

A HUNGARIAN COLLECTOR OF ISLAMIC ART MIKLÓS ZSOLNAY'S CERAMICS COLLECTION FROM FUSTÁT

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The History of the Collection

The Janus Pannonius Museum of Pécs has been in possession of a remarkable collection of Islamic ceramics for more than fifty years, a collection which has rightly aroused the interest of researchers in the field. The collection, hitherto completely unknown, was purchased during a trip to the Near East in 1887-1888 by Miklós Zsolnay, son of Vilmos Zsolnay, the founder in Pécs of a ceramics factory of European renown (Hárs 1996:37). After being stored in the Zsolnay family's private museum for over sixty years, the material was moved to its current location following the factory's nationalisation in 1948 (Hárs 1996:53; Gerelyes & Kovács 1999:15).

The fashionable practices of the period and certain business considerations may all have induced Vilmos Zsolnay to send his son on a study trip of several-months duration. We can reconstruct Miklós Zsolnay's trip quite accurately on the basis of his diary, kept in German and held in the family archive, as well as from his letters to the family, also written in German. When Zsolnay returned from his journey, he did not come empty-handed. During his trip he had purchased a large and extremely valuable collection of ceramics. The collection can be divided into two completely separate units, one consisting of wall tiles, and the other comprising ceramics from Fustát; it is the latter collection that forms the subject of the present paper (Gerelyes & Kovács 1999:15). Both in his choice of route and in his selection of items, Zsolnay followed in the wake of the artists and art collectors, consuls and army officers roaming the "fabulous East". He used almost exactly the same route that the English painter Lord Frederic Leighton had completed twenty years earlier. Lord Leighton visited Rhodes, Bursa and Smyrna (Izmir) in 1867, then travelled to Egypt in 1868 and to Damascus five years later (Simon 1996:16). Zsolnay, and many others, followed the same itinerary. In one of his letters from Cairo, he himself made the comment that he encountered the very same people here that he had bumped into in Istanbul. Nor could it be mere coincidence that Major Myers, who took part in a farewell party held in Sephards Hotel in Cairo on December 27, 1887, was probably the same person who years later purchased large quantities of Near-Eastern, primarily Syrian and Egyptian, ceramics for the Victoria and Albert Museum of London. We can reconstruct Zsolnay's journey as follows: He set out early in November, 1887. His first letter was dated October 18 while still on Hungarian territory, from Mohács. He arrived in Constantinople on October 24. During the month he spent in the Turkish capital, he mostly visited architectural monuments, the mosques. He

procured permission to make copies of the tiles covering the inside walls with the help of transparent paper. In all probability he bought the collection's Iznik pieces, dated from about the second half of the 16th century, in Istanbul. Early in November he made a brief, two-day-long excursion to Bursa, where he studied the tile covering of the Yeshil mosque and its *türbe* (mausoleum). His last letter from Constantinople was dated November 21. His next correspondence was sent during a boat journey in the Aegean Sea. In late November he visited Izmir, Larnaca, and Cyprus. During the next three weeks or so, he completed the journey from Beirut through Baalbek, Damascus, Jerusalem and Port Said to Cairo. According to his diary, he made his most important purchases in Damascus, where he bought over a hundred pieces of 16th and 17th-century Damascene tiles, that still form part of the collection today¹.

From the standpoint of the Fustāt collection of ceramics, Zsolnay's stay in Egypt is a great deal more important. Zsolnay arrived in Cairo on December 19. Here he made the acquaintance of the Egyptian government's Minister of Finance, the Hungarian-born Blum Pasha². Blum Pasha introduced Zsolnay to Max (Miksa) Herz, the architect who was also of Hungarian ancestry. We shall return to Herz later, because he – apparently – came to play an important role in shipping the Fustāt collection to Hungary. After spending Christmas in Cairo, Zsolnay went on a two-week trip on the Nile on December 28. In the letters he sent from here he mostly wrote about the art of ancient Egypt. He returned to Cairo on January 10, 1888, and then left the Egyptian capital a few days later. His next message was sent from Athens on January 28. Here he met the German archaeologist Heinrich Schliemann. Following a brief stay in Athens, he returned to Hungary via Rome in February 1888.

