiya al-ashghāl al-mukattaba al-manqūsha*

The first procedure (*fa-alladhī*) is as if somebody pulls out (erases) plants from the earth (*tuqla’ arḍuhu*), so that only the writing remains raised, as if it was a plant left and not pulled out (*wa tabqā al-kitāba ka-innahā munabbata*); then, the whole ground and the writing are being coated/plated (*wa al-jamīya’ min al-arḍ wa al-kitāba ṭalī*), a procedure called *qala’ arḍihi maṭlī*, the erasure of its ground (and its coating/plating).

*Wa alladhī yakūn barīh*, the second style is when the parts where the metal has been erased (the word *barīh* is not known to me, but Jāzim explains it as a Yemeni word meaning *kasht*) are inlaid with gold, and where the ground around it has been whitened (with tin?), *naqsh maṭlī bi-dhahab wa arḍuhu mubaiyiḍa yusammā mubarriz mukarkash*. This is called “mubarriz mukarkash”. The third procedure (*wa alladhī*) is as if the raised sections were blackened (*kaḥāl*) and the ground around it (*wa arḍuhu*) white (*bayḍā’*) *tusammā al-kitāba qala’ wa dafn*, it is called the erased and dug-out writing. In this style, the ground remains mubarriz mukarkash.

Jāzim notes that the three methods are employed for both jewellery and metal vessels (another section); the text makes it also clear that the technique is the same for calligraphy and ornamental decoration. Jāzim concludes that all three methods are basically identical. I am not so sure about this (yes, the erasing of the metal with a burin, leaving only the writing raised, is the same), but could the third method not be Niello? I tend to understand the first procedure as coating with gold, i.e. gilding, while the second procedure would be inlaying, and the third one Niello (*lāz*).

## Was calligraphic metalwork produced in Yemen?

Whatever the precise technical meaning of this paragraph, this is the only technical description known to me for what is the summit of Islamic metalwork, the inlaid masterpieces of the Aiyubids and the Mamluks with their engraved decoration and the beauty of their bold *thulūth* calligraphy. The question of whether the inlaid plates, chandeliers, braziers, stands or basins bearing the Rasūlid rosette have all been made in Cairo and Damascus, and imported into Yemen, or if there has been a Yemeni production in this exquisite technique has been discussed controversially (Porter p. 236). This author has maintained that some Rasūlid metalwork was indeed produced in Yemen. Here is the proof!

Making an inlaid vessel comprises two stages: the production of the vessels, and, secondly, their engraving. The production of bronze (*niḥās*) and brass (*ṣifr*, but sometimes also *niḥās aṣfar*) vessels as such is inventoried in the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* vol. I, p. 298. We just saw that engraving and inlaying with gold or silver had also been practised. The *qurra al-uyūn* (p. 359) speaks expressly about the Rasūlids' concern for "opening the doors for industry and metalwork (*ta'dīn*), and that the sound of the Ghassānī bronzes inlaid (*muṭ'am*) with gold still echoes the generations to this day". With "to this day", Ibn al-Daybā' (866/1461 to 944/1536), the author of the *qurra al-uyūn*, writing already under the Tahirids, refers to the early 16th century. Inlaid metalwork was as much appreciated in Yemen as it was in Egypt and Syria (and on today's art market). Therefore, inlaid works of bronze and brass were preferred objects in the exchange of embassies and diplomatic gifts between the Rasūlids and Cairo, both ways, as were exquisitely manufactured inlaid weapons: thus, in 799 AH / 1396 AD, when al-Malik al-Ashraf Ismā'il (1377-1400) sent gifts to Sultan Barqūq, these included a steel sword, the blade of which was inlaid with gold, on a golden belt (references in Vallet 2011, p. 297).

## Diplomatic "gifts" between Yemen and Egypt: Motor of trade and luxury industries

The Rasūlids (and above all Aden, their main port) sat at the crossroads of the Egyptian / Mediterranean, and the Indian and East Asian worlds, renewing the earlier tradition of the Jewish dominated

Yemeni world trade documented in the Geniza (Daum 1988). The Rasūlids therefore did everything to strengthen their commercial and political relations with Egypt and India / China, but they were also not loath to enforce their monopoly as the *only* go between, as has been convincingly argued by Vallet (2011). Their principal way of maintaining good relations with both worlds did however consist in the regular exchange of presents, sent through diplomatic missions. These embassies were reciprocated by their partners, chiefly the Mamluk Sultans in Cairo.

