

Ali NOURALLAHI* (Iran)

A Masterpiece in the Closet: Brass ewer in the Zanzan Archaeological Museum

<https://doi.org/10.34739/his.2021.10.07>

Abstract: *Many large and small museums in the provinces of Iran exhibit objects, containers, and display items that are not well known and are often on loan from other museums. These objects of cultural value have been introduced to these collections at different times and no serious, even elementary research and study has been carried out on them. By introducing this type of objects some of the ideas presented so far may be reviewed and corrected. In this article I have tried to point out how to obtain this design and to describe it accurately and to describe the carved inscriptions on it, then how to make it and its motifs and how these decorations relate to its possible function as well as their possible origin. The author also draws attention to the catastrophic lack of evidence and events that have taken place in recent years in the Middle East and Iran's western neighbors. In the end, I have briefly summarized various points mentioned above.*

Key words: Iran; Middle Ages; metalworking; brass ewer

Introduction

One of the objects in the valuable collection which is now preserved and exhibited in Zanzan Saltmen Museum is a ewer with inscriptions which was discovered and seized at a police checkpoint in 1396 (2017) from a black-coloured Xantia which came from Kurdistan and was declared as “the discovery of one-thousand-year old container in the black Xantia”¹ which will be dealt with hereafter [Fig.1].

Description of the Ewer

Material: brass alloy with silver overlay

Height: 31.5 cm

Diameter of the mouthpiece: 8 cm

* ORCID iD 0000-0002-6737-8628. alinorallahy@yahoo.com

¹ “After receiving reports that cultural artifacts were being transported, a black Xanthian unit traveling from Kurdistan to Zanzan stopped in cooperation with law enforcement in the Halab-Zanzan axis, and a valuable Seljuk era work plus some contemporary objects from It was achieved”. [<https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1396/05/02/1473115>; accessed 18.12.2020]

Height of the ewer neck: 14.5 cm
Diameter of the neck: between 5.2 and 5.5 cm
Width of the body: 13 cm
Height of the body: 13 cm
Height of the foot: 4 cm
Diameter of the foot: 8/5cm

This is a ewer made of brass alloy which has been overlaid with a layer of silver for further illustration of the inscriptions.

This brass container is now being exhibited in Zanjan Saltmen Museum. The edges of the container have been ornamented with obviously decorative rope patterns surrounded by circular frame. Once again, the craftsman has embossed the margins of the edges of the ewer with projected rope-pattern decorations surrounded by two projected ribbons overlaid by silver. The neck of the ewer is hexagonal, with three sides including an inscription in Kufic with a background of Arabesque designs and the other three with simple flowers and leaves. In order to make them more prominent, the inside of the leaves, petals, and inscriptions have been overlaid by silver. Beneath the neck, there is a two centimeter-wide decorative clamp around the neck, which divides the neck into three ribbons with two horizontal carved lines. The neck is connected to the main body of the ewer. The craftsman has repeated the projected rope-pattern decorations surrounded by two ribbons over diamond or square-shaped shoulder.

The body of the container, which is a combination of diamond and square shapes, has led to the formation of the container with 14 sides, in which 4 diamonds on 4 sides have been surrounded by 8 triangles. On each of the 4 square-diamond sides of the 4 sides of the ewer, four different Kufic sentences with Islamic designs backgrounds have been engraved and embossed detailedly. For more illustration and reflection of the Arabesque designs and the carved Kufic inscriptions, the craftsman has filled them with silver. In the center of the diamond-square shape, a flower with 6 petals and a circle in the center has been carved which has been covered with silver and its ambient has been left without any designs by the craftsman. The same has been repeated for the remaining diamond-square sides of the ewer. Although the shape of cadres and the Arabesque designs are the same on 4 sides of the ewer, the inscriptions in Kufic are different and independent from each other and, probably, have symbolic, religious, or worship-related aspects.

Where the corners of the diamond-square shapes and triangles connect each other, the craftsman has used a small ball to induce the visitors that it is the small ball which has maintained those sides connected with each other and, this way, give the ewer a unique mode. These projections have probably been the place where the melted brass alloy has been poured into the prepared mold. Inside the triangular

frames, the designs of Simurgh,² peacock or rooster³ or goose⁴ is visible which has bent its head backward to clean its feathers. The craftsman has also framed these designs inside a triangular frame which has been carved by a line; in fact, the framing of the upper and lower triangles is the repetition of a symbolic theme. The direction of the movement of the bird is from right to the left which has been repeated both for all upper and lower frames. Inside these frames, the detailed design of Simurgh or peacock⁵ has been carved with an Arabesque context which, for more illustration, has been embossed with silver [Figs. 2-10].