We have very little information about Zsolnay's purchases in Egypt. During the first days of his stay in Cairo, he mentioned that he was not likely to buy much here, because, as he put it: "valuable Arab items are hard to come by, and Egyptian rarities interest me very little." Despite his earlier plans, however, he did purchase some carpets and Qur'ān holders in the Cairo bazaars, according to his diary. Unfortunately, I have been unable to find any information as to when and under what circumstances he had bought the rather large collection of Fustāt ceramics (approximately 4,000 fragments). I presume, without being able to prove it, that he bought them on the advice of the previously mentioned Miksa Herz. Miksa Herz went to stay in Egypt in October 1880. In early 1881, he joined the Technical Bureau of the Waqf Office, where he worked in the architect team until 1890s. The head of the Bureau, Pasha Julius Franz, retired in 1887 and recommended Miksa Herz as his replacement.

¹ For a detailed description of the journey, see Gerelyes & Kovács 1999:15-21.

² Gyula Blum was born in 1843 in Pest. He worked as Director of the Austro-Egyptian Bank after 1869. He became under-secretary of the Treasury in 1877, and was made Pasha and Minister two years later.

Miksa Herz, subsequently had quite a remarkable career, donating more than 300 articles to the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest in 1891³. The Herz donation included a small collection of Fustāt ceramics, approximately 200 pieces. This collection later on grew through the pieces that the Zsolnay family either donated or sold to the Museum of Applied Arts⁴. Unlike the collection of tiles, the collection of Fustāt ceramics had no influence on the Zsolnay factory's designers⁵. Save for one unique piece, we could discover no traces of experiments or re-firing from the 19th century. The wide variety of patterns associated with the Fustāt collection apparently failed to influence the Zsolnay factory's products after 1888. The composition of the collection suggests that Zsolnay did not apply any clear-cut criteria in his selection. There are hundreds of Syrian bowls of the same type, with an underglaze painted in blue or black. The fact that he brought home approximately one thousand fragments of Mamlūk sgraffito ceramics that did not fit the factory's profile, while the number of lustre painted fragments that did fit its profile were much smaller, although not insignificant, also contradicts the idea of deliberate selection.

Miklós Zsolnay purchased the collection either in December 1887 or in early 1888. Therefore, he bought it eight years before Fredrik R. Martin concluded what could rightly be termed the first planned research, and decades before 'Alī Bahgāt started his research work (Vernoit 1997:5). The area was a favourite site for treasure hunters. Zsolnay's collection precisely matched the Fustāt material acquired for other European collections at the end of the 19th century. The circumstances under which he obtained them can explain why, despite of having thousands of fragments, we are able to reconstruct only a few vessels.

The restoration and cataloguing of the collection have still not been completed. The aim of the present article is to present this previously unpublished collection to the world by listing the main types, thus opening the way for further research.

Both the site and the history of excavations are well known from the literature (Scanlon 1965:7-9). During the earliest Islamic conquests, the Arab armies established military bases over all the occupied territory. Conquered in AD 641, one such base was al-Fustāt, which later grew into a town of substance. More than three hundred years later, in AD 969, Ġawhar, the military commander of the Fātimid Dynasty

³ Miksa Herz was appointed to head the Arab Museum (today the Museum of Islamic Art) in 1892. In 1901 he was officially named as Director of the Institute. On his eventful and successful life, see Ormos (in press). I would like to use this opportunity to express my gratitude to István Ormos for the information he made available to me.

⁴ Iparművészeti Múzeum, Budapest. Éva Csenkey called my attention to the collection of Fustat ceramics owned by the Museum of Applied Arts. I would like to express my gratitude for the help she has given me in my work.

⁵ The collection of 16th and 17th-century tiles exerted a serious influence on the work of the factory's designers after 1888. See: Hárs 1996:71.; Gerelyes & Kovács 1999:37-40, plates 53-76.

(969-1171) that conquered North Africa, marked the site for the new capital, Cairo, north of Fustāt. Caliph al-Mu'izz moved to the new centre, developed specifically for him, four years later. Nevertheless, Fustāt's significance was preserved during subsequent centuries. Right up to circa 1075 the most important ceramics workshops of the Islamic world were to be found in this district. Sometime after 1168, when the area of pottery workshops burnt down and there was a mass exodus of skilled potters Fustāt district started to lose its importance. In subsequent centuries one part of Fustāt became a dumping ground for Cairo's rubbish, which made it into a treasure house for collectors of later periods. The huge quantities of ceramics, mostly fragments or rejects, that were uncovered in excavations in Fustāt not only testify to the skills of local workshops, but also bear witness to the craftsmanship of Iranian, Chinese, Spanish and Italian potters whose works were exported here in large volumes.

