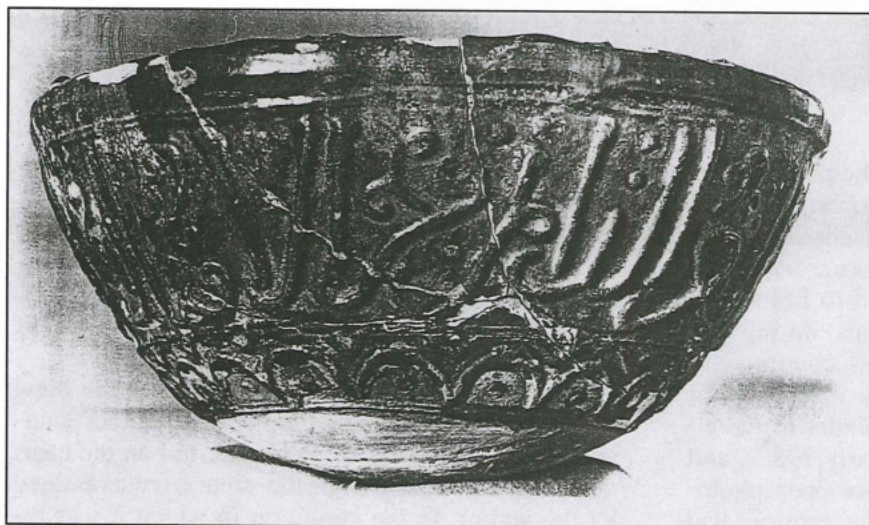


## AN INSCRIBED POTTERY BOWL OF THE MAMLUK PERIOD

*Marcus Milwright*

This note is concerned with an inscribed glazed pottery bowl of the Mamluk period recorded in the photographic archive of the Department of Antiquities in 'Ammān, Jordan. The present whereabouts of the bowl are not known and the only current record is in the form of a series of black and

white photographs. The images of the artefact appear in one of the albums of photographs stored in the archives of the department taken before 1980 (reference: Album no.5, negatives 1297-1304). The illustrations (Figs. 1-3) used here have been reproduced from the negatives by the Department of



1. View of relief-moulded lead-glazed bowl from the collection of 'Abdallah Bey Rihani. Photograph courtesy of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.



2. Detail of the inscription band. Photograph courtesy of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.





3. Detail of the inscription band. Photograph courtesy of the Department of Antiquities of Jordan.

Antiquities.

According to the caption facing the photographs in the album, the bowl was the property of 'Abdullah Bey Rihani. The Rihani are a Christian family who hail originally from al-Ḥuṣn near Irbid, and members of the family were known to have been collectors and dealers in antiquities during the twentieth century. Appended to this caption is a handwritten note that gives the date of the photographs as 25th July 1974. The remainder of the album contains images taken in the early 1950s, and it is possible that the bowl may have been photographed sometime before 1974. The caption also states that the bowl was found in 'Dāmiya' (i.e. the town of Dāmiya (دامية) about 37km due north of the northern tip of the Dead Sea). The modern settlement is located on the southern side of az-Zarqā' River about 3km east of the Dāmiya bridge that crosses the Jordan River. Clearly, the provenance of the vessel should not be regarded as conclusive on the basis of such evidence. Allowing for this important qualification, in the last section of this paper I will make some comments concerning the potential significance of the location of Dāmiya for the understanding of the distribution of this ware in the Mamluk period.

Black and white photographs do not form an ideal basis for the description of a ceramic vessel. The reason for devoting attention to the images from this album lies in the fact that the bowl carries a complete Arabic inscription moulded in a band around the exterior. Inscriptions are an uncommon feature of lead-glazed earthenwares pro-

duced in Bilād ash-Shām during the Mamluk period, and to have an example surviving in this complete form is particularly rare. Another point of interest lies in the fact that it is possible to link the Rihani bowl with other whole and fragmentary examples of the same ware from private collections and from excavations conducted in the south of Bilād ash-Shām.

