

DAVID AARON



Monumental Jar with Turquoise Glaze

8th - 9th Century A.D.

Clay

H: 62cm

The early Islamic period began in the 7th century A.D. with the consolidation of power by Muhammad in Arabia, and the subsequent Arab expansion into the vacuum of power caused by the collapse of the Persian Empire and the exhaustion of the Byzantine Empire. The spread of Islam was almost immediately carried beyond the borders of the Arabian Peninsula by Muhammad's successors (the Caliphs) after his death in 632. The Caliph (Khalifa) commanded the loyalty of the Muslim tribes of Arabia, and within a decade of Muhammad's death Arabian armies had successfully invaded Syria, Palestine, Lebanon, Jazira (the area encompassing the Euphrates and Tigris river basins in Iraq), Armenia and Egypt. The Byzantines were ejected, and large swathes of North Africa and Persia subsequently fell to the Arabs. This expansion was not without its difficulties, costs and compromises, and the caliphate had to maintain a large military force to contain various rebellions. Internally, the caliphate was not stable, with divided loyalties creating various factions in the ruling classes. Civil war broke out in 656 between those who supported the current caliph, and those who supported Mu'awiya, governor of Syria. After months of siege warfare, attempts at arbitration, assassinations and general chaos, Mu'awiya was eventually named head of state. Thus, began the reign of the first great Muslim dynasty, the Umayyads. Vessels and fragments of such have been found in a number of Early Islamic sites, including Samarra, Susa, Rosen-Ayalon, Hira, al-Mina Nishapur and Tarsus. The idea of monochrome, usually green, glazed moulded pottery jars like this one are among the oldest known from the Islamic period. The form and style draw inspiration from Sasanian and Parthian prototypes. The simple but unique decoration of dotted bands is a feature of earthenware of the period. Sometimes these vessels are decorated with incising and applied ornaments. One of the finest examples in a different form, but same genre is the slightly later green glazed dish in the Khalili collection. Despite their beauty these wares were used for practical purposes such as the storage and transportation of liquids and grains. The colour was created from copper and iron oxides mixed in an alkaline glaze. This was applied on top of a fine white paste so that the reddish surface of the clay would not show through.

The shapes of the vessels reveal a reliance on Greek and Mesopotamian forms- although it is not easy to separate these two traditions as the eastern Greeks had themselves borrowed ideas from the Mesopotamians. It has also been suggested that in their colour and form there is some attempt to imitate metallic vessels which were undoubtedly more expensive. The green glaze has been likened to the patina that bronze acquires over time and some of the decorative elements have been compared to twisted metal.

Literature:

‘The Emile Tabbagh Collection, Early Mediterranean and Near Eastern Art, Anderson Galleries’, New York, 3-4 January 1936, Lot 95.

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