THE COLLECTION

The Fātimid (969-1171) and Ayyūbid (1171-1250) periods

Water bottle filters

The water bottle filters constitute a characteristic group among the Fustāt collection's ceramics from the early Fātimid period. With their pierced filters of geometrical designs arranged in radial, triangular, and concentric circles, the pieces in the Zsolnay collection belong to the simplest type. They dated to between the 10th and the 12th centuries inclusively. (Fig. 1.)

Oil lamps

The Fustāt material contains oil lamps in vast quantities – over several thousand –, which were uncovered either during regular excavations led by archaeologists or in the course of earlier “treasure hunts” (Kubiak 1970:1). As a result, Islamic collections all over the world contain lamps from Fustāt in large numbers. The Zsolnay pieces fit the range of the known types well, dating back to the Fātimid period, i.e. the second half of the 11th century and the 12th century.

Lustre painted ceramics

The Zsolnay collection of lustre painted ceramics is extremely rich and quite complex. The time range for the collection are set by the 9th-century polychrome fragments from the period of the ‘Abbāsīd-dynasty⁶ and 15th-century pieces from Valencia. A considerable part of the collection is made up of fragments golden painted against a light background from the Fātimid period (Fig.2.) and, to a lesser

⁶ Gerelyes & Kovács 1999:Fig. 30/a. See: Philon 1980:77-78. Plate VIIA.

extent, by fragments with a turquoise glaze lustre-painted in gold (Fig.3.). The rest of the fragments are small, mostly coming from flat bowls set on a low foot.

The Mamlūk Age

The Bahrī (1250-1390) and the Burgī Periods (1382-1517)

Underglaze painted Vessels

The most common type of vessels during the Bahrī period was painted under a colourless glaze in blue or black. These vessels were produced in large quantities both in Syria and in Egypt. As a result of the free movement of the masters, it is practically impossible nowadays to distinguish between the products of workshops in the two areas (Atil 1981:146). The Zsolnay collection has a large number of pieces representing this type of vessel. Together with the 15th-century Chinese version of the same type, approximately one-third of the collection consists of fragments belonging to this category. These fragments once formed part of some surprisingly coarse vessels with rather thick wall made of white or yellowish-white gritted clay, mostly of flat or deep bowls and larger jugs. The paint, mostly blue or black, and less commonly turquoise or green, was applied on a thin layer of slip which covered the clay body. The painted surface was covered with a transparent, or sometimes greenish, glaze, which allowed the pattern underneath to show. Quite often this layer of glaze turned out to be thicker than intended, accumulating either at the inside bottom or at the outside base. The Zsolnay collection has an especially large number of vessels rejected because of faulty glazing. The wasters are especially important, because they prove the items' Egyptian origin. Despite such technical deficiencies and smaller faults, this type of vessel was attractive and decorative, at the same time being very handy for everyday use. Among the favourite motifs used to decorate the inside of the dishes were the triangular panels separated by blue lines and arranged radially, which were alternately filled with floral and geometrical elements (Fig.4.). In the latter case, the pattern left white stood out sharply from the hatched black background'. In another favourite type of design, one of the alternate panels was filled with inscriptions, actual or imitation. Similarly popular were the floral, Arabesque or simplified geometrical elements arranged in concentric circles.

Related to this type, but emerging somewhat later and continuing to survive well into the Burgī period, are some vessels painted in black under the blue, turquoise or green glaze (Fig.5.). The Zsolnay collection has a large number of similar, 15th-century

⁷ This type of 14th-century vessel, underglaze painted in blue and black and decorated with panels arranged radially, is copiously represented in numerous collections. Lane 1957:Plate 12, Atil 1981:Figs. 66-67, Soustiel 1985:Figs. 260, 261, 262. Jenkins 1984:95-14, links this type unequivocally, not only with Syria, but also with a single workshop.

fragments, painted in black under the turquoise glaze⁸. Substantially smaller is the number of fragments painted black under a green glaze. At this point, we should mention an almost completely preserved vessel. Made of fine, light brown clay, it is a deep bowl standing on a small foot. The pattern is underglaze painted in black: the inside of the bowl is decorated with radially arranged leafed tendrils, the outside is completely covered in tendrils with lotus flowers, trefoils and rosettes. The latter display shows close resemblances with the early Iznik ware, suggesting a late-15th-century date of origin. In the inside the cockspur marks are still visible. Stuck to the outside during the firing process, there is a fragment from the rim of another vessel. This is, therefore a waster, and provided it actually did form part of the Zsolnay collection bought in Egypt, it must have been made in Egypt. This is, however, contradicted by the use of the turquoise glaze. According to the generally accepted view, vessels with turquoise or blue glaze were made in Syria and Iran, while those with green glaze were produced in Egypt⁹.