Doris Behrens-Abouseif has written a wonderful book on this mediaeval Mamluk custom of exchanging gifts between rulers. A detailed and documented, but at the same time immensely readable chapter deals with the gifts exchanged between the Mamluks in Cairo and the Rasūlids. As far as the relations between the two states are concerned, Behrens-Abouseif views the gifts sent by the Rasūlids as an expression of a mutually perceived feeling/status as (at least nominal) vassals of the Cairo rulers. “These were not mere gifts, but a kind of tribute imposed on the Rasūlid sultans” (p. 37). I tend instead to rather sharing Vallet’s interpretation who feels that the very considerable quantities so exchanged were a form of state to state *trade*, and not an expression of inequality. Otherwise, how would the enormous quantities of luxury goods sent by the *Mamluks* be explained! would they in turn feel to be in a state of vassalage towards the Rasūlids? Vallet’s main argument against the idea of a “tribute” comes however from the tax exemptions from which those “gifts” benefitted in both kingdoms: in their dealings from ruler to ruler, both the Rasūlids and the Mamluks thus established a privileged extra trading channel that benefitted their treasuries directly, besides the normal trade relations that were in the hands of the great Cairo international merchants. I can also not dispel the feeling that the Egyptian sources are somewhat biased in favour of their rulers, endowing them with more power and lustre than what they wielded in the reality of Red Sea political and economic relations.

The exchange of such quantities of luxury industrial productions (both ways), plus, of course, the usual curiosities, is of great importance for our subject, as it always included metalwork of all kinds. In this way, an “international style” could develop, with models and techniques from Egypt (plus Syria) being available in Yemen, and the clear indication of precious metalwork, in bronze, in gold, in silver, being

manufactured in Yemen. Vallet (2011, p. 281-301) provides a detailed year by year list of the various embassies and their goods, as far as our sources allow for it, confirming this impression. The goods and commodities exchanged consisted largely of metalwork, such as basins, ewers, chandeliers, plates in bronze and silver. Spices, Chinese textiles (and, in the return direction, textiles from Venice and Sousse) and Chinese porcelain were regular items. The Rasūlids received embassies (in addition of course to the normal trade relations) from Bahrain (al-ʿuqūd, p. 185), Shiraz, Calicut, Cambay, Bengal, Ceylon, and China — and “recycled” some of these as gifts for Cairo. Horses figured prominently amongst the Yemeni “gifts”: in the year 666 AH, al-Muẓaffar sent 20 horses fully caparisoned for warfare, to Sultan Baybars (Yemen was famous for its horses, the main item in its exports to India; in order to keep this business going, veterinarians were prohibited from travelling to India). These horse trappings — presumably in leather, silver and steel — would be products of the Sanaani luxury industries catalogued in the Nūr al-maʿārif. This embassy also included an elephant, and a “wild ass striped black and white” (Vallet 2011, p. 282 s.; al-simṭ al-ghālī, p. 377; ghāya al-amānī, p. 454; al-Maqrīzī, p. 563 s. who interestingly calls al-Muẓaffar “malik al-Yaman”).

The embassy sent by al-Malik al-Mūʾayyad Dāʾūd in the year 703/1304 is particularly interesting for the details transmitted by the Rasūlid court historian, al-Khazrajī (p. 297s): When the ambassador, the Emir Asad al-Dīn Muḥammad b. Nūr, left on the 1<sup>st</sup> of Shawwāl 703 (6 May 1304), his two “majestic” ships were laden with innumerable valuable goods, which I will refrain from enumerating in full. Suffice it to mention the many and various objects in silver (interesting in our context as yet another proof for the manufacturing of precious metal objects in Yemen), such as basins, ewers, necessaries, braziers, containers, etc. (the word “silver” might probably mean bronze or brass, inlaid with silver). The cargo also consisted of logs of sandal wood, and of big chunks of ambergris (found on the Indian Ocean shores of Yemen) and bags with musk (a Yemeni / Soqotri product). Both these raw materials for the perfume and fragrance industries were (and still are) more valuable than gold. The gifts included the “most splendid” Chinese porcelain and jade, Chinese cushions, gilt sedan-chairs, Chinese gold-brocaded robes, etc. Other valuables were Chinese *shah* (a pharmaceutical plant), camphor, and bags of pepper, of cloves, of ginger, of *lac* (the red dye). The obligatory elephant, the

zebra, a giraffe were of course not missing, all of them bedecked with silk and gold weave atlas, as were pure Arab horses.

