

Bronze Mortars from the Collection of the State Museum of History of Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study investigates a small collection of medieval bronze mortars preserved in the State Museum of History of Uzbekistan to understand their historical significance, functional use, and regional similarities. **Method:** A comparative analysis was conducted to examine the morphological forms, decorative designs, and functional attributes of the mortars in relation to similar artifacts from Central Asia and neighboring countries. **Results:** The findings reveal striking similarities in the design and decoration of the mortars from the museum's collection with those from other regions. The mortars served various purposes, including use in production processes, daily life, and pharmacy. Most of the studied artifacts date back to the XI-XII centuries, with some extending to the XIV-XV centuries. **Novelty:** This research provides a focused examination of a specific collection, contributing to a deeper understanding of the shared cultural and functional aspects of bronze mortars across Central Asia during the medieval period.

INTRODUCTION

The archaeological collection of the State Museum of History of Uzbekistan contains an interesting collection of copper and bronze items from the medieval period, including jugs, bowls, trays, lamps and other items. Among the items in this collection, various mortars are of great interest. Unfortunately, these are accidental finds from earlier years without information about the places where they were found and the persons who handed them over.

Considering the degree of study of such products, it should be noted that individual mortars were published as illustrations in the works of a number of researchers, including E.Y. Buryakova, T.A. Abdullaev, A. Fakhretdinova, A. Hakimov, G.A.Pugachenkova, L.I.Rempel, J.Ilyasov, A.Hakimov [1], [2], [3], [4].

These mortars hold considerable historical and cultural significance, reflecting the technological and artistic achievements of their time. Their detailed craftsmanship suggests that they were not merely utilitarian objects but may have held ceremonial or symbolic importance. Mortars were likely used in various applications, including the preparation of spices, medicines, and pigments, essential in both daily life and specialized practices.

The lack of contextual information about the discovered mortars presents a challenge for archaeologists and historians. Without precise data on their excavation sites, it becomes difficult to determine their original cultural or regional affiliations. Nevertheless, the diversity in design and material composition offers clues about the

trade routes, technological exchanges, and cultural influences that shaped medieval Uzbekistan.

Efforts to further analyze these mortars using modern techniques such as metallurgical analysis and comparative studies with similar artifacts in neighboring regions could provide deeper insights. These investigations may help establish connections to specific workshops or traditions, shedding light on the broader historical narrative of the region.

Moreover, the display and study of these mortars within the State Museum of History of Uzbekistan highlight the institution's role in preserving and interpreting the nation's rich cultural heritage. By focusing on such artifacts, the museum not only educates the public about the past but also underscores the importance of safeguarding historical objects for future research and appreciation.

RESEARCH METHOD

In the process of writing this article we have studied the technique of bronze mortars manufacturing and dated them on the basis of comparative analysis with similar items stored in museums of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and the Russian Federation. The purpose of this article is to introduce new, previously unknown samples of such items into the scientific turnover

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

Here is a description of the published mortars kept in the museum:

1. The Mortar is Bronze, Cast, Cylindrical in Shape, with the Mouth Bent Outwards



Figure 1. Bronze mortar, cast and cylindrical in shape, featuring an outward-bent mouth.

The bottom is flat. The outer side is decorated below the edge with a belt of simple engraved plant ornament in the form of shoots. The belt is outlined with concentric thin lines. Below, most of the surface is decorated with two rows of almond-shaped cones. In the lower row there are five cones pointed upwards, in the upper row there are five cones pointed downwards. Each cone is placed on the same configuration, protruding flat tile, which forms a stepped ledge. Against the tip of each of the cone protrusions are engraved

heart-shaped figures with unclosed, twisted inward ends, which are directed at an acute angle to the tip of the cone. Below, at the base, there is a sash of woven ornament, outlined above and below with thin lines. Two more parallel concentric lines are engraved below the girdle. There are cracks along the edge of the mortar. Height - 10.8 cm; edge diameter - 13 cm; bottom diameter - 11.5 cm; size of the cone protrusion - 2.3×1.5 cm; width of the upper ornamental belt - 1.5 cm; width of the lower ornamental belt -1.3 cm (Coll No. 188/39. Inventory No. A.14157) [1], [2], [4].