The 15th century witnessed the emergence of a new type of vessel with an underglaze painted in blue. The 14th-century Ming porcelain vessels began to exert an increasingly strong influence after the beginning of the 15th century (Carswell 1985:31). In part, this was reflected in the accurate copying of the Chinese archetypes, as shown by the pieces in Fig. 6. The shallow plates set on a low foot, were made of coarse white clay. The details of the graphic work in the pattern painted on the inside in blue are very fine and elaborate. Some of the items deserves special attention on account of the multiple tones of the lotus flower, which evokes archetypes from graphic works, rather than from porcelain decoration. The colouring of this items is also unusual, insofar as it comes close to cobalt. The vessels shown on Figure 6 were also made of a coarse white clay composition, and were underglaze painted in blue. Unlike the examples discussed earlier, these fragments are decorated with a somewhat simplified and rudimentary version of the motifs familiar from Chinese porcelain ware made in the second half of the 14th century, such as the lotus flowers, elongated leafs and foliated tendrils. They belong, therefore to the second group of blue-and white Chinoiserie. In the case of several items in the Zsolnay collection, the precise analogies are known from other collections. Partly on the basis of these precise analogies, and partly from the masters' signatures found on items in the

⁸ The vessels painted in black under the transparent turquoise glaze emerged as early as the 12th century in Iran. Grube 1994:Cat.no. 201-202; then, in the 13th century, they also appeared in Syria, most notably in Rakka. Soustiel 1985: 115. On their survival into the 14th and 15th century see Atil 1981:149-150.

⁹ Atil 1981:150.; The vessel has recently been published. Cf. Gerelyes 2001: Fig. 11.

collection, this group of exhibits can quite safely be linked to the 15th-century Egyptian workshop of Gaybī¹⁰.

In the category of underglaze painted vessels, a smaller group composed of only a few items, deserves special attention (Fig.7). Fragments of basis, bottoms and rims belonging to flat dishes constitute this group. The coarse and quite often rather thick material of the vessels, made of white or greyish-white clay mixed with gravel, is in sharp contrast with the fine graphics of the decoration. First, a thin layer of slip was applied, on which the decoration was executed in three colours, black, blue and brownish-red. This was then covered with a transparent glaze of very high quality. Evoking the world of miniatures, the finely drawn pictures had the following characteristics: human or animal representation, such as the figure holding a cup (Fig.7) or the partial figure of a bird ; actual inscriptions or imitation Kūfī inscriptions; and the Arabesque (Fig.7). Although the fragment of geometric decoration in Fig. 7 do not fit the thematic character of the group, they undoubtedly belong here on technical grounds. Researchers date this group of ceramics either to the end of the 12th century or the beginning of the 13th century. Although opinions vary as to the actual workshops associated with the various towns, the Syrian origin of the ceramics is generally accepted. Therefore, this type of ceramics was imported to Egypt¹¹.

Mamlūk incised pottery

Approximately one third of the complete collection belongs to this type, which was produced over a period of roughly a hundred years beginning in the late 13th century. This means that with its several hundreds of Mamlūk incised pieces, the Zsolnay collection has an outstanding significance.

The coat of arms referring to the owners' title, or more precisely to their office, the emirate, was placed in a circle in the interior of the vessels. The most common signs are the cup, the napkin, the sword, the target, and the polo stick (Fig. 8), in other words, the sign of the cup bearer, the master of the robes, the sword-bearer, and the master of the polo game (Mayer 1933:4-5). There are a large number of pieces

¹⁰ Peterson (1980), for example, Plate 4, XIII, shows a remarkable resemblance to fragments Nos. 1 and 2 in Fig. 14. Several pieces in the Zsolnay collection, not published in the present paper, are identical to the items published by Peterson (1980) in Plate 3,6 and by Abel (1930) in Plate V-VI-IX-X. The fragment published by Abel (1930) in Plate XII/59 bears a close resemblance to the item marked no. 2 in Fig. 13 in the present paper, while Plate XXII/104 shows a striking similarity with article no. 1 Fig. 13.