The “return” trade / gifts were equally important. It was especially the large quantities of inlaid metal vessels, trays, chandeliers etc. sent by the Mamluks that were greatly appreciated by their recipients, and treasured in the Rasūlid palaces. They continued to be valued by the successor states, the Tahirids and the Zaydī Imams, to whom much of these works of art passed, as revealed by later Zaydī ownership inscriptions (Porter, p. 232).

In the *ghāya al-amānī* (p. 671, “year 934”), we read about an interesting episode concerning silver-inlaid vessels of the Rasūlids: when its author, Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn (born ca. 1035 AH = 1625/26 AD, died 1100 AH = 1688/89 AD, or in 1080 AH = 1669/70 AD), describes the conquest of al-Miqrāna (near Damt), the last stronghold (“capital”) of the Tahirids, on the 13<sup>th</sup> of Ṣafar 934 (7 November 1527), he has the following to say:

“... when al-Muṭahhar (i.e. the son of Imām al-Mutawakkil Yaḥyā Sharaf al-Dīn) entered al-Miqrāna, he captured arms (sillāḥ) of all kinds, and the cannons (madāfi‘), and the exquisite silver inlaid bronze objects of Rasūlid manufacture, *wa al-ālāt al-rafi‘a min al-niḥās al-ghassānī al-muraṣa‘ bi al-fidḍa*, and various kinds of porcelain.”

## Engraved dagger scabbards, in precious metal and in iron

Nearer to the more restrained subject of this article, the description of the technical procedure (and with yet another word for “inlaid”) given by the Nūr al-ma‘ārif refers also to our inscribed iron/steel thūma:

On pages 290 ss. (vol. I), we find detailed lists of ironwork, iron door fittings, ploughs, horse trappings, locks, lamps, etc. Next is the section which is what we have been looking for, namely daggers and their sheaths, still under the heading “iron”.

In this chapter (and unsystematically elsewhere), the Nūr al-ma‘ārif lists four kinds of daggers (p. 297 s.); they must be of comparable value, as the tax is 1/8 Dinar for each model. The four types are al-khanjar al-khaṭarī, al-kanjar al-‘arabī, al-khanjar al-ḥaḍramī, and al-khanjar al-shāmī.

Jāzim has no doubt (he doesn’t even argue about it) that the Arab dagger and the Ḥaḍramī dagger are what we call today janbīya. I also

do not have the slightest hesitation about it. Even today, there are only two main kinds of daggers (i.e. the blade), the highlands janbīya, identical for the tribesman and the Saiyid (only the scabbard is different), and the smaller and narrower Ḥaḍramī blade. It does seem most natural that this broad division is anchored in the past. I do not know what is meant by the khaṭarī dagger, and I feel not competent for defining what is meant by the Syrian (shāmī) dagger, but straight blades might be a reasonable guess for both.

Then (p. 298), still under the heading “iron”, come the scabbards, *ghilāf* (the text uses al-ghulūf as plural; the normal Yemeni plural is however *aghliḥa*, of Sabaic dialectal inspiration), for both swords and daggers. Following is the description of other armour, such as helmets, etc. This classification makes it clear that scabbards made of iron or steel are meant, not silver or gold; scabbards decorated with gold or silver are indeed treated in another section. Swords, daggers and knives inlaid with gold and silver are inventoried in II, p. 152–160; silver scabbards for swords are in II, p. 160s, silver scabbards for daggers (janbīyas) are p. 161. But the scabbards this chapter lists under the heading “iron” are of course in iron, i.e. they are the iron / steel thūmas we are interested in. We have thus here the written proof for the manufacturing of iron/steel thūmas of the kind of our exemplar. The tax is ¼ Dinar; somewhat casually mentioning only the khaṭarī and the ‘arabī, but obviously referring to all four types. Then (I p. 298) comes a highly interesting note: *hadhihī ḍarība mustamira li-al-qāwī wa al-ḍa‘īf*, this tax is the same for “the strong” and “the weak”. What does this mean?

Jāzim interprets the words as meaning that this tax should not differentiate between a rich and a poor person. Does this make sense? No, it doesn't: the tax is on the object, not the person. So what?