Kufic inscriptions

Inside the four diamonds around the ewer body, four Kufic inscriptions⁶ in the cadre rotating around an axis (right to left) of a six-petal flower in the shape of a diamond with the background of Arabesque designs have been carved. None of these inscriptions inside the diamonds on the frame are similar. Probably, the carved inscriptions in each diamond are on a unique theme.

In addition to the inscriptions on the body of the ewer, three Kufic inscriptions have been carved inside that frame with Arabesque botanical designs and the hexagonal neck of the ewer and they probably, contain religious themes. They have been written from the top toward the tetra decagonal body. Between each of the three inscriptions, the design of the flower with six petals, two of which (on the top

² A winged creature with a dog's head, lion's paws, and a peacock's tail, Simurgh (Middle Persian *senmurv*) in Persian myths and literature, symbolize numerous thoughts, ideas and perceptions. From the fountain of life, growth and fertility, greenery and healing (in the *Avestā*) to the seeking of knowledge and the unmistakable symbol of the state and the unity of both. It symbolizes the unity of soul and body in mysticism (MESKUB, 1389/2010: 44). The Simurgh is described as a wonderful she-bird in Zoroastrian literature and in Ferdousi's *Šāhnāme*: normally she has a positive function as long as Rostam, that is the son of her foster child Zāl, is the classical hero of the whole of Iran. When the kingdom of Iran accepts Zoroastrianism and Rostam refuses it, the rule of the Simurgh changes: so, for instance, the *Šāhnāme* contains the story of a vicious bird with the same name killed by Esfandiyār. The fact is clearly connected with the transition from ancient Iranian religion to official Zoroastrianism. (HARPER, 1961: 95-101; COMPARETI, 2006: 190).

³ The rooster has been considered in the ancient arts and myths of different nations and cultures and has had symbolic and ritual aspects. For example, in the ritual of Mehrparasti (Mithraism), the awakening of the pious for prayer, the myths of ancient Iran, it was created by an Ahurāiēān and the destroyer of demons and the symbol of God; The special bird of Emshāspand Bahman, removes darkness and awakens people and in the religion of Islam in hadiths and narrations is also emphasized in its symbolic aspect (SADR, 1393/2015: 7016). This bird is also religiously and artistically respected in the Yazidi and Yārsān religions, which are in the west and northwest of Iran and central Iran, and in Syrian and Iraqi Kurdistan.

⁴ COMPARETI, 2013: 33, fig. 9; COMPARETI, 2015: 36, fig. 1.

⁵ Simurgh and Peacock have numerous symbolic themes in Eastern (Iranian and Islamic) and Western art; SCHMIDT, 2002; GAMM, 2014.

⁶ Flower and leafy Kofi (Mozahar) this type of Kofi is often planted in a field of flowers and leaves, or at the end of letters becomes narrow plant branches. This type, if associated with plant branches, can be called Kofi Moshajar (ZAMANI, 1352/1973: 23).

and beneath) are protracted and pointed which conform to the shape of the side on which they have been carved.

The method of Production

It can be easily understood from the complicated shape of the ewer being studied that the vessel has first been cast by molding with heated bee wax and then, the craftsman has engraved the inscriptions and the decorations in mind, inscribed them and overlaid them with silver.⁷

Inlaying silver

During medieval centuries, that is, contemporary with Saljuqi period and 10th-12th CE / 4th-6th centuries of Hegira, the industry of metal inlaying was in its peak. In the ewer studied, this technique has been used by the craftsman to make prominent further the inscriptions, the drake, and their arabesque designs background created through carving. After casting and giving the form he had in mind to the container, the engraver craftsman, based on the prepared design for each side (square-diamond- triangles of the body, and the hexagonal sides of the ewer neck) has firstly carved the designs and, then, filled the empty areas with silver. By combining Kufic inscription and the design of the bird, the craftsman has overlaid the words and the body of the bird with silver to make them more illustrious, in such a way that has created beautiful and attractive opposition with the golden brass background.