¹¹ The figure holding a cup on the fragment marked 3 in Fig. 15 resembles No. 212 in Grube (1976). The two fragments display such similarity that it is almost as if they belonged to the same piece. The rim fragment decorated with an Arabesque, marked 2 in Fig. 15, is also very close to the bowl marked Cat. No. 332. in Grube (1994), while the rim fragment imitating Kūfī writing published also in Fig. 15, resembles the decoration of the bowl marked in the said publication as Cat. No. 287. We can read about the Syrian towns identified as possible places of origin in the description of this item.

in the collection which feature the symbol of the five or six-petal rosette, originally symbolising the ruling power but eventually becoming a simple decorative element as well as the lily (Mayer 1933:22-24). Less frequently, we can find examples where two different types were combined, for example the lily and the sword. In some cases, the interior of the circle is divided into three parts with lines coloured differently from the background, with the coat of arms placed in this inner band. Researchers associated this latter type with the period beginning with the second quarter of the 14th century and lasting throughout the Bahrī period (1390) (Atil 1981: items 94 and 95). The animal representations form a separate group. The eagle, a relatively rarely used symbol, and the lion represented the Sultan's power, while the rather numerous fish representations only served decorative purposes (Atil 1981:20). The collection preserved a very large number of mass produced items with geometrical decorations. The ceramics made for emirs and decorated with heraldic signs disappeared in the 15th century. They were replaced by single colour glazed pottery with slip painted ornamental decoration, made of identical material and of identical quality. Two examples of this type are shown in Fig. 9, with the tripods stuck into it during firing still visible.

Ceramics imported from China

Celadon

As early as the mid-12th century, Egypt was flooded with Lung-Ch'üan ceramics of Chinese origin that were already copied by Egyptian potters in the Ayyübid period (Scanlon 1971:88-89). The import of Celadon ceramics from China continued throughout the Mamlük period, and definitely lasted until 1400 (Scanlon 1971:90). The pieces that were uncovered in largest numbers during the Fustāt archaeological excavations were green glazed articles dated from the Mongol Yüan dynasty (1279-1368), either decorated with incised or relief-motifs of fish, chrysanthemums, pointed leaves, or left completely undecorated. The Zsolnay collection displays a similar composition. The number of Celadon vessels is relatively small, and not a single vessel could be put together from the fragments. The two fragments in Fig. 10 represent four different types. The fourth fragment chipped off from the foot and bottom of a large bowl. Under the water green glaze on both in its interior and its side, there is an incised decoration: a lotus flower in the middle, surrounded by lotuses and pointed leaves all strung on a stalk. The other item published here is the ribbed yet smooth fragment of a large, light green bowl with an everted rim. (Fig. 10)

During the Mamlük period, and most notably in the Bahrī period, Egyptian potters copied Celadon ceramics in large quantities. A familiarity with the composition of other Fustāt collections or with the archaeological material of the Fustāt excavations will find it less surprising to find a large number of Mamlük copies of Chinese Celadon ceramics (Scanlon 1984:116-118). The items presented here are fragments from the foot and the bottom of footed bowls (Fig.11.). The fourth fragment in Fig.

10. is made from gritted red clay. This piece displays the marks left behind by the tripod in the interior, as well as visible signs of having been stuck to another vessel at two points. Both the inside and the outside of the vessel are glazed in dark green, and its interior is decorated in a lighter tone: pointed leaves in a radial arrangement set in the relief-like frame depicting a string of pearls. An other piece is made of light brown clay and covered both inside and outside in a light green glaze and featuring an impressed rose in the interior and details from an incomprehensible pattern on the side. The second piece in Figure 10 has a considerably finer execution, finely thrown and made of a light yellow clay. This is the fragment of a bowl set on a higher foot. It is covered in a light yellowish-green glaze both inside and outside, and has an incised pattern in the interior: darker brown Arabesques and circles. There is a drop of dark green glaze in the centre. The Zsolnay collection contains a large number of similarly executed bowl fragments with incised decoration, glazed in a single colour. However, unlike the Celadon ceramics, their glazing might also come in yellowish-brown, light brown, turquoise or even deep lilac colours.