“qawī” and “ḍa‘īf” have a very specific meaning in tribal Yemen, especially in the Ḥaḍramaut: they denote the class structure. A “qawī” may be a small person, a scholar without any physical strength, but from the Saiyid or Qāḍī class. He may be rich, he may be poor. A “ḍa‘īf” is a member of the lowest class who may well be a muscled giant, or again rich or poor. The text therefore refers to class distinction in the form and decoration of the janbīya's sheath, not to the person wearing it or ordering it. In other words: It says that the scabbards for an upper-class janbīya are *visibly different* from those for a lower class sheath. Today's difference between a thūma and the *very* conspicuous silver

scabbards of the lowest classes therefore existed already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century.

In a much later section (II 152), the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* deals again with daggers (under the heading “knives and similar things”, but this time with knives and daggers the hilts or blades of which are inlaid with gold and silver. The eight categories mentioned and the very high prices show the level and the quantity of luxury production in Sanaa.

Then (II 153), the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* comes back to iron production in Sanaa. Of the three family businesses mentioned, two continue to work as smiths to our day! This is extraordinary! Such continuity should not be alien to the other crafts, such as silversmithing.

Another section then deals again with weapons, *sillāh*, inlaid with silver and gold. It also deals with sheaths made of silver and gold. We saw above that such swords were also sent as diplomatic gifts of the Rasūlid Sultans to the Cairo rulers (Indian princes, dignitaries, and Islamic scholars were mostly treated with valuable robes and with gold). The prices reported for these objects are very considerable.

One item here sticks out for our theme: “*ibzīm*”. What is an *ibzīm*?

Every ordinary leather belt has a buckle at one end which serves for fastening it and a tongue at the other end which goes into the buckle. We must now take into account that Islamic law frowns upon the conspicuous display of precious metal for male adornment; but of course the decoration of weapons and related gear is allowed, as are rings and seals. In order to satisfy the human desire for showing off one's wealth, Yemeni silversmiths developed ways that allow both, by transforming utility into ornament.

The belt for a classic 20<sup>th</sup> century *thūma* comes therefore decorated with a number of silver ornaments; the most prominent are the tongue and the buckle, both made of silver and purely decorative — not serving any practical purpose. The silver forms are no longer functional; they are simply sewn on the belt which is fastened by an iron buckle. Such purely decorative buckles have obviously been worn already in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. The *ibzīm*, the false buckle of the *Nūr al-ma'ārif*, is still found on every 20<sup>th</sup> century *thūma* belt, and is still called by this very same name.

We end our reading of the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* with the paragraph mentioning those craftsmen who practise the “hammering industry”, *ṣunnā' al-daqq*, in gold and silver (p. 165): some Persians, *ā'jam*, one in *Tā'izz*, two in Sanaa, and some relatives of them, a Jew in Sanaa by

name of Sālim, others in Dhamār etc. “They produce decoration where the gold or silver is raised, on a basis of black (??)”. I am not sure of my translation, maybe Niello is meant? They also produce “seals for sealing on paper, finger rings, and dies for the mint”.

## Interim conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, we saw that what is generally considered as the classic Yemeni jewellery (both female and male) does not go back deep in time, as had always been assumed: our dated 18<sup>th</sup> century pieces, while they show the same *forms* as the 20<sup>th</sup> century pieces, are in fact totally different in style and technique. Even more surprising is the fact that one of our thūma scabbards (identical in form with the 20<sup>th</sup> century exemplars) made of iron/steel is even older, and indeed *much* older than the 18<sup>th</sup> century: It is of a type recognized by traditionally educated Yemenis as dating to the Rasūlid period. We found this type of sheath described in the 13<sup>th</sup> century Nūr al-ma‘ārif.

Our Rasūlid thūma thus allows for another conclusion: while the style of its decoration and its material are not encountered in later periods, its *form* is absolutely identical with our 18<sup>th</sup> century pieces, and with the elaborate exemplars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century classic style. This is not only brilliant proof for the idea of continuity, it also allows for drawing another conclusion: as the sheath has remained the same for (at least) 700 years, the dagger itself must also have remained the same. Otherwise, it would not have fitted into our Rasūlid scabbard. This means that the Yemeni janbīya, this most visible marker of Yemen's culture, did indeed already exist in Rasūlid times, but without being named so. We were therefore justified when we equated the Nūr al-ma‘ārif's “Arab” and “Ḥaḍramī daggers” with what is known today as janbīya.