Comparison and Chronology

Regarding the form and shape, two similar examples of this ewer are maintained in Berlin's Islamic Museum (Pergamon), one of them made of brass whose height is 24 centimeters which has been introduced by Harari in the book of "A survey of Persian Art".⁸ Another example is a ceramic ewer (Flasche) whose flanks and sides decorated with projected arabesque designs and is of 17.1 centimeters height. Both of these containers have been dated back to 12th and 13th CE / 5th and 6th centuries of Hegira⁹ [Figs. 11-12]. The design of the bird (peacock, Simurgh, drake inside triangular frames) is analogous to the designs of 2 drakes carved with arabesque design backgrounds, which are kept in Boston Arts Museum, crafted by Master Hossein Kashi for Alb Araslan of Saljuqi in 1067 AC / 459 of Hegira.¹⁰ There are very close similarities between the designs of the birds with arabesque backgrounds on this ewer

⁷ ATIL and CHASE and JETT, 1985: 33-34.

⁸ HARARI, 1387/2008, vol. 6: 2282.

⁹ Museum für Islamische Kunst. Indent. No. I. 31/63.

¹⁰ HARARI, 1387/2008, vol.13: 1348.

and the ewer being studied here. Moreover, decorating the rope strips on the sides of the edges and shoulders and the base, as well as the silver-plated six-leaf flowers are similar to the rosewater sprinkler at the Museum of David, dated to the second half of 12th century.¹¹ It can be said to be the continuation of the same art school due to the fact that the Mongol invasion and destruction of the cities of Herat, Merv and Nishapur in 1221, and Herat again in 1222, and other northeastern areas of Iran, a large number of artisans masters came to the west of Iran. The majority of them fled to the area of Jazirah and continued their work there, and consequently, their designs and techniques of metalworking penetrated and remained in effect¹² [Figs. 23-25].

Assumptions on the origin and function of the ewer

As this ewer was discovered in a car which had departed from Kurdistan, which is a province adjacent to Iraq's northern provinces occupied or invaded by ISIS terrorists who committed a great deal of criminal activities in Sinjar, Mosul, and Nineveh, accompanied with great destructions and plunder of the heritage, museums, sites, and the mosques of the above-mentioned cities and areas. This ewer, which contains detailed decorations and can be considered as one of the masterpieces of metalwork in 11th and 12th CE / 5th and 6th centuries of Hegira, probably comes from uncontrolled excavation.

It is difficult to determine the function of the Ewer (Ebrigh) without any knowledge of Kufic inscriptions engraved on it. But according to the presumed origin of the Ewer, it can be considered a sacred vessel for the worship of Izidi (Izadi-Yezidis), because at the time of the Izidi (Izadi-Yezidis) the worship vessel is called a pitcher container called "pitcher or container of Tavoos Malek", which is called holy water from the sacred fountain of the Temple of Lalash (Sheikh Uday's tomb) water was poured into it. This container is also sacred to them.¹³ The container has been painted in various ways, but in view of its elaborate ornamentation in terms of its motifs and inscriptions, it may have been used as a sacred vessel in the Izidi (Izadi-Yezidis) [Fig. 22].

Conclusion

In small museums in the centers of the provinces and in private collections, there are probably many artworks and masterpieces, each of them, if introduced, can enhance the richness of the culture and arts of a specific period or challenge numerous theories. The ewer being investigated in this study has been confiscated

¹¹ BLAIR and BLOOM, 2006: 77, cat. no. 17; BLOOM and BLAIR, 2011: 10, fig. 7; MEYER, 2015, cat. no. 16.

¹² ETTINGHAUSEN, GRABAR and JENKINS-MADINA, 2001: 170.

¹³ EMPSON, 1928: 215-216; ELTOUNJI, 1380/2001: 139; AL-KARMALI, 2006: 245-248.

from the smugglers of the cultural properties who were transferring it from Kurdistan to Tehran in order to sell it in the black market of the cultural objects, is, in its kind, one of the uncommon objects and an art masterpiece and only one metal example of this type has been introduced by Rolf Harari in “a Survey of Persian Art”, although one ceramic example similar to this ewer is kept in Berlin’s Islamic Art Museum. It shows that this ewer is a very valuable ewer which has probably been crafted for a specific individual or a religious ritual, especially bearing in mind that the design of Simurgh, peacock, or drake with a head backwards has a symbolic aspect in the art of the Middle east and Iran. Regarding the origin of the ewer, it can be said that it has been robbed and plundered from the towns of the Kurdish territory of Iraq which were attacked and occupied by ISIS terrorists. On the usage of this ewer, there are some assumptions. As the author was not able to translate the inscriptions on the ewer, reading or translating them can be beneficial to find its usage. One the other hand, it can be supposed that this ewer was been used as a ceremonial pitcher in Izidi (Yezidis) temples in the same region; as, based on the religious ceremonies in Izidi (Yezidis) temples, the pilgrims are welcomed with the sacred spring water inside the temple by the Pir or the Sheikh (the Mentor). Overall, as all of the decorations and inscriptions of this ewer have been engraved and then, overlaid by silver, which was one of the features of the metalwork of the school of Mosul and the Kurdish territory of Iraq, this ewer can be ascribed to that school of metalwork which exhibits the influences Iran’s metalwork, especially the Khorasan School.