Porcelain

The other extremely important group of ceramics imported from China consists of blue-and-white porcelain from the period of the Ming Dynasty¹². Researchers put the date of the appearance of blue-and-white porcelain in Egypt at a very early date, 1326. The surviving archaeological finds have confirmed beyond doubt that some articles made in the second quarter of the 14th century had already reached Fustât. Chinese porcelain production of the 15th century failed to reach Syria and Egypt, due to Timür Lenk's invasion in 1400-1401 and the subsequent decline. This is precisely the factor that motivated local potters to produce underglaze-painted ceramics in blue with imitation Chinese motifs as described above (Figs. 6). The import of Chinese porcelain started to gather momentum again only after the end of the 15th century. We have evidence to show that this process continued throughout the 17th century, and lasted well into the 18th century.

The Zsolnay collection has only a small number of Chinese porcelain fragments. In our selection for Figures 12 we tried to include different types. The second fragment illustrates one of the characteristic types of Chinese porcelain made around the middle of the 14th century. The motif of birds floating on lotus-pond is also well known from intact pieces (Carswell 1985: Fig. 13/a; Carswell 1999: Fig. 15).

¹² The majority of the blue-and-white Chinese porcelain ware produced in the 14th century was intended for Islamic countries. See: Medley 1976:178.

Summary

In terms of its size, Miklós Zsolnay's collection of ceramics from Fustât ranks among the finest European collections of its kind. In its composition, the collection faithfully follows that of other known collections of Fustât ceramics. By reviewing the main ceramic types in the collection, this paper only provided a cross-section of the wealth of material in it. In terms of numbers it only covers perhaps a couple of thousand of the actual volume of vessels. Since the work of research and analysis has still not been completed, this paper should be seen as a preliminary report.

I am greatly indebted to the Max van Berchem Foundation. The Max van Berchem Foundation is a scientific foundation established in Geneva, Switzerland, in memory of Max van Berchem (1863-1921), the founder of Arabic epigraphy. Its aim is to promote the study of Islamic and Arabic archaeology, history, geography, art, epigraphy, religion and literature. It has been subsidising the cataloguing of the Miklós Zsolnay collection since 1997.

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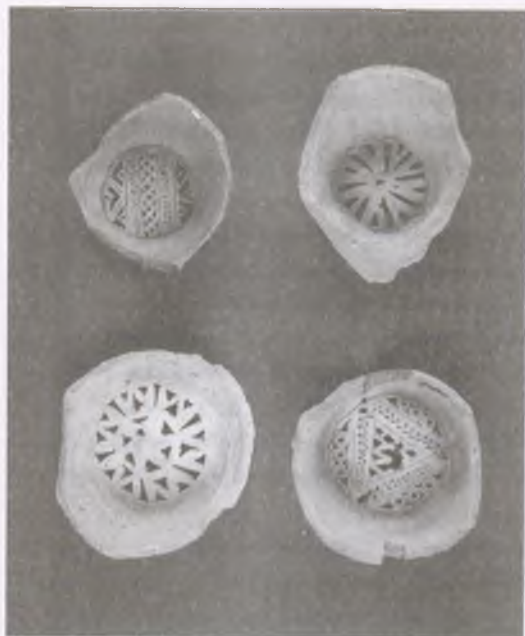


Fig. 1.



Fig. 2.



Fig. 3.



Fig. 4.



Fig. 5.

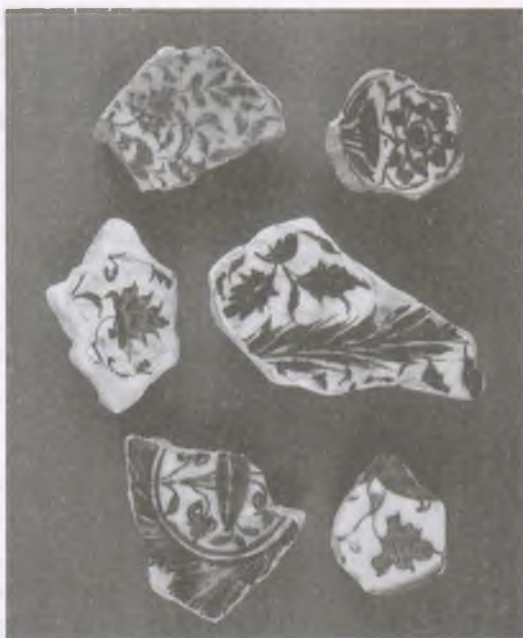


Fig. 6.



Fig. 7.



Fig. 8.



Fig. 9.



Fig. 10.



Fig. 11.



Fig. 12.