We had mentioned above that Jāzīm, with his unparalleled knowledge of Yemeni words and things, had already argued for the identity of these two daggers as janbīyas. Our iron/steel piece is the material proof.

Later on in this paper, we will propose an opinion on how the new techniques (such as granulation and filigree) were introduced into Yemen in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

## Pictorial representations of janbīyas on late Mamluk metalwork

In the late Mamluk period, the blazons of the high officials became more and more complex, combining a plethora of titles, possibly reflecting the accumulation of offices in one person, or the decline in real power that engendered inflation in titles. Our photograph shows an engraved late Mamluk plate in the al-Ṣabāḥ collection, Kuwait, bearing the name of the Amīr Aqbirdī b. ‘Alibay. This tray is an example of a well-known late Mamluk type (see Wiet, planche LI, planche LII, planche LIII, planche LV, planche LVI, planche LVIII). All of them bear this very typical late Mamluk coat-of-arms. This tray is however unique in providing the place of its manufacture, something extremely rare with Islamic metalwork. Wiet (p. 48 ss) lists only 12 such objects. Hence the difficulty of attributing Islamic metalware to specific schools or places of manufacture. The present plate is the only one of its period mentioning it, namely *al-Qāhira al-maḥrūsa*, “Cairo, the city protected by God”.

On this tray, Aqbirdī bears the title *dauwadār kabīr*, Chief Secretary of the Sultan. He was awarded this function in 1481 AD. In 1486, he became wazīr. He died in Aleppo, on the 12<sup>th</sup> of June 1499. The tray is therefore to be dated between 1481 and 1486.

The blazon is intriguing. The top register shows a napkin (“royal steward”), then, in the middle register, a large cup (“cupbearer”). Inscribed into it is a pen-box, indicating his status as chief secretary; the small cup in the lower field accentuates his position as the Sultan’s cupbearer (Mayer, p. 19ss, p. 32, p. 65s). While the significance of these elements is well established, this is not so for the two curious objects left and right of the large cup. Mayer discusses them at great length, coming to the conclusion that they are “horns” or “trousers of nobility” (whatever that may mean). This interpretation has not generally been accepted, but no convincing alternative has been offered.

It seems to me that this impasse is due to the fact that Islamic art scholars at the time (and still today) were not familiar with Yemen. There can be no doubt that these are thūma sheaths — even the characteristic subdivision into two parts with the ridge separating them is clearly visible. The association is also quite fitting if the meaning of the object is considered: the thūma designates Saiyids and Zaydī Imams, descendants of the prophet — quite fitting for a Turkish Emir!

## Published 18<sup>th</sup> century silverwork

Most of the material discussed so far in this article is new. The very existence of real 18<sup>th</sup> century silverwork is new, or almost. Still, a few dated 18<sup>th</sup> century items have been published. The author is the art historian, count Bothmer. Unfortunately, his three papers did not get the attention they merited. I will now discuss them in detail. My rectifications should not be understood as trying to minimize von Bothmer's pioneering work: the three articles are the groundbreaking opening of a totally new vista on the history of Yemeni silver jewellery. Compared with such an achievement, the inevitable errors do not weigh heavily. The following remarks are therefore simply meant as a service for future researchers.

Von Bothmer's first object (2000, p. 19) is a rather plain bracelet, with some engraved linear decoration, and remains of gilding and enamelling (greenish or turned into green). It is stamped *al-Manşūr 1153* and bears the silversmith's signature in Hebrew, Shukr Jamal.

Count Bothmer's next piece is a bracelet similar to ours, equally with some remains of enamelling. It is stamped *al-Manşūr 1153*, but has no signature.

The third object is an Abū Ḥanash anklet, almost identical to ours. The glass beads are missing. The remaining enamel is blue/green. It is hallmarked *al-Manşūr*. Bothmer reads the year as 1189, but the photograph shows that it is 1197. It is not signed.

Bothmer 2001 begins with another *al-Manşūr* bracelet, year 1142, signed by Sālim Dāwūd Qāfiḥ.

The next piece is an intriguing à jour filigree bracelet which I have no doubt is early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bothmer discusses it at great length because of its being stamped "mukhlaṣ 1166". Bothmer feels puzzled because he as well would at first glance date such workmanship to the early 20<sup>th</sup> century which does of course not fit with 1166 AH = 1752/1753 AD. He is also worried by the term *mukhlaṣ* which he thinks was only used during the flourishing of the industry in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>. This is however not so: *mukhlaṣ*, "fine silver", appears already in the *Nūr al-ma'ārif* (I 165).