2. The Mortar is Bronze, Cast, Cylindrical in Shape, With a Slightly Socket-Shaped Mouth



Figure 2. Bronze mortar, cast and cylindrical in shape, with a slightly socket-shaped mouth.

The bottom is flat. The outside below the mouth is decorated with a belt with an Arabic inscription, the letters of which are inlaid with red copper. The inscription is executed on a background of vegetal ornament in the form of bending bifurcated stems and filling in the form of miniature hemispheres. The belt is outlined with thin concentric lines. Below, most of the surface is decorated with two rows of almond-shaped cones. There are five cones in the lower row with the pointing upwards, and five cones in the upper row with the pointing downwards. Against the tip of each of the cones are engraved small three-petalled palmettes, coming out with their tops to triangular cartouches, located at the same level with the cones. The lateral petals of the trefoils are bent. The trefoils are encircled by a second contour line, and each of them has a notch. The triangular cartouches are also made with double lines, and inside them there is plant ornamentation. At the bottom, at the base, there is a narrow belt of flagellated ornament, which is connected in five places by short strips with four horizontal dashes inside. The girdle is bounded at the top and bottom by thin concentric lines. The base has been cracked during moulding or use. Height - 12 cm; edge diameter - 13.7 cm; bottom diameter - 12 cm, the size of the lump 2.8×1.8 cm; width of the upper ornamental belt - 2 cm; width of the belt with lumps - 8 cm; width of the lower ornamental belt - 0.6 cm (Coll. No. 188/40. Inventory No. A.14158) [1], [3].

3. The Mortar is Bronze, Cast, With a Cylindrical Body



Figure 3. Bronze mortar, cast with a cylindrical body, featuring wide horizontal edges decorating the top and bottom.

The top and bottom are decorated with wide horizontal edges. The upper surface of the flange is decorated with ornamentation in the form of four broad cartouches with concave lateral edges encircled by a double border. The cartouches contain epigraphic decoration in the form of Kufic pseudo-inscriptions on the background of a circular floral ornament. In the spaces between them are four round medallions with wicker inside. The lower part of the edge is also decorated with four narrow strips-cartouches with curved stems of plant shoots and strokes. The ends of the bands are concave and outlined with a single line. Between them are four small medallions with two crossed ribbons. On the torso in two rows are four almond-shaped cones, located under each other, and the space between them horizontally, decorated with engraved ornament in the form of two triangles, facing each other at acute angles and encircled by double lines. The triangles inside are filled with plant ornament in the form of bending and twisting shoots in different directions. Between the cones vertically ornament in the form of round medallions of double lines with plant shoots and strokes. The surface of the lower edge of the mortar is also decorated with four cartouches imitating inscriptions in Naskh handwriting on a background of plant shoots. Between them are four medallions of double lines, within which are semi-circles with strokes and plant shoots. This mortar is decorated with copper inlay used in the decoration of cartouches, medallions and triangular elements.

The edges of the upper socket and base are partially broken off. The bottom of the mortar is slightly concave. There is a break in the center of the bottom of the mortar; in the middle part of the tulle between the cones on four sides at the same level, four breaks have been specially made. Apparently, this richly decorated mortar was reused after it had fallen into disrepair, for example, after its bottom had broken. Height - 14 cm; diameter of the upper socket - 19 cm; diameter of the base - 19.5 cm; internal diameter of the mortar - 12.5 cm; width of ornamental cartouches on the mouth - 2.6 cm; diameter of the medallion - 2.7 cm; size of triangles on the torso - 6×3 cm; diameter of medallions on the torso - 2.7 cm; width of cartouches on the base - 2.6 cm; diameter of medallions on the

base - 2.6 cm; size of the cone protrusion - 1.7×2.6 cm (Coll. No. 188/41. Inventory No. A.14159) [3].

4. The Mortar is Bronze, Cast, With A Cylindrical, Slightly Concave in the Middle Part of the Body and a Thickened, Pointed Outwards, Flattened from Above Edge



Figure 4. Bronze mortar, cast with a cylindrical body, slightly concave in the middle, and featuring a thickened edge that points outward and is flattened on the top.