Fig. 1. The Ewer with the other seized objects (photo by Tasnim News Agency)

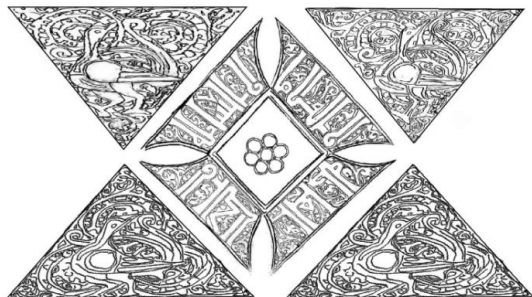
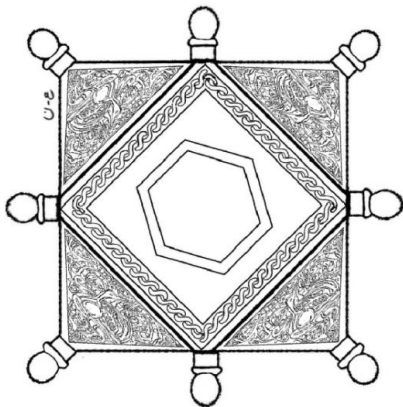
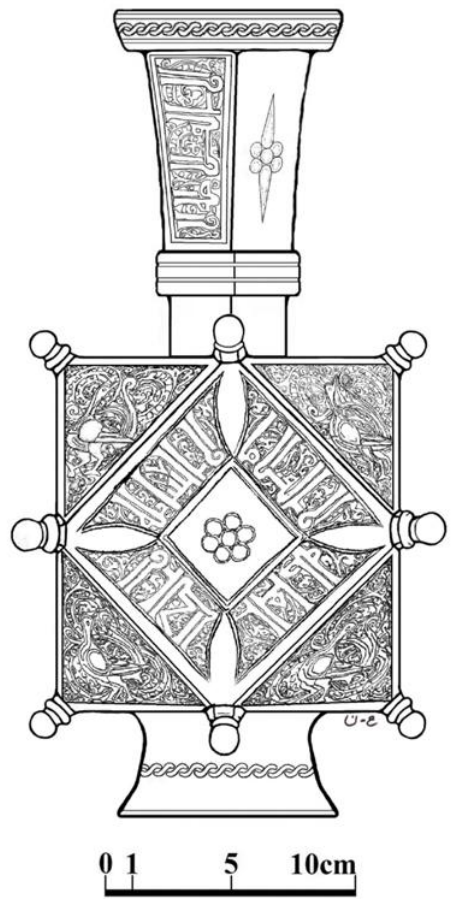


Fig. 2. Different views of the Ewer from the Salt Men Museum and details (by author)



Fig. 3. Different facets of the Ewer (by author)



Fig. 4. Decorate the rope on the edge of the Ewer (by author)



Fig. 5. Decorate the rope on the shoulder (by author)



Fig. 6. The Ewer base and view of bottom it's (by author)



Fig. 7. Facade A from Ewer at the Salt Men's Museum and its details (A) (by author)



Fig. 8. Facade B from Ewer at the Salt Men's Museum and its details (B) (by author)



Fig. 9. Facade C from Ewer at the Salt Men's Museum and its details (C) (by author)



Fig. 10. Facade C from Ewer at the Salt Men's Museum and its details (D) (by author)