Leaving such doubts aside, Bothmer strongly feels that the stamp was punched into the metal by its original maker, during the fabrication process. He boldly concludes that here we have proof for the existence of the "classic" style filigree technique in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century already.

I can not share this arguing. There is no evidence at all that this style was practised before the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also, “mukhlaş” stamps, when genuine, come without a frame (this one has a frame) when they are not part of the frame containing the maker’s name. Finally, a genuine 18<sup>th</sup> century object never bears a mukhlaş stamp; its authenticity (good silver) is guaranteed by the hallmark bearing the Imam’s name. There can be no doubt that this bracelet is early 20<sup>th</sup> century, and that the stamp is a fake. I feel not competent enough to pronounce myself on the authenticity of the Hebrew signature Sh Šālīḥ.

Bothmer then discusses another filigree bracelet which I have again no doubt is late 19<sup>th</sup> or rather early 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is a typical product of the Badīhī workshop.

Bothmer however, fired by his euphoria for just having discovered an 18<sup>th</sup> century à jour bracelet, sets this one too in the technical/artistic vicinity of the preceding bracelet (which is correct), and therefore also within the dating range he had proposed for the other piece (which is not correct). The bracelet is stamped with a hallmark that looks perfect. It says *mukhlaş 07*. Bothmer however reads it upside down (although the lettering of the word mukhlaş indicates what is top and what is bottom), misreading the number 7 for an 8. In his elation caused by his dating of the previous piece, he then interprets this as referring to the 1180s AH, i.e. to the decade 1766 to 1776. All this is of course not possible. The date reads 07; this is to be understood as 1307 AH, i.e. 1889/1890 AD (still an interesting early date!).

In his 2003 article, von Bothmer discusses three thūmas. The third one, made in 1347 (= 1927/28), is beyond the time period of our article; we will therefore only comment upon the other two.

There is no doubt that the first of these three thūmas is indeed old — but its two halves are in totally different techniques. Thūmas always show the same style in their upper (şadr) and their lower part (tūza). This is therefore a composite object, soldered together some time after the two thūmas from which the two halves originate were made and had partially disintegrated. The tūza has an inscription which Bothmer reads as “bi-rasmi Šālīḥ al- ...”, *made on order of Šālīḥ al-....* I am unable to read the inscription on the photograph in full, but Bothmer’s reading is not possible: if indeed it began with bi-rasmi, this would always be followed by a title, and not by the name (which would come after the title). The number of possible titles is quite considerable; *al-maqar* might be common, or *al-janāb al-‘alī*, “the lofty excellence”.

I have said above that I would offer a possible etymology for *janbīya*: could the name be derived from this title?

But let us return to this *thūma*. On its back, it bears three or four words casually engraved in a cursive Arabic hand. Bothmer reads it as *ʿamal Mūsā al-Jamal*. His photograph is not perfect, but allows for reading the first word, which is *ʿAlī*. The next word can not be *Mūsā*, as an initial *sīn* and a *normal* *alif* are clearly visible. The inscription therefore does not give us the name of the maker, as Bothmer surmises, but the name of its owner. I can also not recognize the presumed date (1155 AH = 1742/3 AD), but style wise, the *ṣadr* is 18th century. It should also be said that (as far as I know) these not uncommon inscriptions in cursive Arabic always denote the owner, and not the maker.

The next piece is identified correctly by count Bothmer. It is inscribed for *Sayf al-Islām Muḥammad*, son of *Imām al-Mutawakkil al-Muḥsin*, and thus datable to the 1860s. This is an important piece, providing a glimpse on the style of royal patronage. The inscription ends with the maker's name, *ʿamal ʿAlī*. The photograph shows that Bothmer's reading is correct. I think I know who this *ʿAlī* is, but will not expand on it here.

## A few more published old Yemeni silver objects

The *Museum für angewandte Kunst* (MAK) in Vienna possesses a pair of lovely *qubūr al-ʿushshāq* bracelets dated *al-Manṣūr 1153*. This is the *Imām al-Manṣūr Ḥusayn*, born on 13 *Dhū al-qaʿda 1108*, died on 7 *Rabīʿ I 1161*, ruled 1139 — 1161. The bracelets also bear the signature (in Hebrew) of the silversmith *Mūsā Ṣarum* (colour photograph in *Janata* p. 136, description p. 187).