The bottom is flat, the bottom part smoothly widens downwards under the cone and is pointed outwards at the base. In the lower part of the body there is a circular wide groove, as if separating the upper part of the body from the base of the mortar. The body is decorated with six vertical faceted ribs, which are pointed from above and widen to 1.5 cm from below and are bevelled at the ends. The ribs go up to the groove. In the upper part of the stupa there are two loop-shaped ears ending with the head of a bird resembling an owl. The head of the owl, flat, with a protruding beak in the form of a rib. Shown are divergent, pointed, curved 'ears' with elongated recesses, round eyes with engraved ovals around them. Rings 6 cm in diameter and 0.8 cm in cross-section are inserted in the ears (one ring is preserved). Height - 13.5 cm; mouth diameter - 18 cm; bottom diameter 18.5 cm; length of ribs - 10 cm; owl's head - 2.8×2.8 cm (Coll. No. 188/43. Inventory No. A.14161) [4].

5. Miniature Bronze Mortar



Figure 5. Miniature bronze mortar.

The body is cylindrical, smoothly expanding to the lower, protruding flattened base of the base. The upper part margin is sharply bent, protruding and slightly overhanging.

On the flat surface of the mouth there is an ornamental sash of hearts facing inwards into the mortar, in which trefoils are enclosed. The belt is bounded by two concentric lines, and the free fields inside and outside the hearts are filled with hatching. From below the edge is decorated with an ornament in the form of a girdle with a stalk with trefoils on curved spurs. The background is in the form of fine grain. The full-height body of the mortar is decorated with a wide belt with epigraphic ornamentation in the form of Arabic inscription with flowering kufi, outlined above and below with narrow rollers. The surface of the protruding base is ornamented with a continuous shoot with offshoots with trefoils at their ends. The belt is outlined with concentric lines. Height - 4.2 cm; diameter of the upper part (outer) - 6.4 cm diameter of the upper part (inner) - 4.3 cm; bottom diameter - 6.1 cm (Coll. No. 188/ 72. Inventory No. A.14187) [1].

6. The Pestle is Bronze, Cast, Judging by its Size, It Was Probably Included in a Set with a Miniature Mortar



Figure 6. The pestle is bronze, cast, and judging by its size, it was likely part of a set with a miniature mortar.

The pestle consists of a round rod in cross-section, the upper part of which served as a handle with a hemispherical cap, and the lower working part extends to the rounded end. Almost in the middle the pestle is divided by a projecting shaft. The surface of the pistil stem before and after the shaft is decorated with engraved ornamentation. Just under the upper cap there is a transverse narrow horizontal belt with a continuously running shoot "islimi". The same concentric belt is made in front of the protruding shaft separating the pistil. The entire surface between the belts is decorated with twisted ornamentation in the form of slanting smooth ribbons, between which vertically bending shoots "Islimi" are clamped. The background is in the form of fine grains. The same ornament on the surface of the lower working part of the pistil. Total length - 11.5 cm; length from the upper end to the lintel in the middle - 5.1 cm; length from the lower working end to the lintel - 6.1 cm; diameter of the upper extension - 1.3 cm; diameter of the roller - 1.2 cm; diameter of the lower extension - 1.9 cm (Coll. No. 188/72A. Inventory No. A.14188).

7. The Mortar Is Bronze, Cast, In the form of a Thick-Walled Vessel With A Roundly Expanded Body in the Middle Part



Figure 7. The mortar is bronze, cast, in the form of a thick-walled vessel with a roundly expanded body in the middle part.

The bottom is flat on a protruding pallet. The walls from the pallet expand upwards, then bend inwards, smoothly pass into the vertical and form the upper part slightly thickened outwards, flattened and tapered from above. In the middle part of the body, on a slightly protruding strip of fourteen protrusions-counterforces, which slightly widen downwards. In the middle of the mortar body there is a break in the wall formed during casting. Height - 9 cm; diameter of the upper part (outer) - 7.5 cm diameter of the upper part (inner) - 6.5 cm; bottom diameter - 7 cm; tray height - 0.8 cm; width of the strip with counter ribs - 2.7 cm, width between ribs - 2 cm, width of ribs at the bottom - 0.8 cm, at the top - 0.7 cm; wall thickness - 0.3 cm. (Coll. No. 188/42. Inventory No. A.14160). Published for the first time.