Some observations can be made about the bowl on the basis of the photographs, while other characteristics of the vessel can be inferred on the basis of similarities to sherds of the same ware examined by the author. In the condition in which it was recorded the bowl has a diameter of approximately 25cm and a height of 12cm. Originally, the vessel would have possessed a high, flaring pedestal base, nearly doubling the total height. The bowl has evidently been reconstructed from a large number of fragments, but the photographs indicate that the individual sherds probably all came from one vessel. The rim of the bowl has an in-turned lip, and there are numerous drips of glaze around the rim. This latter feature indicates that the bowl was fired upside-down in the kiln. The lead glaze is glassy with some crazing in the thicker areas, and has been applied over a pale slip. The interior was painted with a darker glaze (probably green), some of which has dripped onto the exterior. The exterior glaze is lighter, and is probably yellow-ochre in colour. The inside of the bowl was not photographed, but the interior is unlikely to have carried any decoration (simple graffito designs are sometimes found on examples of this ware, however).



The most striking feature of the bowl is the moulded ornament running in a band around the exterior. This was achieved by pressing the unfired bowl into a carved mould (made of plaster or ceramic) while the clay of the bowl was still wet. This technique leaves a pattern in relief that can then be slipped and glazed. The method of mould casting is well known in Islamic pottery, and was most commonly employed in Bilād ash-Shām in the manufacture of unglazed lamps, jugs and water flasks. The combination of mould casting and glazing is less common in this part of the Islamic world, although examples in earthenware and stone paste are reported from the ninth to the twelfth century in Egypt and Syria.

The Rihani bowl belongs to a type of decorated lead-glazed ware that can be securely dated to the Mamluk period (see discussion below). Examples of this group of relief-moulded lead-glazed earthenwares carry a wide range of decorative motifs. The elements seen on the Rihani bowl — a wide inscription band with a simple geometric band below — find close parallels in numerous published pieces. In this case, the lower band is made up of a continuous zigzag design. The inscription is written in a bold cursive hand around the exterior. The terminals of letters do not have serifs and the profusion of dots above the letters do not function as diacritic points. The spaces left within the text band are filled with simple ornamental curvilinear devices (Fig. 4). The inscription itself reads: *al-'Izz ad-Dāyim wal-'Iqbāl wal-Majd* العز الدائم والإقبال والمجد *wa wal-Hāl was-Sa'ādātu al-kāmila* والحال والسعادة (الكاملة). Removing the repeated use of the definite article, this may be translated as 'perpetual glory and prosperity and (?) and perfect happiness'.