The other piece is an extremely important (the only one known to me) pre-classic *thūma* belt with not only the *thūma*, but complete with all the other fittings. It is in the *Rassām* family collection in *Sanaa*, and reproduced in fine photographs by *Stephen Gracie* (pp. 84–87). The hallmark says *al-Manṣūr 1159* (wrongly read by *Gracie* as 1119), the same *Imām* as with the *Vienna* bracelets. The *Jewish silversmith's* signature is said to be *Zabanti*. *Gracie's* book has photographs of four other *thūmas* (p. 122) that do not bear a date. He assigns them to the 18<sup>th</sup>/ 19<sup>th</sup> century. This is correct.

The third piece is of course *Carsten Niebuhr's thūma* which he received as a gift from *Imām al-Mahdī ʿAbbās*. The *Imām* had sent the

gifts to the Niebuhr delegation on the 25<sup>th</sup> of July 1763, after their second audience. This allows for a perfect dating, although it is not hallmarked or signed. Niebuhr's dagger is kept in the National Museum in Copenhagen which recently (at last!) staged an exhibition on the Royal Danish expedition to Arabia, this extraordinary voyage inspired by the spirit of the Enlightenment, in ambition and in its scientific results comparable only to Cook's voyages. The catalogue of the exhibition (see: Hansen) is not only lavishly illustrated (Niebuhr's dagger is on pages 191 to 193), but also a serious piece of research that at the same time makes good reading.

## Where does the “classic” Yemeni jewellery come from?

This article has shown that there is both continuity and rupture between the “classic” age of Yemeni jewellery (late 19<sup>th</sup> century and first half of the 20<sup>th</sup>), and what preceded it. Most of the *forms* go back in unbroken continuity to at least the Rasūlid period and so do most of the names. The techniques used by the silversmiths are however radically different, with in particular the switching to granulation and a specific style of filigree, with à jour work as the summit of the art.

Filigree is an age old technique, almost as old as jewellery in precious metal itself. It was invented in early 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium Mesopotamia. The Etruscans brought it to great mastery. The term “filigree” does however cover an enormous array of visually different forms and techniques which only have in common that the basic material are wires. Wolters provides the most comprehensive documentation of what falls under “filigree”, both historically and for the contemporary goldsmith. His treatise shows that filigree can take all kinds of visual shapes that would seem at first glance (or rather to the lay person) to have nothing in common. The judgment about possible connections of Yemeni Jewish filigree is therefore not so much an opinion based on technical criteria, but rather inspired by art-historical impressions that are of course subject to individual and therefore disputable appreciation. With this caveat, I would say that the type of filigree in classic Yemeni Jewish silver is first encountered in early mediaeval Europe, for instance on shrines, such as the 1183 Annoschrein in Siegburg (Wolters, col. 1119). It becomes quite common in the later Middle Ages and the Renaissance, such as the Hans Ment tankard

in Munich, which dates to 1590 (Wolters, col. 1142). During the Baroque and the Rococo, it is found all over Europe, in Germany, Italy, France, the Netherlands, and especially in Hungary. In the 18<sup>th</sup> and the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Europe's main production centre was Schwäbisch Gmünd. In the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century, shortly before its eventual decline, there were still hundreds of workers active in Schwäbisch Gmünd, with their products peddled all over Europe, stimulating similar local production, especially in Northern Germany and in the Eastern Austrian lands.

From amongst this vast production, the nearest I can see to Yemeni filigree are Jewish finger-rings from Hungary / Siebenbürgen (Transylvania), of the 17<sup>th</sup> and the 18<sup>th</sup> century. They are very typically Jewish in form (going back to mediaeval Jewish rings, such as those from the Erfurt treasury). They usually bear the inscription *mazal tov*, and there can be no doubt that the silversmiths were also Jewish. For a fine group of these see the Louis Koch collection, vol. II, especially numbers 1074, 1075, 1076, 1077, and 1078. These highly elaborate rings are so similar to Yemeni Jewish silverwork that one might easily mistake them for early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bausānī work from Sanaa.