Discussion

Analogues to our bronze mortars are mainly found among random finds in Central Asia, as well as among mortars stored in the collections of various museums. Quite often among bronze stupas of the XI-XII cc. there are specimens decorated with louvres, arranged in two rows along the body. Protrusions of either drop-shaped or subtriangular form were an almost obligatory element for medieval mortars of the X-XII centuries. Their purpose is not entirely clear: whether they had only decorative value or served to hold the mortar during work is uncertain. As J.Y. Ilyasov writes: "If the protrusions are a purely decorative element, we can assume that its origin is associated with the imitation of stone inlay. This is hinted at by the shape of some drop-shaped protrusions having the form of a caste with an inlay. The possibility of such a rich decoration of mortars becomes clear if we remember that in the Zoroastrian tradition mortars used for making the sacred drink - khaoma - were considered sacred objects" [5], [4].

There are three such mortars in the museum's collection (coll. nos. 188/39,40,41). A mortar very similar to ours was found in Shaartuz, South Tajikistan. This mortar has a slightly concave wall with a sharp bend in the upper part. The top of the upper part is bevelled inwards, the bottom is flat, on the surface of the wall there are two rows of

almond-shaped relief cones, in the lower row there are four cones and in the upper row there are three. Each of the cones is encircled, with a slight indentation, by an engraved oval, ending with a cross-shaped figure. At the bottom, at the base, there is a band of ornament divided into four cartouches, each of which is filled with L-shaped figures and more complex signs in the form of an imitation of Arabic inscription. In the upper part of the wall there is a band of inscription. On the upper plane of the upper part there are three ornamental cartouches, each with a plant shoot. The mortar is smaller than ours: its lower diameter is 4.9-5.1 cm; its upper diameter is 5.6-5.8 cm; its height is 4.5-4.7 cm. A.A. Ivanov dated the inscription on it to the second half of the XI-XII c. The cross-shaped heart-shaped elements located against the point of the cones are similar to the 'hearts' of mortar No. 1 (Coll. No. 188/39); the lower ornamental girdle of the same mortar and the upper girdle with the inscription on the body of mortar No. 2 (Coll. No. 188/40) are also similar [6].

A similar mortar, cast in white bronze, was found in the area of the Ken-Buluk settlement (Kyrgyzstan); its diameter is 14 cm and height are 12.5 cm. The outer surface of the upper crown is engraved with epigraphic ornament, and the lower part has an ornamental sash. Eight almond-shaped 'cones', arranged in two levels, are separated by triangular frames, in which plant ornament is engraved [7].

The museum of the history of school No. 25 in the Murghab district of Turkmenistan keeps a mortar with a pestle, also decorated with two rows (four each) of almond-shaped cones, and the upper part of the body is decorated with a sash with concentric lines, interrupted by a braid [8]. In the same territory of Turkmenistan in the autumn of 1970 in the vicinity of the settlement of Yassy Depe was discovered a hoard of bronze items, which was submitted to the Institute of History named after S. Batyrov of the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan. Sh. Batyrov Institute of History of the Academy of Sciences of Turkmenistan. The hoard, which included parts of lamp stands, a vase and a cauldron on three legs, also included a bronze mortar [9]. The treasure is dated XI-XII centuries.

A bronze mortar of the XI-XII centuries decorated with relief symmetrically arranged oval protrusions was also found in Kazakhstan at the Isfijab site. The mortar has a squat body with a slightly widening edge. Height - 14 cm, diameter - 12 cm [10].

The Termez Museum has a mortar similar in shape to ours, but with six almond-shaped cones in each row. There is a strip of vegetal ornament along the the upper part, rosettes engraved between the drop-shaped protrusions, and a meander strip at the bottom almost identical to our mortar No. 2 (188/40; Inventory No. A.14158) [6], [4].

A large number of mortars, including some similar to ours, are kept in the collection of the State Hermitage [11], [6]. Among the Hermitage collection there are specimens with a concave profile of the side wall. Such is the mortar (A-12711), 14.5 cm high and 16.2 cm in diameter, bought by N.I. Veselovsky in Turkestan. Another mortar of the XI-XII centuries (CA-4127), 9 cm high and 11.2 cm in diameter, was found at the Paykend settlement. A richly decorated mortar with sharply bent outward sides was found in the Takhta-Bazar district of Turkmenistan [8].