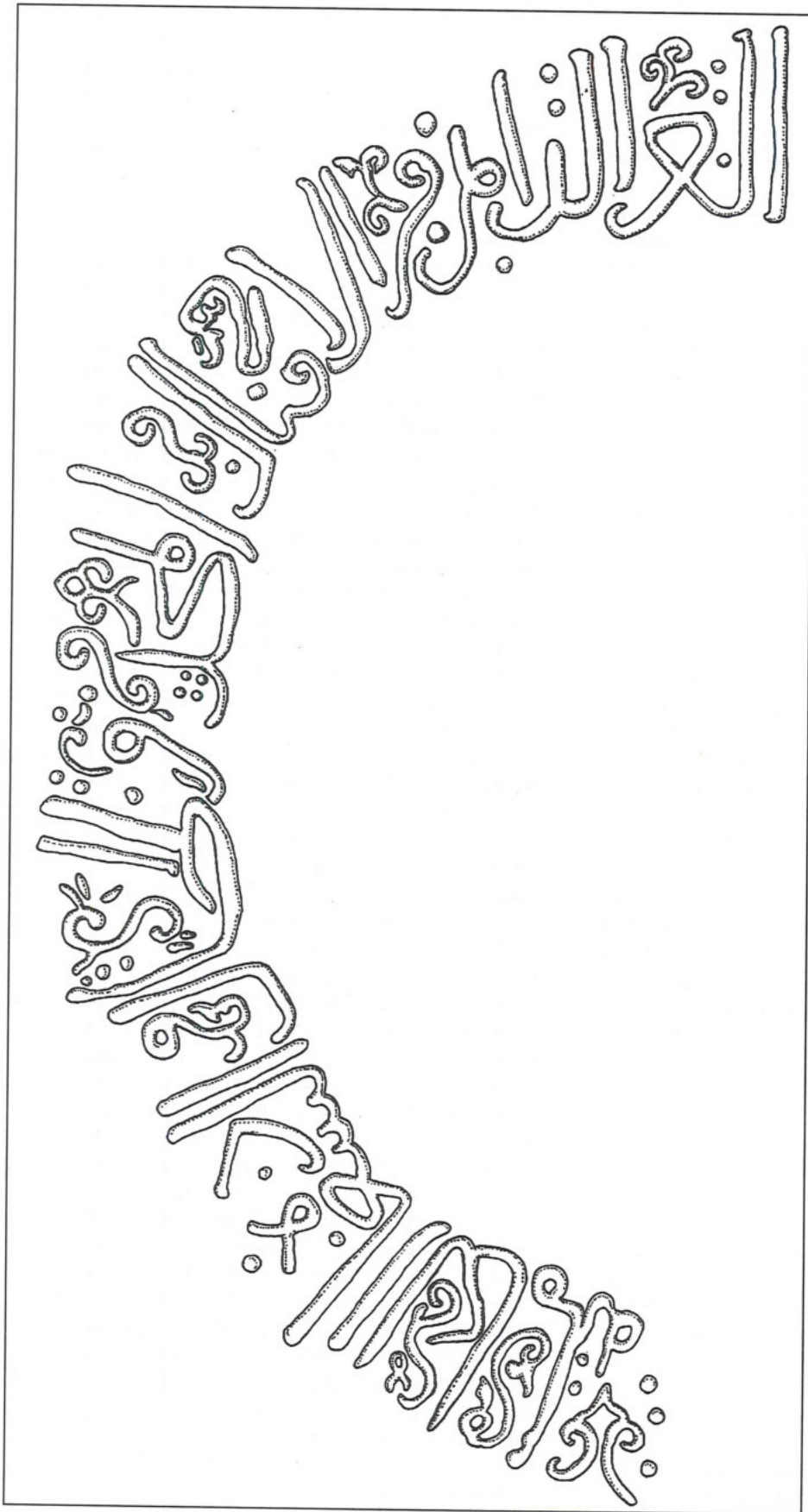
Only one word — which appears to read as *al-hāl* الحال — is difficult to decipher. The first letter after the definite article could perhaps also be read as an incorrectly rendered *ṣād* or *dād*. In the context of the inscription the word has no clear meaning, and the arrangement of the *alif* and the *lām* with the following letter is also curious. It is possible that the vessel was clumsily restored in this section, though the close-up photographs do not support this interpretation. It is worth noting that the remainder of the inscription contains errors including the two *waw*(s) before and after *al-majd* المجد and the numerous dots placed in incorrect positions. These features call into question the literacy of the craftsman who designed the mould from which this vessel was made. Significantly, there exist other examples of relief-moulded bowls — glazed and unglazed — of this period that carry inscriptions that are only partially

legible (for instance, see Ben-Tor *et al.* 1996, photo XIII.26, fig. XIII.43.1). It may be that the maker of the mould used in the manufacture of the Rihani bowl made a mistake in copying an inscription from another source, in which case, *al-afḍāl* الأفضال ('the benefits') is likely to have been the term originally employed.

### Discussion

The characteristics of the Rihani bowl correspond well with a type of relief-moulded lead-glazed earthenware that appears relatively frequently in excavations of Islamic contexts in the south of Bilād ash-Shām. The scale and profile of the Rihani bowl can be compared to published examples, and the lower decorative band is also of a familiar type. The inscription on the Rihani bowl takes the form of a generic good luck message and has some close parallels. A bowl from the Keir collection carries the legend, *al-'izz wa'l-iqbāl wa'l-majd wa'l-afḍāl wa lahu 'l-sa'adat al-kāmilat al-dā'im* (Grube 1976: 155-56, pl. facing 137). A similar inscription can be found on a bowl excavated in Ḥama, Syria (Riis and Poulsen 1957: fig. 398). A bowl now exhibited in the Archaeological Museum on the citadel in 'Ammān contains a partial inscription reading, *...al-dā'im (?) wa'l-iqbāl wa'l-majd wa'l-afḍāl al-sa'āda...* (illustration in Milwright 2003: fig. 3). It is probable that these types of non-specific benefaction reflect the fact that potters were seeking to imitate the inscriptions found on other decorated pottery and on low quality metalwork produced in provincial centres in Bilād ash-Shām during the fourteenth century.