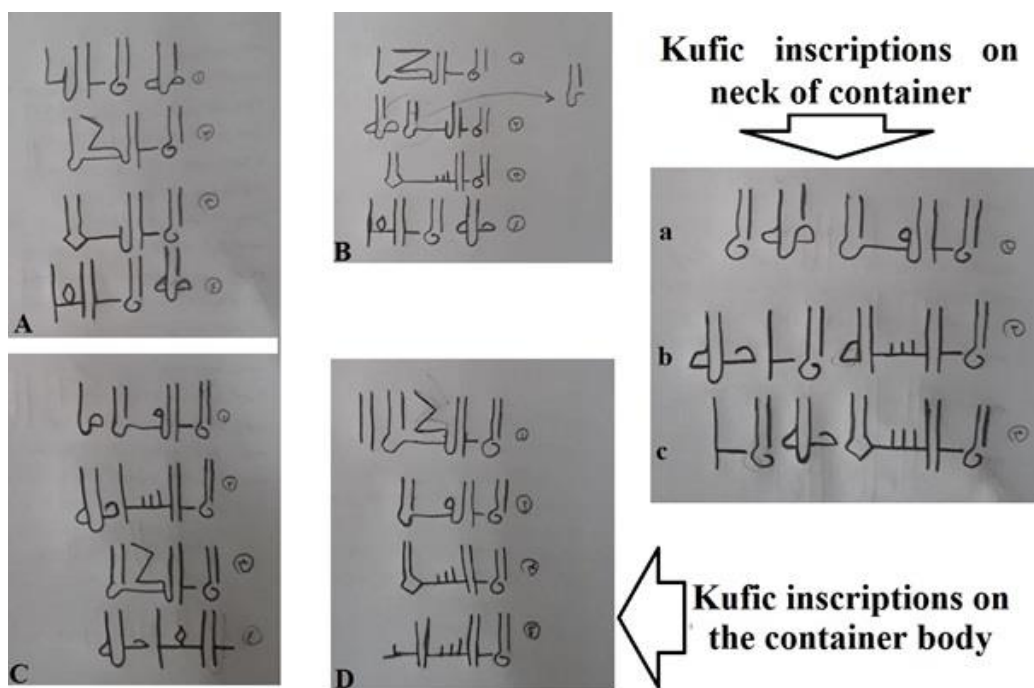


Fig. 11. The inscriptions around the neck and body (by author)



Fig. 12. The inscription in section A and details (A) (by author)



Fig. 13. The Inscriptions in Section B and details (B) (by author)



Fig. 14. The Inscriptions in Section C and details (C) (by author)



Fig. 15. The Inscriptions in Section D and details (D) (by author)



Fig. 16. Kufic inscription with arabesque motifs background in one of the rectangular frame A around the neck (a) (by author)



Fig. 17. Kufic inscription with arabesque motifs background in one of the rectangular frames B around the neck (b) (by author)



Fig. 18. Kufic inscriptions with arabesque motifs background in a rectangular frame C around the neck (c) (by author)



Fig. 19. Motifs of flower a silver-plated matted around the neck (by author)



Fig. 20. Facade of bird motifs the engraving in the upside-down triangle (by author)



Fig. 21. Facade of bird motifs the engraving in the frame of the bottom row triangle (by author)

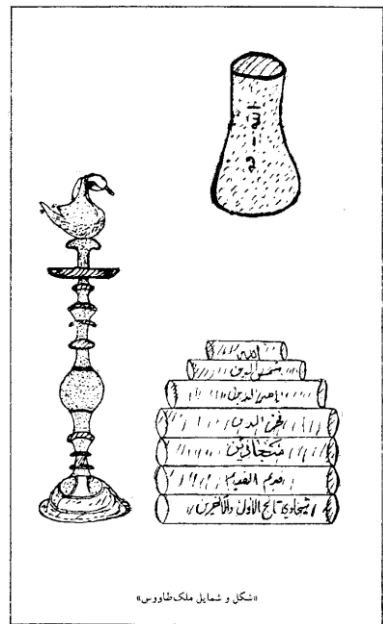
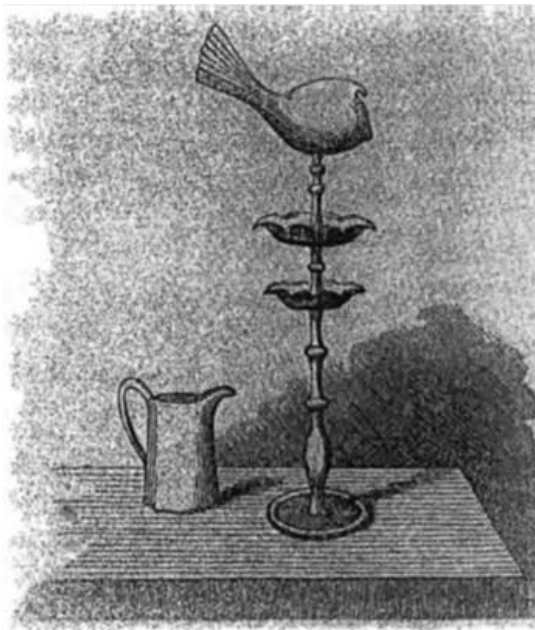