Close in shape and ornamentation to our mortar No. 3 (Coll. No. 188/41) is a cylindrical mortar found in Dashlyalanga (Turkmenistan) with margins protruding along the side and at the base of the body. It is 12.5 cm high and 17.5 cm in diameter. The top of its rim is decorated with four rosettes with a plant pattern between them. The tulle is ornamented with rows of oval and square cones around the circumference, above and below which are engraved triangles with floral ornament and Arabic inscriptions [12]. The mortar is dated to the XI-XII centuries. A bronze mortar of similar shape also comes from Dashlyalanga. Its height is 16 cm and the diameter of the the upper part is 21 cm. Its rim is divided into four compartments. Each compartment has engraved knots - the so-called 'symbols of happiness', between which there are convex drop-shaped decorations [12]. The third mortar of the same shape was also found at the same settlement. On the rim of the mortar the plant ornament is divided into sections by leaf-shaped protrusions, and in the middle of the tulle there is a roller-shaped concentric protrusion [12].

In March 1987, members of the Uzbekistan Art History Expedition of the Khamza Institute of Art History J.Y. Ilyasov and D.V. Rusanov in the north-eastern part of the shahristan of Budrach ancient settlement in Surkhandarya region. In March 1987, members of the Uzbekistan Art History Expedition of the Khamza Institute of Art History named after Khamza J.Y. Ilyasov and D.V. Rusanov in the north-eastern part of the shahristan of the Budrach ancient settlement in Surkhandarya region, in one of the waste places was discovered a hoard of bronze items, among which were about 30 stupas of several types. In addition to mortars, five whole pestles and seven fragments were found in the hoard [13].

Several years before the discovery of the hoard of bronze items, a mortar was found by local resident Kh.Narbutaev during the planning of the hillocks at the Budrach settlement, in the place where the waste place with bronze items would later be discovered. It is cylindrical in shape, with the edge bent at right angles and the same bottom part: on the body there are three alternating lugs for handles and three drop-shaped protrusions with an inverted schematic image of a human face. The flat top of the edge is engraved with a pattern of two types of alternating palmettes, in which is inscribed in kufi script: "made by Akhmad" (read by E.V. Rtveladze). The mortar is dated to the XI century [13].

We also find analogies to the mortars under Coll. Nos. 188/39-41, 43 we find among the mortars in the collections of foreign museums in Europe and the USA, in particular, in the Berlin Museum, the Metropolitan Museum of Art (USA) and the Victoria and Albert Museum (UK), where they are dated to the XI-XII centuries [14], [15], [16].

A thick-walled, moulded mortar similar to our mortar No. 7 (coll. No. 188/42) is kept in the G.K. Prave Regional Museum of Local History in Stavropol. It was found accidentally by local residents at the Golden Horde settlement of Majara. Its height - 7 cm; diameter of the throat on the inner side - 5.3 cm; diameter of the bottom - 6.3 cm; thickness of the walls - 0.8 cm. The bottom is flat, 0.5 cm protruding outwards. The rim

is 1 cm high, straight, its edge flatly cut. 12 semi-cylindrical buttresses protrude along the abdomen. Two groups of three protrusions have transverse chiselled incisions; the groups with incisions are interspersed with groups without incisions. The vessel is made of tin-lead brass with increased lead content. Similar vessels were found in the Ukraine, Bulgaria and Sicily and were used as apothecary mortars. The author dates such mortars to the XIV-XVI cc [17, [18].

CONCLUSION

Fundamental Finding : This study highlights the diversity and craftsmanship of medieval bronze mortars from Central Asia, demonstrating their intricate designs and possible sacred significance. Through comparative analysis with similar items across regional museums, key patterns in their ornamentation, manufacturing techniques, and functional or symbolic roles have been identified, expanding our understanding of their historical context and cultural value. **Implication :** The findings contribute to the broader understanding of Central Asian metallurgical art and its intersection with cultural and religious practices. By introducing previously undocumented artifacts, the research enriches the archaeological discourse and underscores the importance of preserving such historical items to support further study and cultural heritage awareness. **Limitation :** The study's limitations stem from the lack of detailed provenance for many mortars and the reliance on comparative analyses due to incomplete contextual information. Additionally, the absence of precise archaeological data constrains the ability to fully reconstruct their original usage and historical significance. **Future Research :** Future research should focus on fieldwork to uncover similar artifacts in their original contexts, enabling more precise dating and functional analysis. Interdisciplinary studies combining materials science, iconography, and cultural history could further unravel the social and ritual roles of these mortars in medieval Central Asia.

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