Thus, by the 17<sup>th</sup> century, and particularly by the 18<sup>th</sup>, the technique was practised in the Ottoman neighbourhood or indeed in the Ottoman sphere. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century (and possibly earlier), it spread over the Balkans and the rest of the Ottoman Empire. The various national museums in the capitals of modern Balkan nations all have pieces that are astonishingly near in style to the later Yemeni work; some forms (such as certain belts or necklaces) are identical with Yemeni models. In 1872, the Ottomans entered Sanaa. This political situation and the increased exchange of goods and people that were so enormously facilitated by the Suez Canal (opened in 1869) made it easy for itinerant craftsmen to come to Yemen. Above all, the Turkish officers and their wives would now constitute a demanding clientele with quite some spending power. They would have asked the local silversmiths for jewellery in the style of models they had brought with them from back home. Fashion would endow the new style with the aura of the fashionable, as fashion always does.

The course of events and influences here presented also explains why not only new techniques, but also some new *forms* entered Yemen at this time — new forms for which I saw the prototypes in the Balkan museums. That there is some connection has already been seen by Inge

Seiwert, a professional anthropologist and museum curator. She suggested an Ottoman inspiration for certain pieces (i.e. for their forms) of Yemeni silver jewellery. Ester Muchawsky-Schnapper has shown that one of the most famous items of Yemeni jewellery, the *labba Abū ṭuyūr* (“bird necklace”), has a foreign (possibly European) origin in both form and technique.

## Post scriptum: the Schenkung Daum

This article is based on the knowledge assembled through and with my collection of Yemeni silver jewellery. It comprises 1032 items plus a complete pre-1950 Jewish silversmith’s workplace. It is the largest collection of its kind in the world. It was assembled with the scholarly aim of systematically documenting all styles and all regions of Yemen (North and South), as far as possible, together with information on terminology and their makers. It was brought together with great material sacrifice; much of it through trying travelling to remote places.

In 1995, the collection was donated (Schenkung) to the Staatliches Museum für Völkerkunde, Munich (today: “Museum fünf Kontinente”), through the Association of the Friends of the Museum. It has been inventoried at the Museum, but is not exhibited.

The contract of July 17, 1995, between me, the Museum, and the Association of the Friends of the Museum stipulated, among other things, the following:

— In publications or when exhibited, the objects must be labelled “Schenkung Dr. Daum”.

— If descriptions were required for such purposes, I was to be asked for them.

All three sides expressed their intention (“gehen davon aus”) that a *catalogue raisonné* of Yemeni silver jewellery should be produced, written by me, in order to make this unique material available to the public. This was left pending on the understanding that I would be able to assume this task only after my retirement in 2008, and that the Association of the Friends of the Museum would provide the financing.

The agreement was unfortunately broken in all three points:

When a number of the objects were exhibited and published in a catalogue, they were not only not labelled “Schenkung Dr. Daum”, but, what is more, expressly said to have been “acquired” (erworben). In the catalogue issued on the occasion of that exhibition, my objects

were described by the curator of the Islamic art department. I was not asked.

When I took up the catalogue raisonné project, after 2008, the question of providing the funds for the publication was examined by the Association of the Friends of the Museum. In 2010, the Chairperson (Vorsitzende) of the Association informed me that the financing was secured. Shortly afterwards, a new director was appointed for the museum. She refused that a catalogue be produced or financed by the Association (which of course complied). The reason is to be sought in her active predisposition against her predecessor and his highly successful (attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors) focus on the history and anthropology of North-Eastern Africa and Arabia. I believe that it is extremely regrettable that the unique documentation I have assembled in the form of real objects and my field-notes is doomed to be lost. In the last few decades, much of the knowledge which I was still able to collect has disappeared, and so have many types of objects. Today, traditional Yemeni jewellery could no longer be researched, even if anthropologists were found to do it (if travelling was at all possible), and if the financing would be made available.

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Aqbirdi plate



Rasulid thuma



The thuma al-Mansur 1198



Rasulid thuma. Detail



The thuma al-Mansur 1198



al-Mahdi 1120, signature



al-Mahdi 1231, signature



al-Mahdi 1233, signature



al-Mansur 1198, signature



al-Mansur 1211, signature



hallmark al-Mahdi 1120; width 6,0 mm



hallmark al-Mahdi 1231;  
width 5,0 mm



hallmark al-Mahdi 1233;  
width 10 mm



hallmark al-Mansur 1198; width 4,0 mm



hallmark al-Mansur 1211; width 5,5 mm