Fig. 22. The sacred vessel for the reception of the holy water with the holy water in the Yezidis (ELTOUNJI, 1380/2001: 139; AL-KARMALI, 2006: 248)



Fig. 23. Almost similar brass texture at the Berlin Museum of Islamic Art (HARARI, 1387/2008: Tab 1277)



Fig. 24. Almost similar earthenware at the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (Ident. Nr. I. 31/63)



Fig. 25. Flowers, rope motifs on the sprinkler at the David Museum (BLAIR and BLOM, 2006: 77)

Bibliography

- AL-KARMALI, A. (2006) *The Writings of Izdiyyekan (Jilvah and Mas hafa Rash)*, *Izdiyaty Bibliography*, translated by Abdoula Nejati, Beneke Zheyn, Soleimani. [in Kurdish]
- ATIL, E. and CHASE, W. and JETT, P. (1985) *Islamic metalwork in the Freer Gallery of Art*. Washington, D.C.: Freer Gallery of Art, Smithsonian Institution.
- BLAIR, S. and BLOOM J. (2006) (eds.) *Cosmophilia. Islamic Art from the David Collection, Copenhagen*. Chestnut Hill, MA: McMullen Museum of Art, Boston College.
- BLOOM, J. and BLAIR, S. (2011) (eds.) *And diverse are their hues : color in Islamic art and culture*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- COMPARETI, M. (2006) 'The so-called *Senmurv* in Iranian Art: a Reconsideration of an Old Theory', in *Loquentes linguis : studi linguistici e orientali in onore di Fabrizio A. Pennacchietti*, eds. P. BORBONE, A. MENGOZZI, M. TOSCO, Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 185-200.
- COMPARETI, M. (2013) 'Due tessuti centrasiatrici cosiddetti "zandaniji" decorati con pseudo-Simurgh', in *Le spigolature dell'Onagro. Miscellanea composta per Gianroberto Scarcia in occasione dei suoi ottant'anni*, eds. M. COMPARETI, R. FAVARO, Venice: Biblion, 17-37.
- COMPARETI, M. (2015) 'Ancient Iranian Decorative Textiles: New Evidence from Archaeological Investigations and Private Collections', *The Silk Road* 13: 36-44.
- EMPSON, R. H. (1928) *The Cult of the Peacock Angel, a Short Account of the Yezîdî Tribes of Kurdistan*. London: H. F. & G. Witherby.
- ELTOUNJI, M. (1380/2001) *Yazidian or Satanists*, translation by Ehsan Moghaddas, Tehran: Atai Library [in Persian]
- ETTINGHAUSEN, R., GRABAR, O., JENKINS-MADINA, M. (2001) *Islamic Art and Architecture, 650-1250*. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.
- GAMM, N. (2014) 'The peacock: A symbol of royalty', *Hurriyet. Daily News*, available at <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/the-peacock-a-symbol-of-royalty-65241> [accessed 21.12.2017]
- HARARI, R. (1387/2008) 'Metalwork after the Early Islamic Period', in *Survey of Persian Art*, eds. A. U. POPE, Ph. AKRAMAN, Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Publications [in Persian]
- HARPER, P.O. (1961) 'The *Senmurv*', *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 20.3: 95-101. doi:10.2307/3257932
- MESKUB, S. (1389/2010) *Tone of the Pahlavi and Ravan Kheradmand*. Tehran: New Design Publishing. [in Persian]
- MEYER, J. (2015) *Sensual delights: incense burners and rosewater sprinklers from the world of Islam*. Copenhagen: The David Collection.
- SADR, M. (1393/2015) *Encyclopedia of the Islamic World*. Tehran [in Persian]
- SCHMIDT, H.-P. (2002) 'Simorǧ', in *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Online Edition, July 20, 2002, available at <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/simorg> [accessed 21.12.2017]
- ZAMANI, A. (1352/1973) 'Decorative Kufic script in Islamic historical works', *Journal of Art and People* 128: 15-33. [in Persian]

To cite this article: Nourallahi, A. (2021). A Masterpiece in the Closet: Brass ewer in the Zanjan Archaeological Museum. *Historia i Świat* 10, 171-194, DOI: 10.34739/his.2021.10.07



© 2021 The Author(s). This open access article is distributed under a Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license.