The Rihani bowl fits into a known subset of relief-moulded lead-glazed wares carrying inscription bands. The precise wording of the inscription is also familiar, but what is perhaps more significant here is the manner in which the words are arranged and the presence of numerous ornamental devices attached to letters or filling up the remaining spaces. Extensive use is made of an upper register in a manner that is not commonly encountered in the inscription bands from the remainder of this group. Most striking are the additional ornamental features, including the elaborate tails added to the *waw*(s) and the devices located in the spaces between some of the letters. There is considerable technical and stylistic continuity between all of the published examples of relief-moulded lead-glazed ware, but idiosyncratic features on the Rihani bowl provide persuasive evidence that there existed a number of skilled craftsmen at work in the design of the decorative moulds used in the production of relief-moulded lead-glazed bowls.



4. Inscription band reconstructed from the photographs (not to scale).



I have discussed the dating and distribution of this ware in greater detail elsewhere (Milwright 2003: 91-101), but a few relevant details can be highlighted here. The available archaeological evidence indicates that this type of relief-moulded lead-glazed earthenware was being manufactured in a period from the end of the thirteenth century through to the last quarter of the fourteenth century. Importantly, sherds of this ware were found in an excavated context in the 'Armenian Garden' in Jerusalem with coins from the reign of the Mamluk Sultan Sha'ban (r.1363-76) (Tushingham 1985: 141-42, 148). The occasional presence of simple Mamluk blazons on bowls is another factor that reinforces the late thirteenth — or fourteenth century dating. Whether relief-moulded lead-glazed ware continued into the fifteenth century is not clear from the archaeological evidence. As to the distribution, the published finds from excavations and surveys are concentrated in an area east and west of Jordan Valley and Dead Sea Aghwār. A very small number of finds is reported outside of this range, including Damascus and Ḥamāh to the north and the Mediterranean coast of the Sinai to the southeast. One significant aspect of the distribution pattern is the clustering of finds around Jerusalem, suggesting this city as the main centre of manufacture (Ben-Tor *et al.* 1996: 102; Milwright 2003: 93, n.62). In the absence of solid archaeological evidence, however, this must remain only a hypothesis.

In the context of the distribution pattern outlined above, the apparent find location of the Rihani bowl at Dāmiya provides interesting additional evidence. A variety of routes would have been employed in the dispersal of relief-moulded lead-glazed ware bowls from their place(s) of manufacture in central and southern Palestine east into Jordan. The finds from the Karak Plateau, and further south, presumably were carried on the trade route that originated at Gaza and then ran via al-Khalil (Hebron) around the south end of the Dead Sea (Popper 1955: 47, fig. 13). There were well-established routes that started from Gaza and ran to the central part of Palestine before turning east, crossing the Jordan River at Jisr al-Majāmi' on the way to Irbid (Popper 1955: 48, fig. 13; Kareem 1992). A quantity of relief-moulded lead-glazed ware sherds has been recovered from the khān associated with this important bridge (Katia Silverman, pers. comm.). This was not the only bridge crossing the Jordan River in the Mamluk period, however. Another bridge over the river was constructed at Dāmiya by sultan Baybars (r.1260-77) in 664/1266, and repairs on the structure were conducted in the following year (Meinecke 1992, II:

22 no.86). The governor of Jerusalem did further work to the bridge in 687/1288 (Kareem 2000: 11). The continuing importance of this route in the latter part of the fourteenth century is indicated by the fact that reconstruction work on the bridge was ordered during the reign of Sultan Barqūq (r.1382-99) (Meinecke 1992, II: 277 no.25A/60).

Historical sources of the Mamluk period indicate that Dāmiya was one of the principal towns on the eastern side of the Jordan valley, along with Quṣayr (North ash-Shūna) and Ṭabaqāt Faḥl (Pella) (Kareem 2000: 80, 294). Presumably, the trade passing east-west via the bridge contributed to the prosperity of the Dāmiya area during this time. Located south of Wādī az-Zarqā' the bridge at Dāmiya provided a convenient route from the towns of central Palestine to the east side of the Jordan valley and the plain of al-Balqā'. The main settlements of al-Balqā' during this period were as-Salt, 'Ammān and Ḥisbān. Little excavated material of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries has been published from either as-Salt and 'Ammān, but archaeological work in Ḥisbān has led to the recovery of a number of relief-moulded lead-glazed fragments comparable to the Rihani bowl (Sauer 1973: fig. 4.138-40; LaBianca and Walker 2001: 9; Milwright 2003: fig. 3). Further excavations and field surveys in al-Balqā' would contribute to our knowledge of trade with Palestine in this period. The Rihani bowl points to the significant role played by the Dāmiya bridge in connecting these two regions during the Mamluk period.

#### Acknowledgements

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